

MY DAD'S A WAR HERO



Darin Johnson, a fifth-grader at Freeburg Elementary School, walked to his locker and unzipped the pocket in his backpack where he had stashed his father's gold medal. As he did, he rehearsed his oral report in his mind.

My father was injured during the Gulf War. The enemy bombed a jet he was working on, and as the plane went up in flames, he crawled underneath to rescue another soldier who had been knocked unconscious. A burning pipe fell from the belly of the plane and landed on my dad's leg, but he shoved it away and dragged the other man to safety just before the plane exploded. This medal—a Purple Heart—is a special medal given only to American military members who are injured or killed by the enemy.

Darin grinned as he remembered the fancy ceremony where his father had received the award, a handshake, and a salute from a two-star general. He could almost see all those soldiers standing like statues in honor of his dad while the band played "I'm Glad to Be an American" and the decoration bearer marched up the aisle with the medal on a purple pillow, his eyes staring straight ahead like a zombie.

Eat your heart out, Andrew. Hannah is going to love my report. Darin's proud smile faded, along with his daydreams, however, when he looked inside his backpack. His face went white and he started to shake. It wasn't there. He yanked everything out—baseball cards, a picture of his dog, and a crumpled dollar bill. It was no use. The medal was not there.

Oh, God, he prayed silently, as he shoved his things back in his backpack. *What am I going to do now? My dad specifically said not to take the medal to school.* Darin thought about his father's scarred right hand and the fact that he would walk with a limp for the rest of his life.

You may be sure that your sin will find you out—Numbers 32:23. Darin wished his Sunday school verse hadn't popped into his mind. *This is one time I hope the Bible is wrong,* he thought to himself—knowing that could never be true.

"Darin," his teacher called. "Please go to your seat."

"Yes, ma'am," he answered, sliding into his chair. He looked to the front of the room where his best friend, Andrew McGinnis, sat, holding his latest swimming trophy and grinning like he'd just won the lottery. Darin felt something crawling in his stomach and thought he was going to be sick. He took a couple of deep breaths and rubbed his forehead. *This can't be happening,* he thought.

"You okay, Darin?" It was Hannah Carrico. She sat across from him.

"I don't feel so well," Darin whispered. His father's words pounded in his ears. "I'll be glad to bring it for you to show, but I'd rather not take a chance on you having it at school all day."

Darin fought to keep from crying. How could his father ever understand—let alone forgive him? Why hadn't he respected his father's wishes? *Oh, God,* he prayed again. *Please forgive me and help me find Dad's medal before he discovers it is missing.*

Darin knew that he was forgiven immediately, but he also knew that God would most likely allow him to suffer consequences in order to learn a lesson.

While his classmates gave their reports, Darin thought about the day before. It had started out quite well. Miss Poe, Darin's teacher, had made an announcement in the morning.

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"Boys and girls," she said, sticking her pencil behind her ear. "As I told you on Monday, Mr. Trelunki asked each teacher to choose one student for the student council."

Darin put his pencil down and sat up straight. He knew he had a chance.

His grades were high and he had been elected class president for three years straight. *Please help me get it,* he prayed silently.

Hannah smiled and Darin smiled back, remembering when the guys teased him for liking her the year before. But not this year. Somehow, the fifth grade boys agreed, the girls had gotten better looking and now acted more like human beings. Besides, some of the girls made them feel all funny inside—a good kind of funny. Hannah was cute—there was no question about that.

Andrew thought so, too, for that matter. Darin loved to see Hannah's dimples when she laughed, and she wore the coolest clothes in the school. But it was more than that. Darin thought about the first day of school when the guys were making fun of Elliot for his new glasses. Hannah had stepped in and taken Elliot's arm. "I think the glasses make you look intelligent," she had said. Darin chuckled inside when he remembered the shocked looks on the guys' faces. Then, the next day, when Carolyn lost her lunch money, Hannah had offered to pray for her right in front of everyone. And ten minutes later, Carolyn found the money under her books. Everyone knew Hannah was a Christian, and no one ever made fun of her.

I try to be good, Darin thought. He'd gone to church since he was a baby. But he didn't know how to tell others what he believed. Like the day before. At recess, Darin had walked up to a few of his friends who were hooting and laughing like a bunch of cowboys.

"What's so funny?" Darin asked.

"Oh, nothing," a guy named Mac said. "You wouldn't get it, anyway. You're a church boy." Mac raised his eyebrows and elbowed one of the other boys, and they all cracked up again.

Darin had walked away, embarrassed. He really didn't care what they were laughing about. It was probably a dirty joke. But he couldn't help feeling bad because he never witnessed to his friends. When Andrew saw what had happened, he tried to console Darin.

"I feel sorry for you, Darin. Your parents make you go to church, and then all the guys think you're like this perfect person who doesn't want to have fun or anything."

"Yeah," Darin said. *Man*, he had thought, *I can't even tell Andrew that I go to church because I love God—not just because my parents make me.*

Darin looked over at Hannah, and his smile returned. She would make a great member of the student council. *That would be okay, too*, he added to his prayer.

Miss Poe pulled a sealed envelope from behind his back. "Drum roll, please," she ordered. The students laughed—like this was an Oscar award or something. Miss Poe was always making school fun.

Slitting the envelope with a silver letter opener, she pulled out a slip of paper and looked up at the class. "The person I have chosen sets an excellent example in all areas, but especially in

the areas of honesty and integrity. I totally trust this student to tell the truth no matter what the situation.”

Andrew looked back from his front row seat and gave Darin a thumbs-up. Embarrassed, Darin motioned for Andrew to turn around. Andrew was a ton of fun, but sometimes he didn't think much before he did stuff. His pranks had gotten him into hot water more than once. Miss Poe took another look at the slip of paper. Like she didn't know what it said.

“This year's representative is . . .” Miss Poe paused and grinned.

“Read it!” the class cheered. Darin could feel his knees shaking.

“This year's winner is Darin Johnson!”

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Later that morning, Miss Poe was teaching math when there was a loud knock and the classroom door swung open.

“Miss Poe?” It was Mr. Trelunki, the principal. In he walked, followed by a huge boy who looked every bit as tall as Miss Poe. The boy's hair was long and hung in his eyes. His faded pants were torn and mended, but clean.

Darin figured that it was the boy's father who came next. Talk about tall—the guy's head practically scraped the top of the doorway. When he passed Darin's desk, he belched. Darin was sure he smelled beer, but Miss Poe said nothing and smiled politely.

Andrew must have heard it too because he turned around and rolled his eyes. The students fought hard not to laugh, but a few giggles escaped. Not for long, though. All got quiet immediately when Mr. Trelunki scrunched his eyebrows and gave them that “Straighten up!” look.

Well, it turned out that this kid's father was a first cousin of Mr. Trelunki. I guess that would make the kid Mr. Trelunki's second cousin. They sure didn't look alike, though.

“Class,” Miss Poe said. “This is Judd Becker.”

“Hello, Judd,” came the reply in unison.

Judd looked at the floor and shuffled his feet a little.

Darin jumped when Judd's father slapped his son on the back and said, “Don't be bashful, boy. Tell the nice students hello.”

Judd muttered a quick hello, more like a grunt, actually.

“Come on in, Judd,” Miss Poe said as she led him to the only empty desk in the room. You guessed it. Right behind Darin.

Darin took another look at Mr. Becker and instantly felt sorry for Judd. He remembered his soccer banquet the week before when his own dad kept telling corny jokes and trying to be cool with his friends. *Man*, he thought, *my dad has his moments, but he’s nothing compared to this guy.*

Turning around to be friendly, Darin realized how huge Judd really was. Darin was used to be teased about being small, but suddenly, Judd’s size scared him.

“Judd,” Miss Poe said. “This is Darin Johnson. I’m sure you two will be good friends.”

Darin smiled, but Judd didn’t notice. He was busy gazing into Miss Poe’s eyes while flashing a wide smile.

Oh, charming, Darin thought. No telling what Miss Poe thought. She quickly turned and scurried to the front of the room.

“Judd will be fine,” she told his father and Mr. Trelunki.

Mr. Becker chuckled and shook Miss Poe’s hand—way too hard. “If he gives you any trouble, ma’am, you just let me know. ‘Course the boy’ll probably have to stand to do his work the next day.” Then Mr. Becker laughed right out loud and slapped Mr. Trelunki on the back. “Bet you wish more parents were like me, don’t you, Ralphie?”

Mr. Trelunki got red and looked away. “We should be going,” he said.

Miss Poe fidgeted a bit at her desk after the men left. Nobody said much. They just watched Miss Poe and waited. Eventually, she regained her composure and gave the math assignment.

As she began to write problems on the board, Darin turned to offer Judd a piece of paper and a pencil.

But Judd curled his lip and snarled. “Turn around, Tiny. I don’t need the likes of you to take care of me.” Then he reached across the aisle and grabbed Hannah’s things.

Darin clenched his fists as he swiveled around to face the front. *You big ox. You really think you’re something special!*

Miss Poe missed it all. Darin could feel his ears heating up, and he let out a startled yelp when Judd crammed the end of a pencil into his back and snickered.

Miss Poe turned. "Something wrong?" Not knowing exactly who had cried out, she looked across the class.

Judd cleared his throat. Darin kept his eyes on his desk and grimaced when Judd spoke out loudly. "I think everything is fine, now, Miss Poe. Right, Darin?"

Darin looked up and nodded to Miss Poe. Inside, though, everything definitely was not fine. Darin was as mad as a kid who just found out he had to miss his final ball game for his sister's dance recital.