

TINY



By Amber Hescock Johnson

*Dedicated to Sir Gavin.
Happy Birthday and Merry Christmas to you!*

Gavin was up later than usual, due to a heightened level of seasonal excitement. He was in an especially festive mood, as his birthday was the next day, followed closely by Christmas.

In Gavin's younger days, he went through a lengthy and intense Santa phase. This time in his life entailed carrying a small Santa figurine wherever he went—so consistently that its colors started to wear off. He could also be found with a Santa stuffy at bedtime, and—of course—dressing up as Santa for Halloween. He'd gotten a few years older, but clearly had held on to the magic of Christmas, only amplified by his birthday.

Feeling restless, Gavin got up to use the bathroom. While in the hall, he noticed a strange sound echoing from the kitchen. Kind of a twinkling.

Everyone else was asleep. Figuring the dog was up to something, he went to investigate. The noise grew louder as he grew closer.

Gavin entered the kitchen—and froze. There in the open silverware drawer sat Tiny, the family's shelf-hopping elf. "What the heck!" said Gavin, which startled the elf and caused Tiny to trip on the upcurved tip of a spoon.

"Whoa..." said Gavin, as he stepped closer. That's when Tiny gathered himself, hopped up on the counter and said, "Why hello!"

Upon hearing Tiny speak, Gavin's heart did a backflip. "This has got to be a dream," he said, shaking his head. At the same time, he was

curious and had always wondered what Tiny did when no one was looking. Now was his chance to finally get some answers.

He rubbed his eyes, then looked up to find Tiny using a salt shaker as a stool. “Hello, Sir Gavin!” he said warmly. “Let me be the first to wish you a very happy birthday, indeed!”

Gavin looked at the clock—it was midnight. His birthday had begun! “Thank you, Tiny,” Gavin replied. “Just call me Gavin.”

“Okay, sir,” said Tiny.

Gavin asked, “What have you been up to tonight?”

“Well to be honest, I was hungry and searching for your mom’s secret stash of holiday candy.”

Gavin’s mouth dropped open. “She has a secret stash of holiday candy?” he asked loudly and incredulously.

“Shhhhhh! You’ll wake them up,” said Tiny. “I’ve been waiting to talk to you alone.”

“Me? Wow,” said Gavin. Now he was even more curious.

“Santa has been impressed with you,” explained Tiny. “He’d like to meet with you in person on your birthday, to thank you for your service to the fundamental principles of the nice list. He has a special place in his heart for kids born close to Christmas, you know.”

“Are you kidding me? Meet Santa?! But how? When? Where? WHAT?!”

“No, yes, drone, now, North Pole, that’s what,” said Tiny.

“Um, did you just say ‘drone?’” asked Gavin.

“Yes indeed! Follow me, sir!” Tiny did a perfect double flip off the counter and landed by the backdoor, which leads from the kitchen to the backyard. “If you don’t mind?” he said.

“Oh yes, of course,” said Gavin. He opened the back door, then once they were out in the cold winter air, he shut it behind them.

The white trim of Tiny’s elf uniform glowed in the moonlight. Gavin followed him to the other side of the deck, where Tiny disappeared underneath, prompting a mouse to scurry out. Gavin got down on his knees to take a look. There he saw a drone and remote control.

“Is this deck like your drone garage or something?” asked Gavin.

“Pretty much,” said Tiny.

“How are we going to use a drone to get to the North Pole? This doesn’t even make sense!” said Gavin.

“True, true. It does not make sense, but that doesn’t mean it’s not possible. First, I’ll need to downsize you—err, I mean, shrink you,” explained Tiny.

“Are you kidding me?” laughed Gavin. “Tiny! For real? You’ve got to be kidding me!”

“I don’t kid about North Pole transportation,” said Tiny. “Or the business of being nice or naughty. Everything else is fair game for kidding, though.”

Tiny pulled a tiny cookie, the size of a thumbtack and shaped like an ornament, from his pocket. “Here you go,” he said.

Gavin examined the cookie as it lay balanced on the tip of his pointer finger. “How is a cookie this small going to do anything but make me want a bigger cookie?” he asked.

“You’ll see,” said Tiny.

“Alright,” said Gavin, still dubious but realizing that after talking to an elf, now was not the time to start doubting holiday magic. He placed the cookie on his tongue and, since it was too small to chew, swallowed it like a cinnamon-flavored pill.

“Hmm, that’s odd,” said Gavin. “I feel totally normal!” Just as he finished the thought, the cookie did its work. All at once, he shrank down to about 11 inches tall and wound up suspended in air where his center of gravity used to be, about two and a half feet above the ground. He promptly plummeted to the frosty earth, using a well-honed football move to roll upon impact.

“Well done, champ!” said Tiny. “Now hop on!” The elf was sitting atop the drone, with the remote control in his lap. Gavin joined him,

and slowly Tiny guided the drone, just an inch off the ground, out from under the low deck with dazzlingly precise control.

“Hold on!” yelled Tiny. Gavin grabbed the edge of the central body of the drone, careful to avoid the propellers. At what felt to Gavin like light speed, they rocketed away, over the neighborhood and then the nearby town forest, and up beyond the clouds.

Soon, through a clearing, Gavin saw a large city all lit up and sparkling. But it wasn’t long before the lights of cities and homes grew sparse, and all was dark below.

“Hang in there, sir! We’re getting close!” shouted Tiny. The air was ice cold, but somehow, Gavin felt fine and correctly assumed the cookie had imparted him with an elf-like imperviousness to frigid temperatures.

“This is awesome!” yelled Gavin, feeling the thrill. Suddenly he noticed glowing ribbons of green and blue illumination coursing through the sky, and snowy surface beneath them. He was completely wonder-struck and remained silent as Tiny began their descent. Soon a village came into view, every surface lined with Christmas lights—there must have been millions.

“We’re carbon neutral now, sir,” shouted Tiny over the whirl of the drone, seeming self-conscious about the electricity use. “All those lights run on a combination of wind energy and good vibes.”

“Nice!” said Gavin.

They zoomed into the village square, empty except for a few ice sculptures and a lone arctic rabbit wearing a bowtie. After they disembarked, Tiny handed Gavin another cookie, this time shaped like a Christmas tree and now a proper size, proportionally. “You want to feel like yourself when you meet the big guy,” said Tiny.

Gavin ate the cookie, and after a delay of just a second or two, rocketed up the equivalent of several stories in height in an instant. “Whoa, I’m super dizzy,” gasped Gavin.

“It’s normal to be dizzy with joy at the North Pole! Let’s go!” shouted Tiny, unconcerned and waving his hand as if to call attention to the grandeur of the village. Sure enough, as they followed a gumdrop-paved path, just a moment later, Gavin felt like his old self—but more excited than ever.

The gumdrop path inefficiently weaved around buildings and trees, which Gavin found strange. Tiny must’ve sensed this reaction, or encountered it before. Right as Gavin had the thought, Tiny said, without even a glance in his direction, “It’s about the journey, not just the destination!”

“Of course,” thought Gavin. He relished the sights along the way including reindeer in their stable, a busy sporting goods workshop as seen through an open gumdrop-shaped door, and a Christmas tree at the entrance to the dining hall, draped with golden utensils, cookie ornaments, and candy canes, and finished with popcorn and cranberry garlands and a red berry and white cream striped trifle as topper.

Finally, they arrived at a tiny cabin. “Why would the biggest person at the North Pole have the smallest house?” asked Gavin, who was now feeling a bit nervous to meet the legend himself.

“Well, it’s just his office. But as Santa always says, ‘It’s not the size of the house that matters, it’s the size of the cookies!’ And I’ve always interpreted his use of ‘cookies’ as an analogy for Christmas spirit.” said Tiny. “He really does love cookies, though, so who knows, sir.”

Tiny executed an extraordinarily complex knock sequence on Santa’s door. Gavin has a good ear for music, and at first thought it sounded like a peppy version of “O Christmas Tree.” But upon closer listening, he realized Tiny was actually tapping out the “Happy Birthday” song. Gavin fixed his hair and tucked in his shirt, reflexively, barely realizing what he was doing.

The door opened to reveal thousands upon thousands of fluttering files, hanging on a conveyer belt filing system that looked to Gavin like a rollercoaster for paperwork. The red, green, and gold folders shuffled and shimmied each time the belt started. A wall of screens to the right displayed weather forecasts from around the world, in all different languages, and a series of line graphs, jagged like mountaintops, morphed and bobbed as it updated in real time, tracking levels of Christmas spirit by region.

“We don’t know the exact route Santa will take until all the data is in, just before take-off. It’s always a last-minute call,” explained Tiny, pointing to the information displays. Gavin was amazed, yet his eyes looked beyond all the hubbub, scanning and searching for the man, the myth, the maker of toys and dreams. Then he heard it.

“Ho, ho, ho! Is that Gavin I hear?” Santa’s enormous, overstuffed desk chair, upholstered in a candy cane stripe fabric, swiveled to face them. Suddenly, Gavin wasn’t nervous at all! Just happy to be there. Santa’s face was such a warm and welcoming sight, all he could do was smile.

“Yes! It’s me!” said Gavin, gathering speed with each step as he approached Santa’s giant, cluttered desk. Santa came around to give him a hug.

“Thank you for coming all this way, Gavin. Do you have any idea why I wanted to see you?”

“Not a clue,” said Gavin. “But if I had to guess... maybe you’ve noticed that I started playing handball recently—and I’m shockingly good at it!”

“Ho ho ho!” laughed Santa. “Well, yes, we’re aware of your competitive exploits. What I appreciate most is that Tiny says you are a good sport—which is not always easy when you are so competitive! Impressive, Gavin.”

Tiny hopped up onto Santa’s chair, then up to the desk with a pirouette, and tapped a couple of buttons on the handheld device that lay there. The suspended folders lurched forward, swinging and swaying in the shuffle. As they came to a stop, Santa pulled a gold folder from its perch. “Ah, yes. Here you are, Gavin! Let me see...”

As Santa leafed through the papers in the folder, his eyes lit up. “There’s a definite pattern here. First, there’s the matter of your

brothers. Twin brothers. You were the only child before they came along, weren’t you?”

“Uh, yes!” said Gavin brightly. “I guess I was.”

“Well, you’ve had to share a lot with those two, haven’t you?” asked Santa.

“Yes, pretty much,” replied Gavin. “But we have a lot of fun, usually. I love sports, and so do my brothers, so there is always someone to play with and practice with.”

“Your birthday is close to Christmas, but you’ve never complained about sharing that time of year with me and my holiday. Not once. In fact, you see it as making your birthday even more special, don’t you?”

“Yeah, of course!” said Gavin. “Christmas is the best and birthdays are the best. So for me, December is the most amazing time of year.”

Santa continued, “I see that many of Tiny’s reports note that you comfort your brothers when they are upset, and try to make them feel better when they are hurt.” Santa glanced at Tiny, standing off to the side, who nodded emphatically.

Gavin had never really thought about this before. “Of course,” he said. “Don’t all big brothers do that?”

Santa smiled, and turned to Tiny, expectantly.

“Uh, no,” said Tiny. “I’ve served hundreds of families by now, and this most certainly isn’t always the case. Some big brothers, well, they prefer to agitate rather than calm siblings. Trust me on this one. I get headaches just thinking about it!”

Gavin shrugged. “I guess!”

Santa cleared his throat, indicating that he was about to say something of importance. “Tiny has suggested to me that you are a true leader. In sports, in your family, and in holiday cheer!”

“I hereby bestow upon you the official North Pole designation of Honorary Steward of Christmas Spirit! This title comes with many benefits, including lifetime nice list classification, annual midnight trips to the North Pole for as long as you live or wish, and especially for you, entry into the elves’ annual handball tournament! Of course, you’ll have to shrink down for that!”

“Wow! Thank you Santa.” said Gavin. He could hardly believe it. “Best. Christmas. Ever!”

“Unfortunately, for now, I must return to my work as Christmas is approaching, and your birthday festivities will begin in the morning—I wouldn’t want you to miss a moment of them,” said Santa. “Happy birthday and the merriest of Christmases to you, Gavin!”

Santa turned to Tiny, “And thank you for bringing this tremendous talent to my attention!”

“All in a day’s work, sir!” said Tiny.

Gavin gave Santa his thanks, and as he and Tiny strolled back to the drone on the winding gumdrop path, he practically floated—feeling so happy and light on his feet.

With another microscopic cookie, Gavin was back down to Tiny’s size and they were sailing into the night.

Before he knew it, Gavin saw the multi-colored Christmas lights on the evergreen trees in front of his home as they descended. Tiny performed the most impressive parking job ever, deftly gliding under the deck.

After returning to human scale, Gavin led Tiny back into the house and it was time to say goodnight. “Thank you, Tiny,” said Gavin. “I’ll never forget this for as long as I live!”

“Happy birthday, dear Gavin!” sang Tiny. Then he was off.

Gavin returned to bed and dreamed of his friend Santa, playing handball with the elves, and becoming a North Pole champion!

The next day, he and his brothers found Tiny up to his crazy antics. And as usual, Gavin’s birthday was full of treats, like waffles for dinner and cake, of course. He received many wonderful presents, and felt very thankful for the entire season.

At one point, Gavin tried to introduce his brothers to Tiny, but he was unresponsive. Back to acting like a mere doll. “Did I imagine that whole trip to the North Pole?” he wondered.

Just a couple days later, Gavin and the twins woke up on Christmas morning to find an enormous pile of gifts waiting for them.

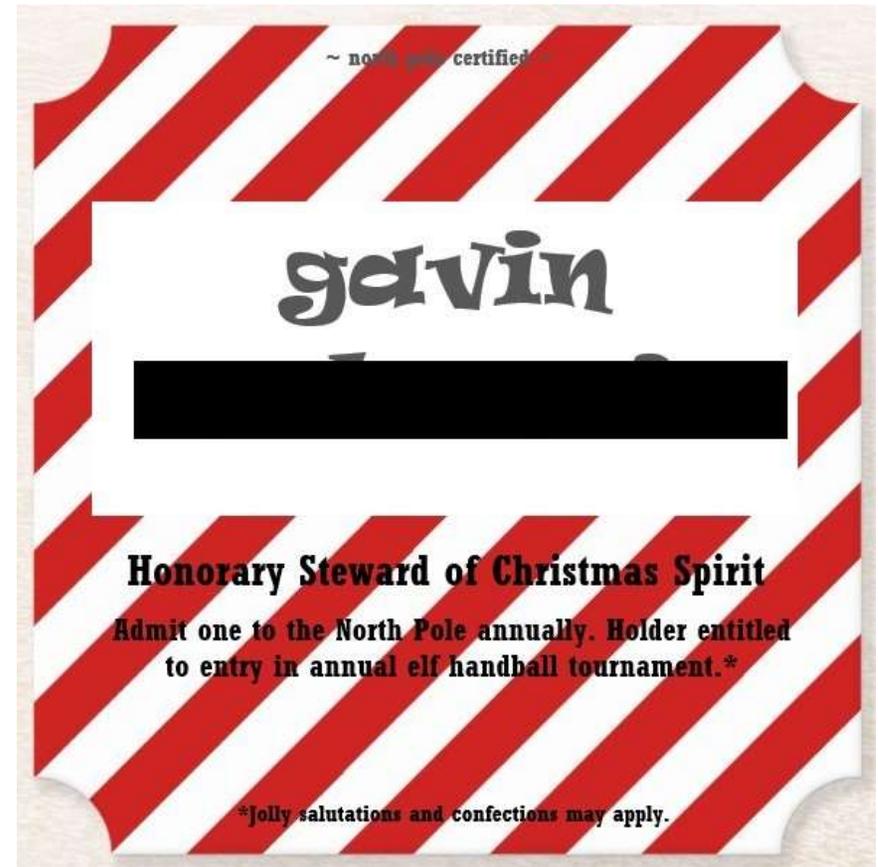
Gavin thought he'd emptied his stocking when he noticed that the toe still had a funny shape. He reached in and pulled out a vibrant, candy cane striped ticket, printed with silver lettering that sparkled in the morning light.

The title read, "Honorary Steward of Christmas Spirit." In small print were the words, "Admit one to the North Pole annually. Holder entitled to entry in annual elf handball tournament.*"

Then, in super small fine print was an intriguing footnote: "*Jolly salutations and confections may apply."

"I knew it!" shouted Gavin, who ran to show his brothers. Tiny sat nearby as the boys examine the ticket.

Gavin looked up at Tiny to thank him. And that's when, to this day, the three of them swear—up, down, and sideways—they saw Tiny wink.



The end