

INTRODUCTION

The Sick Little Boy and the Biker Dude

Today is Christmas Eve. The sky is blue with puffy white clouds. The air is a balmy seventy degrees. A typical winter's day in Southern California. It is also the day of the annual toy run at the children's hospital. Although I have volunteered here for almost two years now, this is my first opportunity to bear witness to the magic that is about to unfold.

For over twenty years, a local H.O.G. (Harley Owners Group) chapter has dedicated Christmas Eve to putting smiles on kids' faces by rolling onto the hospital grounds with an eye-popping array of toys, games, and stuffed animals. My job is to escort the kids—those who got permission from their nurses—outside onto the sunny lawn. All morning long the kids ask: “When are the biker dudes coming? What are the biker dudes gonna bring me? Can I sit on a biker's bike?”

With help from other volunteers, sick children from ages two to fourteen stream slowly out of the hospital—some in wheelchairs, some pulling along their IV poles, and others clutching the hands of the nearest adults. They know that in a few

minutes more than one hundred motorcyclists on super-shiny machines will roll deafeningly through the parking lot bearing gifts just for them.

The kids jockey for the best viewing positions, with some sitting cross-legged or squatting on the grass, while others are lucky enough to find some folding chairs set up for the occasion. Happy to escape the confines of their small hospital rooms, they wait restlessly, faces aglow with anticipation and wonder. Minutes go by. Then excitement crackles in the air as the muffled roar of motorcycles is heard down the road. A traffic light turns green and a cavalry of bikes barrel through the intersection, revving their engines to the delight of the kids. “It's the biker dudes!” screams someone in the crowd. “Yay! They're here!”

This yelling onlooker happens to be *me!*

Surveying the crowd, I see that some of the children are stranded behind others, craning their necks to see what is going on. Others, absent of family or friends to share the day, shy away from the big noise and hug the walls of the building, far from the action.

Oh, this will not do! I grab some kids' hands and poke through the crowd, prodding adults out of the way and leading the bewildered youngsters to front-row views. Several wary children are now close enough to actually feel the heat from the engines blasting past.

Two by two, row after row, bikes of all shapes and colors roll by. Men on bikes. Women on bikes. Men and women on bikes and trikes. Decked-out Santas wave and smile at the small fries in their jammies, bandages, hospital gowns, and rolling IV units.

The deafening roar finally subsides as the last of the bikers rumbles into the parking lot and the bikes are shut off. Now the procession to the toy bins begins. There are four big, empty containers already waiting along the wall of the hospital, behind the kids. The bikers head over to the bins and begin filling them to the brim with the colorful bounty they have brought. Watching each rider, the kids quickly check out every toy that drifts past them, eyeballing which one they might want.

I stroll through the crowd, making sure each child is okay. Warm enough? Need a chair? Did you see the cool bikes? Wanna sit on one? As I make my way through, there he is: a fragile little boy in his hospital PJs, maybe five or six years old, sitting all alone, with his little legs dangling over the edge of his chair. Although sullen, he seems aware

of his surroundings, yet at the same time he's oblivious. I am sure being a patient gives him more pressing things to think about than bikers and toys. Or does it? Instantly my heart opens to him.

As I approach the little munchkin, from the corner of my eye I notice a badass-looking biker dude is also headed his way.

I mean no disrespect when I refer to this man, but he is fully decked out as the hardcore stereotype of "the Biker." Had I been casting a biker movie, this guy would be called back on the first day, and he would not need any help from the wardrobe department. He has the do-rag on his head and a long, straggly, graying beard. Faded tattoos march up and down both arms. Worn leather chaps and vest. A chunky metal chain strung from his belt to his back pocket. The classic, weathered, *Easy Rider* boots. He is the complete picture, the real deal.

I make way for the biker to approach the little boy. After all, this gentleman is a participant in the toy run, and he's part of the reason the kids have something to look forward to this Christmas Eve. The boy is well aware of the approaching man and eyeballs him up and down. I am nervous. This little boy looks very unsure of himself, and I'm worried that the man is going to intimidate him. This could end in disaster, or at least tears. As the biker takes another step

toward him, I look in the little boy's eyes, which are growing wider as an "oh my God!" expression spreads across his face. With each step by the biker dude, the little boy leans farther and farther back in his chair.

Then I turn toward the man and gaze into his eyes. *Well, I'll be damned. Would you look at that!* There is as much fear in the biker dude's eyes as there is on the face of the sick little boy. Is he simply preparing himself in case the boy freaks out and starts crying? Two boys: one big, one small, and each afraid of the other. *This I've got to see.* I don't move a muscle, and I breathlessly wait to see how this plays out.

Slowing his steps, the man stops within arm's length, crouches down to eye level with the boy, and shakily extends a teddy bear. Well, that is all it takes. With one look at that teddy bear, the sick little boy turns into a regular little kid. He looks up at the biker and gives him the toothiest smile I have ever seen. The dude's face flushes with relief and joy. And in that moment, these two boys become one. With the gift of a simple teddy bear, all fear vanishes.

In the middle of a crowded parking lot filled with kids, bikes, and riders milling around, the little boy is smiling, the biker dude is smiling, and I am crying like a baby. As I wipe away the tears, I hear God say *Your next book is on bikers.* I reply: *Okay.*

In this moment, I learn a simple truth about these folks who straddle a "wild thang." Behind their don't-fuck-with-me masks, this tough-looking crowd is truly a bunch of loving teddy bears with big-ass hearts.

Witnessing that awesome encounter between the sick little boy and the biker dude opened my eyes and, dare I say, opened my mind as well. Deeply moved by that moment, I felt I had been let in on a major secret—these riders are really special people. I was now damned curious to learn what goes on in their heads. And to share my findings with the world.

It seemed only appropriate, if not obvious, that since this book began at a children's hospital, it should be used to help youngsters. And as I learn more about the charitable heart of the motorcycle community, I see just how generous bikers really are: holding thousands of charity rides and other events every year for every cause under the sun. Surveys show that riders give to charity and participate in charitable causes far more than non-riders do, dedicating entire rides to feed the hungry, provide for veterans, aid in cancer research, and, yes, to brighten the lives of children in need.

Join me in celebrating this amazing community that continually gives back and provides a charitable example for all to follow.