

## second chances

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## second chances

by [meridies](#)

### Summary

Tommy isn't quite sure where he fits in with his new family. He has one sibling who probably hates him, another sibling who tolerates him, and a father who's struggling to keep them all together. As Christmas Day creeps closer and closer, everything comes to a head, and Tommy is forced to figure out where he truly belongs.

### Notes

this can be read as a sequel to [pick me up, take me home](#) but also stands alone.

mild cw for an anxiety attack, but nothing graphic <3 enjoy!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Tommy comes home from Tubbo's house one day to find a tree in the living room.

An entire fucking tree.

“What's that?” he asks.

“A Christmas tree,” Wilbur says blandly. “Ever seen one before?”

Tommy crosses his arms. Of course he's seen a Christmas tree before. He's just never seen one in his own home before.

"Of course I have," he says defensively, and turns away.

That's the end of the Christmas talk for the day.

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Contrary to popular belief, Tommy does enjoy the Christmas season.

For appearances, though, he claims to hate it. He complains about Christmas carols, playing endlessly and incessantly over the radio, always exhausting and cheery. The red and green decorations lining the halls of school are tacky. Everything in the world suddenly comes in flavors of peppermint, and Tommy protests that he hates peppermint. Besides, he shrugs, Christmas is supposed to be about *family* as well. He likes to pretend sometimes that he still doesn't have one of those.

Because, well, it's strange to have one. There are times when he forgets about it.

This will be his first Christmas with Phil and Techno and Wilbur. And because there's always a part of him that's fearful to be himself—scared he'll be shot down, hurt, abandoned—he proclaims defiantly, *I don't like Christmas*.

Techno pauses from sorting through the various boxes of tinsel and ornaments. His hands are covered in red glitter.

"Okay," he says, and turns his attention back to the box. "Remind me why I should care again?"

Tommy scowls.

"You shouldn't," he blusters, "I'm just saying. I'm not going to help with decorating your stupid tree. So don't expect me to."

"Fine," Techno hums. "You'd probably just mess it up anyway."

Tommy glowers. "I would *not*."

"You would."

"No I wouldn't!"

"Good thing you're not helping me and Wil decorate it, then," Techno says, and he sets aside the tinsel. The box rattles when he pulls it closer. Tommy peers over curiously—just to see what's inside.

"Ornaments," Techno says, by way of explanation. He lifts one up. It's a photo of a baby in a bassinet. "Look. It's me."

"Is it really?"

A dry laugh. "No. It's a stock photo. Wilbur and I bought them because we thought it was funny that we don't have any baby pictures of our own."

“Ah,” Tommy says faintly.

He wonders about that for a moment. Do any of them have baby pictures at all? Or is the only proof of them existing coming after they were adopted?

Tommy has no idea what he looked like as a baby. He firmly pushes that thought away. Looks back towards the tree, green and bristling.

“Well?” Techno says. “We have a lot of ornaments to hang. Are you just going to stand around and stare?”

Tommy turns away.

“You can do it on your own,” he says dismissively. “I don’t care.”

Lying to himself is a habit Tommy is particularly skilled at.

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“Techno told me that you aren’t a fan of Christmas,” Phil says without preamble.

Tommy frowns. He wishes he hadn’t said that it was okay for Phil to come inside his room when he knocked.

“Techno says a lot of things,” Tommy frowns, and he turns his attention back to his phone.

“Is there a reason?” Phil asks, and he sits on the edge of Tommy’s bed. “If we need to tone it down this year, that’s perfectly alright by me.”

Tommy huffs. How many times will he have to say it? “I don’t care.”

“Regardless,” Phil says, “I wanted to let you know— I know Wilbur isn’t a fan of religion, and I wasn’t raised Christian or anything like that, so there’s no way we’re going to mass if that’s something that worries you— Christmas is a holiday about family, right? That’s why we celebrate it.”

“I don’t care,” Tommy says stiffly.

Phil goes silent. Tommy can tell that he’s looking at him. *Watching* him.

“I don’t care,” Tommy repeats, a bit more forcefully. “Can you go now? I’m in the middle of something.”

He’s not in the middle of anything. He just doesn’t want to stay in this moment. Everything feels unbearably oppressive. Like his room is smaller than ever, crashing down around him.

“Okay,” Phil says, after a beat. “If you do end up caring, will you come and tell me?”

A beat.

“Sure,” Tommy says. His heart skips a beat.

Phil’s tone is slightly more relaxed. Like he’s done something right.

“Have fun, Toms,” he says, and ruffles Tommy’s hair. Tommy wrinkles his nose, bats Phil’s hand away. He protectively arranges his hair back into how it was before— a wild nest.

With that, Phil closes Tommy’s bedroom door.

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One week until Christmas, and the entire neighborhood comes alive at night.

String lights and decorations are splattered across front lawns in patches of light. Tommy ducks his head and stuffs his hands into his pocket as he passes one house with a nativity scene in front. The frost crunches beneath his feet; the entire town is blanketed in the stuff. His breath comes out in clouds.

He’s on his way back from Tubbo’s. Now that school has ended for the semester, he would have thought that they would see each other once a week, at most. But Tommy has ended up going over to Tubbo’s house nearly every day. They see each other more over break than they did while at school together.

Tommy very much likes Tubbo’s house. They don’t have a Christmas tree, but Hanukkah ended a few days ago and they still have their wax-splattered menorahs in the front window. The candles dripped down in an endless stream of white-gold-blue, forming intricate sculptures on the metal. Tommy was there when Tubbo’s family lit the candles for the last night. It was an odd thing to be a part of, considering he had no idea how Hanukkah works or anything about it, really, but the jelly doughnuts for dessert weren’t too bad. And his pockets were full of chocolate coins as he walked home, wrapped in gold.

He likes Tubbo’s house because it’s so very full of *life*. His room is a mishmash of everything in the world that one person could have. His bedspread is three different colors, quilted together in shapeless fabric. He has two bookshelves, each filled to the brim with books that Tommy’s never read. There’s one large window, with a lamp beside it, and it looks out into the neighbor’s backyard. Tubbo confesses that he used to clamber out of it to go play with the neighbor’s dog when he was younger.

It’s always a shame when he has to go home for the night. He very much likes being Tubbo’s best friend.

This night, tucked under his arm as he paces home is a box. Tubbo gave it to him that afternoon, but as Tommy began pulling the ribbons apart, Tubbo made him promise that it was a Christmas gift. It had to go under the tree with all of the other gifts that Phil bought for him, Wilbur, and Techno, and it couldn’t be opened until Christmas Day.

Tommy hates being patient. He jiggles the box carefully and hears something vaguely expensive sounding inside. It’s heavy in his hands and slips from his gloves. Twice on his way back home, he’s forced to readjust his grip so the entire thing doesn’t fall.

“What’s that?” Wilbur demands, the second Tommy steps through the door.

“It’s for me,” Tommy glowers. “Not for you.”

“I know that,” Wilbur says. “What’s inside of it?”

“I don’t know.”

“You didn’t open it?”

“Tubbo told me I couldn’t.”

“Never took you for someone who’s able to wait for things.”

“That’s Tubbo for you,” Tommy huffs, and he places the box directly underneath the tree.

Techno and Wilbur did a shit job of decorating it. All the ornaments are evenly spaced out, without any chaos at all, and all of the ornaments look stupid as hell. That stock baby picture is perched right near the top. Gold and red tinsel showers glitter all over it; string lights are wound around the branches.

“This tree looks like shit,” Tommy says.

Wilbur curls his lip. “Say that to my face.”

“There isn’t even a star on it.”

“We don’t have one.”

“Well, it looks dumb without a star.”

“Fucking hell,” Wilbur sighs, “You are so negative. All of the time. Doesn’t it ever get exhausting?”

“I’m not negative,” Tommy protests. “I don’t like Christmas. All this fuss is just annoying.”

“Wait until Phil starts making you buy gifts,” Wilbur says. “That’s when it gets annoying.”

Tommy blanches. “Do I have to buy people gifts?”

“You’re thirteen,” Wilbur says. “Of course not. By the way, is there anything you want for Christmas? Phil asked me to ask you and to make it subtle.”

There are a lot of things Tommy wants for Christmas.

He wants to walk around and see the lights glimmer through the evening mist. He wants to buy those peppermint mochas from the coffee shop down the street, even though he doesn’t like the taste of coffee. Just because they’re a seasonal thing and he *wants* it. He wants to buy a perfect little star to go on top of the Christmas tree he was too stubborn to decorate.

He wants a baby picture. Of him. To go on top of the Christmas tree, right next to that stock one. To have proof that he existed before this year.

“Nothing,” Tommy says.

“Nothing?”

“Nothing,” Tommy confirms. “I don’t want anything for Christmas.”

“Phil is going to get you *socks* if you say that.”

“I don’t even want those.”

Wilbur stares.

Tommy realizes that he's still in his winter clothes from outside. He goes through the arduous process of unraveling his scarf from around his neck, pulling his hat off, untangling his mittens from one another, peeling his coat off, shaking the half-melted snow from his boots while Wilbur looks at him curiously.

"Fine," Wilbur says eventually. "I'll tell Phil that you want the warmest, fluffiest pair of socks he can find, and that will be your big Christmas gift."

There's already a scattering of presents underneath the tree. Above the gas fireplace that they never use are their stockings. Tommy's name is embroidered in a looping script across the fluffiest part of it.

Fine, Tommy thinks. Socks are fine by him.

Something sharp and hot burns in his chest. He can't put a name to it.

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He and Techno have not had the greatest relationship.

They still don't like each other. Tommy is fairly certain that Techno still hates him, even as much as he says that Tommy is *bearable* to have around. The day before the semester ended, they got into the pettiest fight imaginable. Tommy threatened to burn Techno's final English essay the day before it was due. Techno hissed that he was going to smash Tommy's precious record if he didn't *put that essay the fuck down*.

Their argument dissipated when they heard footsteps climbing the stairs. Hastily and without mentioning it, Tommy slid Techno's essay back over to him, and Techno passed over Tommy's disc abruptly. Both of them retreated to their rooms the second Phil came in eyesight.

Phil asked, "Is everything all right up here?"

Tommy scowled. "Perfect."

Techno glared. "Peachy."

"Alright," Phil said, and he was smart enough to cotton onto the tension. "Please try not to burn down the house when I go back downstairs, okay?"

With that, he left. Tommy flipped Techno off. Techno raised his chin and refused to do the same in return.

Ever since then, they've fallen into an uneasy truce. Tommy ducks around the hallway when he finds Techno in it. Their conversations are dry and brittle—mocking stock baby portraits— but still border on irritating.

Case in point:

"Come driving with me."

Tommy pauses. "What?"

“I said,” Techno repeats, condescendingly, “Come driving with me. Phil is making me run errands. I’m dragging you along.”

Tommy pretends to consider. “How about *fuck you and no* ?”

Techno’s eyebrows clamber up his face. “Someone’s in a bad mood.”

“I don’t want to go run errands.”

“We’re just going to the post office and back.”

“I don’t even want to do that.”

Techno sighs. “Is there anything you *want* to do? You seem to hate every part of this family.”

Tommy doesn’t. He really loves it quite a lot.

But he’ll never admit that out loud to Techno, so he says, “I want to go hang out with Tubbo.”

“There’s two days until Christmas,” Techno says. “Spend some time with your family instead of your friend.”

The word *family* is tinged with bitterness. Techno is always one for making jokes about how they’re not actually family because they’re not blood related. Tommy hates those jokes. They make him feel unstable, impermanent. Like he could be erased from Phil’s life completely just through a few pieces of paperwork. Just like he was before, over and over and over.

“Fine,” Tommy surprises himself by saying. “But if this takes more than ten minutes I’m throwing a fit.”

“You’ll do that anyway,” Techno mutters, but he fishes out the car keys to the shitty little sedan from the drawer. “Come on, then. And wear your coat,” he says pointedly. “I’ll tell Phil if you don’t.”

Tommy’s built for colder weather. Unlike Phil, who practically bundles up even when they’re inside the house and the heat’s all the way up. Tommy could go outside in short sleeves and barely get goosebumps. But Phil still tries to get him to wear a bulky jacket and gloves and a hat and all of the things that normal kids are supposed to wear, because he could *catch a cold*. Tommy feels very stupid bundled up in that big puffy thing.

He slips into the passenger seat instead of the back, and Techno gives him a look for it but doesn’t protest. Heat fizzes from the vents and envelops the air with warmth. Tommy kicks his feet up on the dashboard, testing Techno’s response, and to his surprise, Techno allows it to happen.

“If we get in a crash and you die,” Techno says mildly, “That’s on you, not me.”

“Whatever,” Tommy says, and leans his seat back further.

The drive to the post office takes seven minutes. Techno goes inside to mail a stack of letters to various family friends. It’s their annual Christmas card. It won’t arrive until New Year’s, because Phil wanted to hold off on taking any family portraits until Tommy was certain to stay. Otherwise it would have been quite awkward to take family portraits without Tommy, or to mail out dozens of images of their perfect little family only for Tommy to depart in the next month. It’s the only professional picture Tommy’s ever had taken of him.

Techno comes back to the car. The windows are frosted over, and he begins the drive back to their house without any fuss.

Without warning, Tommy sees a flash of gold pass by. He presses both hands to the window and says, "Stop the car."

Techno looks at him disbelievingly. "What?"

"Stop the car!" Tommy shouts, and Techno slams on the brakes. "Pull into that parking lot."

"You have to be kidding me."

"Just do it!" Tommy says. Something wild and alive races through him, filling him up with light. "Do you have cash on you?"

"I have Phil's card," Techno says, and follows Tommy's gaze. "He told me not to use it for anything other than stamps and postage cost."

"I want that," Tommy says, and points.

In the window of the store is a star. Woven gold, glowing so brightly that it almost blinds him. It would go perfectly on top of their Christmas tree.

Techno glances from Tommy to the ornament and back to Tommy. His brows crease. Vaguely Tommy realizes that this is the first time he's shown any interest in the holidays at all.

"Are you sure?" Techno asks.

"Of course," Tommy says, and he crams his beanie back on his head, which he pulled off the instant he was in the car. "I'm going to get it right now."

"Fine," Techno sighs, clearly exhausted with him. He passes the credit card over to him. "Go wild. *Don't* buy anything other than the star."

"Will do!" Tommy says eagerly, and he pushes himself out of the car.

He returns a few moments later with the ornament carefully cradled in his mittened hands. This close up, it's even brighter than he could have dreamed. Gold and silver beads are sewn into the edges, glimmering in the lamplight. It's cool to the touch. Stupidly expensive, but Tommy doesn't think Phil will mind at all.

Techno is still looking at him curiously, brows furrowed.

"Are you okay?" he says, after a long moment.

Tommy blinks himself back into the present.

"I'm fine," he says, and buckles his seatbelt. "Let's go home."

Techno, too, has to drag his eyes away from the star.

"Alright," he says. "Home."

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Phil brings out the stepladder that night to help Tommy put the star on the Christmas tree.

It sits there, glowing, and Tommy looks at it for far longer than he should.

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Christmas Eve brings nothing but arguments.

They're all supposed to be making dinner together, but Phil ends up apologizing to all of them and saying that he has to make a few important work calls, so he won't be able to help the three of them. He shuts his bedroom door, and even though Wilbur presses his ear to it, trying to hear what's going on, he comes back and all he says is that Phil sounds *upset*.

Tommy doesn't like the sound of that. He exchanges glances with Techno, and he knows that both of them are thinking exactly the same thing.

A few days after Tommy was adopted, and he and Techno got into that fight (essay burning, record smashing), Wilbur dragged the two of them into a room together and forced the three of them to come to an agreement.

Their agreement is simple: whatever they have going on in their lives, it will stay out of Phil's.

Phil was kind enough to take all three of them in, and it's not fair for them to expect their father to deal with everything. Over whispers and painful secrets, all three of them pinkie-promised on it. He and Wilbur and Techno decided not to make Phil upset any longer. They would deal with Tommy and his petty behavior, and in return, Tommy would do his best to not pick fights with them.

Because as much as he dislikes his older brothers, he likes Phil.

He adopted him, after all, and Tommy will never have enough words to explain how much Phil has changed his life. How much it matters that he has something permanent to cling to, when before, it felt like he was floating, anchorless, without something to keep him from disappearing entirely.

So they make a promise. *Don't upset Phil. Don't worry Phil.* He has enough on his plate already, dealing with the three of them.

That's why, when Wilbur returns from listening through Phil's bedroom door and says, "Phil sounds *upset*," all three of them glance at each other.

They're all wondering, *what did we do?*

Christmas Eve preparations are spent in silence. Every so often there's a frustrated sound coming from Phil's room and Tommy's shoulders are wound so tight it's a wonder he doesn't snap from the tension. He feels brittle. One push from keeling over.

It's ridiculous. It's stupid. He knows that everything is a done deal. He's *home*, this will be his home for the next five years, at least until he turns eighteen. There's no way Phil is getting rid of him now.

But Christmas is in less than twelve hours. He crept out of bed in the middle of the night before to see if there were any gifts for him underneath the tree (despite telling Wilbur he didn't want any)

and to his horror, he found that there were none with his name on them. There were at least five addressed to Wilbur and Techno each. But there was nothing for Tommy. Nothing except his stocking.

Phil is upset. Phil is upset. Phil is upset.

It's illogical. It's irrational.

But the conclusion Tommy comes to is this: I am the one who made Phil upset.

He's meant to be peeling and slicing potatoes for dinner, but the knife slips in his jittering hands. He slices his thumb open, the thick fleshy part of it.

"Fuck," Tommy says, and his hands start shaking even worse than before, "Shit, fuck, I didn't mean—"

"Swear jar," Wilbur laughs.

Tommy goes still.

It's a joke. He knows that it's a joke. But the words burn and flash through his mind, and all he can remember in that instant is that house number two had a swear jar as well. Tommy's never been good at keeping his mouth shut and his tongue runs away from him. Every time he swore, he was expected to put a quarter into the jar. It drained him of all his fundings in a matter of days. Eventually he just gave up on speaking altogether.

Tommy rounds on Wilbur furiously, intending to speak his mind, but something inside of him reaches up and clamps his mouth shut. Pain lances through his hand, stinging, and all the words he wants to say shrivel and die before they make it to the front of his throat.

"Come here," Techno says impatiently, beckoning with two fingers, and Tommy's anxiety turns into a live thing, rearing its head violently in his stomach.

He wants to cry all of a sudden. The inability to speak up, terrified that Phil, who has been nothing but kind to him, will take away everything Tommy's ever had. The stinging pain lancing through his thumb. The jeering, laughing look on Wilbur's face, like he doesn't even know how much discomfort Tommy is in. The golden star on top of a Christmas tree that holds no gifts for Tommy. Those bloody potatoes which now have to be thrown out all because Tommy never fucking learned how to hold a knife correctly.

"Come *here*," Techno repeats, with a note of irritation, and his apathy is what drags Tommy back to earth.

He has the first aid kit out from the bathroom cabinet. Wilbur looks confused, but he doesn't know what he's done wrong. In bitter silence, Techno directs Tommy to stick his hand underneath the kitchen faucet. He swipes an alcohol pad across it, and Tommy hisses through clenched teeth. Techno's motions are brisk and efficient. Tommy recalls Techno bandaging himself up in the bathroom after that first fight at school. He had nearly depleted their first aid kit then, too. It's a wonder how Phil didn't notice.

"There," Techno says, and he acts remarkably like Phil in that moment, taking control of a situation that has somehow spiraled. "Wilbur, can you cut the rest of the potatoes? Tommy, just—" He looks towards his little brother, still pale and strangely silent, and reconsiders whatever he was going to say. "Go put on some Christmas music."

Tommy can do that. That's much easier than handling knives, which he still doesn't like to do. They make him uncomfortable, make him uneasy.

He crosses over to the radio they have— why doesn't Phil just buy a speaker? Wouldn't that be easier?— and he finds a station that's playing only Christmas music for the holidays.

The quiet in the kitchen is swallowed by the croonings of Frank Sinatra. Tommy sits on the couch, hugs a blue-tasseled pillow close to his chest. His thumb stings. It feels oddly detached from the rest of him.

“Tommy,” Wilbur says, after none of them have spoken in a long time, “You're okay, right?”

“Yeah,” Tommy swallows, and he repeats it more strongly, laughing: “Yeah, I'm fine. Just absolutely shit with knives is all.”

His anxiety retreats, unable to feed on any of his worries anymore, and Tommy forces it down further. This is *his* house. This is *his* home. He can say whatever the fuck he wants.

He's about to stand up and continue doing whatever Techno will inevitably ask of him next, likely seasoning the sprouts or something, when Phil emerges from his room.

“Dad,” Wilbur says, and that's when it becomes obviously clear to Tommy just how much Wilbur was affected by him going nonverbal, even just for an instant. Wilbur rarely calls Phil *dad*.

“Everything alright with work?”

“Fine,” Phil says, with a tired smile, and then regains his energy in the next instant. “This all smells delicious. Nothing happened while I was busy?”

“Tommy cut his finger,” Techno says, monotone, and gestures with the tip of his knife to where Tommy is still sitting, pressed into one corner of the sofa. “I put him in timeout for it.”

No mention of the brief and fierce panic that overtook him. No mention of how tense the kitchen was. No need to make Phil any more upset.

“Everything's alright?” Phil checks with him, and Tommy nods.

“Had to throw out about half of the potatoes, though.”

Phil smiles, evidently relieved. “That's alright. We have more than enough for the four of us.”

Christmas Eve dinner is finished in swift silence. Christmas music blares out into the air, and Tommy thinks about just how awful tomorrow is going to go.

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Tommy wakes up, stupidly late.

There's already noise from the living room, and he can hear someone talking. It's Techno's god awful voice, and it feels too damn early, even though one glance at his alarm clock tells him that it's nearly noon. The smell of fried bacon wafts through his closed door, and Tommy's stomach perks up in interest.

Then he remembers that today is Christmas.

It's Christmas Day. It's *noon* on Christmas Day and no one has come barging in, demanding that it's time to open presents.

Is Phil still upset with him?

Have they already opened presents without him there?

It takes him ages until he manages to peel himself from his bed and stumble out downstairs.

"Merry Christmas!" Wilbur says. He looks much more awake than Tommy feels. It's at a time like this when Tommy is reminded of just how young they all are. Wilbur bounces forwards and backwards on the balls of his feet. Excited about the rest of this morning.

"Hi," Tommy mumbles.

"Hi," Phil says. "We were waiting for you to wake up before we opened presents."

Tommy's stomach turns. "Oh."

He pokes faintly at the fried eggs and bacon. He doesn't feel as hungry as he used to.

"Whenever you're ready," Phil says. "I think Techno's been trying to guess what they all are. We should probably go before he sleuths us all out."

His tone is light. There's none of the *upset* from the night before. Tommy has no appetite, but he forces himself to choke down a decent sized breakfast. His mouth tastes of nothing at all.

When Tommy moves to the living room, he finds that there's a good number more presents underneath the tree than there were on Christmas Eve. Phil must have added more overnight. Techno places a present back, looking guilty. Tommy supposes Phil was right about Techno trying to figure out what his presents are.

"Tommy's up," Techno sighs, "Finally."

"Sorry," Tommy mutters, face hot. He knows that Christmas Day is supposed to start early. The kids are supposed to beg the parents to wake up, be sitting eagerly by the tree. Tommy knows that he's fucked that all up.

"Don't worry about it," Phil says firmly, and they sit in a loose semicircle on the carpet around the tree. Techno's face glows with light from the tree. Phil, sitting closest, begins to dole out presents. They come in all shapes and sizes, colors and ribbons and glitter. Even though they're all obviously from Phil, all of them say *from: Santa* on the tags.

"Pretty sure we know Santa doesn't exist," Techno says flippantly when he sees that. "Just like the Tooth Fairy."

"Play along," Phil shushes him. "It's the thought that counts."

Techno rolls his eyes, but obligingly plays along. Tommy's heart sinks lower and lower in his chest. The pile of presents dwindles. Not one is passed to him.

Finally, Phil turns to him.

"This—" He pulls out a manila envelope, the size of a half-sheet of paper— "Is for you, Tommy."

Tommy takes it. It's light in his hands. It almost feels like there's nothing in it.

He looks up at Phil. “What is this?”

“Open it,” Phil encourages. Beside him, Wilbur and Techno have already torn open half their gifts. Ribbons and wrapping paper are strewn halfway across the carpeted floor.

Tommy rips the envelope open. Braces himself for bitter disappointment.

And *pictures* spill out of it.

Three of them. A picture of a baby in a bassinet, one that definitely isn't a stock photo. The baby is swaddled, pink-cheeked, eyes closed and mid-yawn. One tiny hand tries to poke free of the blanket. The name on the bassinet reads *Tommy*.

The second picture is of a baby, now with a tuft of blond hair, clinging onto the edge of a sofa as he attempts to stand. His fingers are small and chubby and the baby smiles, still toothless and happy.

The third photo is of those same fingers, clinging to someone's index finger. Tommy's baby hand is small and barely reaches the second knuckle. It's slightly blurry. Like whoever was taking it was excited.

His hands begin trembling.

“I know it's not much,” Phil explains hastily, and his words blur into a rushing sound, “Wilbur told me you didn't want anything, so I looked around to try and find something that was small but wasn't a large gift. Techno told me how you asked about the other baby picture, and I got in touch with your birth family— they didn't have many they could find—”

Tommy can barely hear his dad talking. He looks down at *himself*, there, clinging onto the side of a sofa long forgotten to time. Learning to stand for the first time. Clinging to someone who used to love him.

That's *him*.

“Thank you,” he whispers finally. He blinks furiously. His eyes sting. His voice doesn't sound like himself at all.

“What did you get?” Wilbur demands, and he leans over, grabbing at Tommy's wrist. Tommy wants to clutch these pictures close to his heart, keep them a treasure, but he obligingly turns them over so both Wilbur and Techno can see.

Silence falls.

“No way,” Wilbur says, hushed. “You lucky son of a bitch.”

“Wilbur,” Phil reprimands.

“I get *new shoes* and he gets his own baby pictures?” Wilbur demands. “This is unbelievable.”

His tone is light, though. And he's smiling. And Tommy finds that he's smiling too, ear-splitting, unable to contain himself.

“Show me,” Techno demands, and Tommy passes the three pictures over. He tucks his hands under his legs to hide how much they're shaking.

Techno looks for a long, long time. And when he passes them back, he too is smiling.

“And these,” Phil adds, and he hands another squishy, soft package to Tommy. It’s his other present.

Inside is a pair of the fluffiest socks Tommy has ever seen.

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That night, Tommy takes his precious record and he sets it on the record player.

That was Tubbo’s gift to him. A sleek black one, with a knob for adjusting sound and a turntable and a crisp, clear speaker. The music plays softly into the air and for the millionth time, Tommy lies on his back and looks at his pictures.

Christmas is for family, he recalls Phil saying.

The house smells of cinnamon and pine. His mouth is sweet from eggnog and his fingers are still stained with the glitter from wrapping paper. Downstairs, Wilbur’s guitar rings through the house. He’s playing a Christmas carol for Phil. The world hums along with him.

Tommy looks at his baby pictures until his eyes are too blurry to see them at all.

## End Notes

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