

LETTERS FROM GRANDPA
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Dearest grandchild,

Today's letter will deal with Robert L. May who created the famous story of Rudolf the Red Nosed Reindeer. Robert L. May was born a weak and delicate child whose playmates often goaded him to tears. The ridicule he endured, however, forged within him many admirable qualities of character. When he graduated from college he didn't get a plush job, but instead became a lowly copy writer for Montgomery Ward's in Chicago. This too helped him to relate to and understand common people. At 33 years of age he faced additional hardship because his wife, Evelyn, was dying of cancer. In fact, she had been bed ridden for two years. His meagre salary and savings were eaten up by gargantuan medical bills and he was deeply in debt.

It was at this time that Montgomery Ward asked him to write a children's booklet to give away at Christmas. Since Robert was hurting so much he decided to write a story to help hurting people. His four year old daughter Barbara was also hurting. Her mother was dying and she couldn't understand why. So May decided to try his story out on her. Since he knew what it was to be laughed at, he came up with the story of a reindeer that was ridiculed because of his shiny red nose. He thought about calling him Rollo, or Reginald, but settled at last on "Rudolph".

As the story took shape, he read it to Barbara every night. She laughed with glee every time the story was told. This nightly routine was inspiring Barbara to believe that she also could triumph over troubles. Denver Gillen, a friend from Ward's art department, went to the Lincoln Park Zoo and sketched a reindeer with a shiny red nose. Evelyn died as May was putting the finishing touches to the story. It was 1939 and war was breaking out in Europe. Soon that war would engulf the world. That Christmas, little Barbara received the first copy of her daddy's book. Within a year 2.4 million copies had been distributed. In spite of the paper shortage during W.W. II, a total of 6 million copies had been given away or sold by the end of 1946.

Because May was a Ward's employee, he received no royalties. In January 1947, however, Sewell Avery, Ward's corporate president, gave the copyright to May. His first commercial printing took place immediately and was a great help in paying off his debts. The same year a nine minute cartoon was shown in theaters across the country. May's brother in law, Johnny Marks, wrote lyrics and a melody for Rudolph, but many were afraid to meddle with an established Santa tradition. Finally, Gene Autry recorded the song in 1949 and sold two million copies the first year. The song about Rudolph became one of the best selling Christmas songs ever, second only to "White Christmas". A television special about Rudolf, narrated by Burl Ives, was produced in 1964 and remains a popular holiday favorite to this day.

Robert L. May died in 1976, but his classic story of Rudolf lives on. There is, of course, a reason for it's success. The fact that May was laughed at as a child helped him to relate to millions of others who were laughed at as a child. The fact that his wife died of cancer helped him to understand the rest of us who face illness and discouragement. The fact that his four year old daughter needed something to cheer her up at Christmas helped him put his finger on the pulse of countless other children who need to be cheered up at Christmas.

The original Christmas story is also shaped by "facts" that resonate with mankind. Jesus

was born in poverty so He can relate to and understand most people in the world who are also born in poverty. Jesus was harassed by King Herod so He can understand the harsh hand of government persecution. Jesus was constantly criticized during His earthly ministry, so he can empathize with others who are unjustly criticized. Jesus gave us an example that we should follow in His steps. He ministered to the sick. He was a friend to social outcasts and sinners. He denied selfish ambition and refused an earthly crown. He devoted Himself to others. He took up a cross. He died praying for the forgiveness of those who were killing Him. He was, as the Scriptures say, tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin.

Popular stories invariably have a happy ending. The story of Jesus is no exception. That "man of sorrows" who was "despised and rejected of men" triumphed over all His troubles. He even arose from the dead! He not only conquered death but also brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel. Darkness and discouragement retreat whenever His story is told. Someday He will come again and the world will be amazed by the "brightness of His coming". Those who have received Him as Lord, of course, will live happily ever after. I pray that you will be happy ever after!

MERRY CHRISTMAS!

Grandpa Boyce