

## Earls Greatest Adventure EVER

Saturday afternoon was cold and blustery, but so exciting as Earl's Mom and Dad brought him downtown Detroit to the J.L. Hudsons store to see Santa! It was so cool to see all the other kids from school there, too, milling around the community Christmas tree, throwing snowballs, and sliding on the slick sidewalks. Buick's, Chevrolets and Fords lined the streets taking every available parking space, while others drove around anxiously searching for a vacated spot. Crowds of people hurried in every direction, arms filled with wrapped packages. Others just ambled along enjoying the elaborate window displays and the aromatic treasures of the Christmas season pouring out of the restaurants, bakeries and confectionery shops. Toy villages displayed Lionel trains chugging through an imaginary countryside; the realistic white smoke billowing from the Super Chief locomotive as it pulled coal cars and flatbeds with make-believe packages headed for unknown destinations. Store windows, festively decorated with garland, featured toy soldiers marching to their own drumbeat, commanding the attention of civilians passing by.

Mom stopped and gazed fondly into a shop window exhibiting shiny jewelry that sparkled with bright hues of red, blue and yellow, reflecting both the streetlights and the store lights in a rainbow illusion. Of course, Dad stopped at the window filled with new golf equipment, shoes, clubs, balls, gloves, bags, and all the "necessary" paraphernalia that a true "duffer" would appreciate owning. He really enjoyed his spring and summer Sunday afternoons on the old public course; it wasn't as nice as the country club on the other side of town, but he always had fun with the guys. *I bet during that time he feels like Sam Snead, or maybe even Bobby Jones*, Earl thought. *I just hope I can play as good as Dad some day.* For a moment, Dad grinned indulgently at the new equipment, and then sighed, "This would never be as good as the old 'broken-in' clubs I got from Dad, and, yes, son, they will be yours someday." Not knowing what to say, Earl smiled up at him in acknowledgment, understanding how much he really wanted that stuff. *Maybe someday I can get those things for them*, Earl thought.

By the time Earl got to see Santa, sit on his lap, hug him, and tell him what he wanted for Christmas, all thoughts of gifts for Mom and Dad had fled. As he and his parents were leaving Santa and Hudsons, an elf gave him a large book, gravely reminding him, "Do not lose this catalog, because it's special."

"Well thanks," replied Earl.

"Don't misplace it or destroy it – it has a magic of its' very own," cautioned the elf.

Dismissing the elf's' warning regarding the auspicious nature of the catalog, Earl and his parents went to a their favorite local lot to purchase a Christmas tree.

Dad praised the lot owner by saying, "nobody sells trees worth bringing home like this guy, and the others are just dried out and over-priced." Earl's Mom never questioned his judgment on this subject.

At home that night, tired and full from a good meal, Earl laid on the living room floor in front of the fireplace, listening to radio programs while paging through his Hudsons Christmas catalog. As an only child, he loved the occasional escape into the fantasy world of the family's RCA console radio that offered tremendous and astounding opportunities. Riding with the Lone Ranger, dashing through cornfields with Lassie, rescuing crime victims with Rin-Tin-Tin, slinking around dark corners with the Shadow – Earl knew adventure!

"Earl, your radio program is almost over, and it's getting close to your bedtime," Mom softly called.

"Yeah, Mom, just a few more minutes, it's the Lone Ranger."

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“And I don’t want you spending all night looking at the Hudsons Christmas catalog,” Mom admonished. She smiled to herself, knowing full well that Earl had his nose buried deep into the pages, closely studying every toy and game that a little boy could ever want.

“Okay, Mom, I’ll put it away,” Earl, replied obediently, even as he reluctantly closed the magazine and rested his chin on his hand in his usual spot in front of the radio. Television was a new concept and his family wasn’t rich enough to afford one yet. He had heard that one of his friends’ dads had just bought a new RCA television with Technicolor. *I bet its cool to be able to watch a radio program. Oh well, I still like my Mystery Theater, The Lone Ranger and all the others.*

As the fatigue of the busy day overtook him, he drifted off to sleep face down on the catalog in front of the radio. When Mom walked into the living room and discovered him asleep, she asked her husband, “Honey, will you carry Earl to bed?”

“Yes, it’s time for us to be headed that way, too,” Dad stretched and yawned.

“Thank you,” Mom sighed tiredly. “And put the catalog in with him, at this time of year it’s his security blanket. I worry that he hasn’t had a brother or a sister to play with, and not many friends in this neighborhood.”

“You noticed his “security blanket” too,” chuckled Dad, as he carried Earl to bed and tucked him in for the night.

Sunday morning, Mom was up early getting ready for the day. At 7:30 she started calling Earl to come down for breakfast. With no response, she called again, but still no answer. Realizing that Earl had a fondness for hide-n-seek, especially on the weekend, Mom went back to her morning chores, not giving his absence another thought. A short time later, she went upstairs to get Earl up and moving. Upon entering his room, she found the Hudsons catalog on his bed, opened to the Board games page, but no Earl. Calling his name, she checked the closet, the bathroom, under his bed, but there was no reply, no Earl to be found. Panic stirred within her. *This is not like him to take the game this far*, she thought.

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While Earl had been asleep during the night, on top of the catalog, the characters of Candyland, Mousetrap and the other games were suddenly calling to him. They invited him to come in and play with them. Trusting and sleepy-eyed, Earl sat up in his bed and reached into the catalog. *Could this be true? I feel like I can touch them!* Before he realized what was happening, Earl was inside the catalog playing with all the toys he could ever imagine. The stuffed bears were alive, the trains were really moving through the countryside, and he could ride any and all of them wherever he wanted to go. Sand boxes were crowded with every Tonka truck imaginable, and all the Lego’s necessary to build an entire city. Trampolines to bounce on, airplanes to fly, models to build, robots to command! Topping it all off, a shiny red Schwinn bicycle to ride anytime he wanted to. This wonderful world was all his. “Wow!!” cried Earl, “The only friends I’ve ever had to play with were at school or imaginary.”

Time was immeasurable as Earl played with every great toy he encountered. It seemed like days, though in reality, less than an hour had passed. Now, even more tired than ever, Earl curled up on the soft, downy blanket on page 334 and drifted into a deep sleep. So, when Mom came to wake him up, he couldn’t hear her. He was very fast asleep. Mom was upset when Earl didn’t answer her, and, in fact, he was so well hidden she couldn’t find him.

Clearly shaken, Mom muttered to herself, “He has gone too far this time, I’ll have to discipline that boy.” Stricken with cold fear, she hurried back down the stairs to find her husband. Breathlessly, she told him that their boy was missing and he needed to help look for him. “And

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when you find him let him know he's grounded for a week for pulling a prank like this," she said angrily.

"Yes, dear," Dad replied, knowing it was not a time to joke with her, but just do as he was told. Upstairs he went from room to room, and closet-to-closet, all empty of his boy. He even looked through the garage, the basement, and then checked Earl's tree fort in the backyard. "Wow, this kid has really found himself a good hiding place this time."

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Earl awoke from a pleasant dream of more toys than he'd ever seen. *This is one of the best dreams I've ever had, I can't wait to tell mom about it.* He slowly rubbed the sleep from his eyes, as he tried to shake the cobwebs out of his head. In a few moments he blinked and looked around – he wasn't in his own bed after all. Maybe this wasn't a dream! *Seems like a good place to play, but I'm awful hungry. Where are my Mom and my Dad? How do I get out of here?* He wondered.

Suddenly his attention was caught by the commotion of a group of toys all talking excitedly at once. It looked like they were trying to hold a meeting, but no one was in charge. As the commotion continued, Earl saw a General G.I. Joe doll step to the front of the group. "Listen up everyone," ordered the General. "Quiet down and give me your attention," he demanded.

Silence ensued and order was restored, as all eyes turned toward the General. "It's great that this little boy has been able to visit us and play with us, but we have a problem. We have to get him back home to his Mom and Dad. They're probably worried that something terrible may have happened to him."

Heads were turning back and forth, looking at each other in total dismay, as whispers went through the group like a strong, cold, northern gale.

"Who is he?" asked Teddy the Stuffed Bear, just joining the meeting.

"His name is Earl," offered Barbie, "He came through the catalog."

"Is he an only child, like the last one that was here?" inquired Cabbage Patch.

"But, of course" replied Raggedy Ann, "that's why they come here, because they're lonely."

"Ssshhh, be quiet and listen," shouted one of the General's aides.

"As I was saying," the General continued, "We need to find a way for his mother to help him get out of here. We all know what we have to do; we've done it before. This is Christmas time after all, the time to realize the joy of loving and helping one another. Of course, our greatest privilege is to end up under a tree as a child's gift, and that's what we all want. But, if we don't get moving we might not be able to help Earl out of here. As soon as catalog orders are placed, we are removed for delivery, and soon there won't be anyone here to help him. If we stay behind, we'll be "leftovers" for next Christmas. Time is running out! So, let's get on with the task at hand and get Earl back home."

Nodding and whispering softly, they dispersed to their respective areas, acknowledging their respective duties, and not wanting to cause Earl alarm.

Earl stood puzzled and suddenly alone, watching them go. *What do they mean, help me get out of here? What could they do?* "General, wait, what did you mean? How can you help me get out of here?" he cried.

The General turned to Earl with a mournful look, "Son, whenever a child is allowed to join our world, it means that something is troubling you in your world. In your case, you're an only child, and very lonely because of it. There's really nothing we can do to conquer that lone-

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liness, except to offer a temporary place for fun and companionship. Yes, this is a fabulous place for a child to enjoy, but it's not forever."

"Yeah", sighed Earl sadly, "I'm tired of being by myself all the time. Mom and Dad are great, but I've always wanted a brother or sister to play with. Do you have any idea how silly it is to try to play a board game alone? I know my folks are worried, too, that I spend so much time with catalogs and the radio, with no one to play with."

"Now it's our job to get you back with your family," the General patted his shoulder encouragingly.

With tears welling up in his eyes, Earl was frightened, and missing his folks terribly. "I do like it here, but I want to go home!" Earl acknowledged shakily. He thought of how worried Mom would be and he longed to be held in her arms again. Quietly he kept repeating, "Mom, I love you, please help me."

The General did his best to comfort the boy, but knew that the only way was to get him safely back at home.

In the kitchen, Earl's mom was phoning all the neighbors, friends and family she could think of, asking if anyone had seen her boy. No one had, he'd simply disappeared! With each and every call, the urgency and concern in her voice was obvious. Her eyes, puffy and red from crying as she clung tightly to the Hudsons Christmas catalog. *This is the last thing Earl had when his dad put him to bed last night.*

Recalling the cryptic message the Hudsons elf had given Earl, she set the book down on the counter and started flipping through the pages: girls' clothes, boys' clothes, baby toys, young girls' toys, then, finally, toward the back of the catalog, the boys' toys. For some reason, she momentarily felt better while looking at these pages. As she stared at the toys, though, she felt some trepidation that they were "looking" back at her! She shook it off, attributing the thought to the stress she currently felt. As she slowly scanned the pages, she noticed all the "X's" Earl had marked, indicating the toys he wanted. Smiling, she remembered the long list he had made last year from a similar catalog, containing every single toy in the book. She and her husband had gotten a good laugh over it. Earl was always thinking big, and last year he didn't fall short in that department, either.

"Pay attention, everyone," the General spoke quietly, "She's getting close to the page. We have to be ready!"

Mom flipped to the Lionel Trains pages, all with elaborate setups and various lengths of track. *I really want to get one for Earl this year for Christmas. Every time we go to Hudsons, he spends so much time looking at the trains.* She tried to turn the page, but it slipped out of her fingers, and stayed open to the two pages of trains. *Odd*, she thought, and tried again, but failed to turn the page. Little did she know, that inside the catalog, the General's group had taken up positions behind other toys and off to the sides so she couldn't see them. They were holding the two pages open to the train section. *Must be a sign*, she thought, *I'm meant to get him a train this Christmas.* She knew the ones at the store were for display only, and the ones in stock had sold out. If she were to buy one, she'd have to order it from the catalog. Since she had taken on a few odd jobs just for something like this, she decided immediately to order the biggest and the best for her son. "Oh, what the heck!" she laughed as she noted the information on an order blank.

"What did you say, honey?" her husband startled her back from her daydream.

"Hhmm? Oh nothing."

"Are you okay, Dear?"

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"Yes, I'm just worried about Earl. I know he hasn't been gone very long, so he just has to be hiding in this house. Did you have any luck finding him?"

"No, I'm afraid not," he sighed as he put his arms around his wife. "You look peaked, why don't you try to get some rest, and I'll keep looking for him. He's got to crawl out of his hiding place sooner or later. Should be good and hungry by now."

"Would you please put this catalog back on Earl's bed?" she asked, "I've already jotted down what I want to order for him."

"Sure," Dad replied, giving her an odd look as he walked out of the kitchen.

She sat staring out of the kitchen window, *I know he'll be back, maybe he went to a friends' house, but how did he get out without us seeing him? If anything has happened to him, I just couldn't bear it!*

Dad tossed the book onto the bed, simultaneously taking a quick look around, but nothing had changed, so he left the room.

"Ok, everyone, this is our only chance, let's do it", ordered the General.

"Yes, Sir," replied the aide, and the pages began to flip backwards to the board games, eventually opening to the page where there was a yellow box painted with red letters that spelled *Chutes and Ladders*. The longest ladder was picked up and braced tightly so Earl would be able to climb it. "Now, Earl, this is your only chance. Your mother has opened the portal by ordering something from the catalog for your Christmas," the General told him.

"Really, what is it?" Earl asked excitedly.

"You know I can't tell you. It's a surprise! Now get moving up the ladder, it's your only way out, and go to your parents. They've been missing you," the General said tenderly, wiping a tear from his eye.

"Thank you so much, Sir," sniffled Earl, wiping at his own misty eyes.

Everyone in the group labored mightily to make this happen, and they succeeded!

Up the ladder Earl climbed. When he reached the top rung, he heard a loud sucking noise and realized he had climbed out of the catalog. Sitting on his bed, looking around his room, his glance landed on the clock on his nightstand. "Wow, I've only been gone about an hour, but it seemed like days. I hope Mom and Dad aren't mad at me."

Hearing their voices downstairs, Earl let out a yell, "Mom, Dad, where are you?"

Down in the kitchen, she heard that sweet voice, and started for the stairs. At the same time, Dad was coming from the living room where he'd been sitting and staring forlornly out the windows, wondering where his little boy had gone. Earl was at the top of the stairs, Mom and Dad looked up at him from the bottom.

"Earl, where have you been?" asked Dad, attempting to assume the stern male role, "You know you scared the heck out of your mother!" In reality, he was so happy to see his son safe and unharmed.

Earl was excited to tell them about his adventure, but for the moment, they didn't want to hear it. His mother ran up the stairs hugging and kissing him.

"Mom, stop! What if my friends see me like this," cried Earl.

"No one's around but us, sweetie, and I'll hug and kiss my little boy any time I please, so get used to it," Mom laughed, knowing that Earl spoke of imaginary friends.

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At dinner that evening, everyone sat quietly eating, enjoying each others' company, when Earl's Mom looked at him and he saw tears glistening in her eyes. Immediately feeling guilty for

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hurting her, Earl said “Mom, I told you I was sorry for being gone like that, and it will never happen again.”

“You’re safe and that’s all that matters,” Mom smiled. “It’s just that your father and I have something important to tell you. We wanted to wait until Christmas day, but I think now is a better time.”

“Cool, tell me.” Earl bounced excitedly in his chair.

“You won’t have to worry anymore about only having imaginary friends to play with, Earl. You’re going to have a little brother in the spring.”