

Yicheng

Ms. Horton

Grade 9

Age: 15

The Mysterious Gift

Winter break had just begun. The hallways were filled with the echoes of cheering students and the slamming of lockers, but as I walked home, I felt utterly depressed. My physical world seemed as gray as the heavy clouds above. I had walked out of my physics exam without turning in the paper. Because I assumed my score would be low, I gave up—forgetting that a retake could have saved my grade. Now, the school had marked it as a zero for violating exam discipline.

I reached my doorstep, my head low, when I noticed something strange. A small, shiny box wrapped in silver paper sat there, shimmering even in the dim evening light. A little tag read, “To the one who believes in wonder.” I hesitated, then pulled the ribbon. Inside was an iron key and a note: “*Please use this key to open the new locker in your study.*”

Driven by pure curiosity, I hurried to the study. The locker stood in the corner, cold and imposing. As I inserted the key and turned it, the room began to tremble. The edges of my vision blurred into a chaotic swirl of colors. I blinked hard, trying to hold onto a reality that was slipping away. My heart hammered against my ribs—a mix of terror and a strange, electric thrill. I wasn't just opening a locker; I was unzipping the fabric of time itself.

First, a day and then a night passed. Then another day and another night transitioned. Then it was day-night-day-night. A week, a month, a year, a decade passed! A.D. 2025. A.D. 2019. 1999! 1957! Gone! The Machine roared. There was a sound like a gigantic bonfire burning all of Time, all the years and all the calendars set aflame. Out of chars and ashes, the modern world vanished like a fleeting firework, leaving only the bitter scent of gunpowder. The fog blew away, and I found myself in the heart of the American Civil War. The scene was a nightmare of motion: the thunder of cannons, the acrid stench of old blood and wet earth, and the agonizing screams of men. But then, as if the earth itself had held its breath, the fighting ceased.

Silence.

A green peace settled over the charred battlefield, a silence more terrifying than the roar because it carried the weight of what was lost. In this stillness, I saw them: Grant and Lee. I was struck by their presence. Particularly Robert E. Lee. He stood near a tattered gray tent, his figure as still and carved as a statue of weathered marble. His hair was a shock of silver—the color of a winter sky—and his eyes, though heavy with the fatigue of lost battles, held a light that refused to dim. He was a man watching his world crumble, yet his shoulders remained squared, unbowed by the weight of surrender.

There was a quiet dignity in the way he adjusted his sword. He wasn't just a general; he was the personification of tenacity. I realized then that while he had lost the war, he had not lost himself. Both he and Grant possessed that great virtue of utter fidelity to their cause. In Lee, I saw an indomitable quality—the born fighter's refusal to give up as long as

he could still remain on his feet. It was a silent, iron-willed strength that made my own habit of "skipping class" feel small and shameful. Though he faced inevitable defeat, his tenacity remained a beacon. There was an unbreakable refusal to surrender.

A sudden gust of wind caught me, spiraling me back through the void. I awoke in my own bed, gasping for air. Facing the window, I could see the tops of trees swaying gently. The delicious breath of rain was in the air, and the faint notes of a distant piano reached me.

I thought about my life. When my tennis serve was weak, I skipped class. When I lacked confidence for the stage, I quit the play. I realized that "fear" had been the guide of my life; it was a pattern of retreat. However, the image of those leaders—standing tall amidst the ruins—changed something inside me. I learned a vital lesson: I must first consider how to solve a problem, and then fight with everything I have. A zero on a test or a missed shot in tennis is not the end. The only true defeat is the refusal to stay on one's feet. From now on, I will not be the one who runs; I will be the one who remains.