



The tin soldier

Every year Margaret's grandfather gave her a present for her birthday. This year it was a small box decorated with a lovely pink bow which she eagerly tugged open to see inside.

Inside there were two little figures of a ballerina and a one-legged tin soldier joined together on a metal base shaped like a heart.

Margaret had never seen such an odd-looking toy.

"What is it, Grandpa?" she asked.

Her grandfather picked up the figurine and started telling her the amazing story of the little tin soldier.

Once upon a time there was a little boy who had lots of toys. He kept them all in his room where he played for hours on end. But what the boy liked most of all was sending his little tin soldiers into battle.

He had lots of tin soldiers but one of them was missing a leg and as he was the bravest, he always put him in the front line to give the others courage.

What the boy didn't know was that at night while he was fast asleep his toys came to life. And that was how one day the one-legged tin soldier ended up in a dark box next to a beautiful ballerina. The two fell in love at first sight. But because they were both too shy to admit it, they hid their feelings behind long conversations. He described his many battles and she told him about the ballets she danced in.

All the other toys grew jealous of the close friendship that had grown between the two. Every night before going to sleep, the boy would put all of his toys away. But the little tin soldier and the ballerina would spend the whole night talking for hours and hours.

One day while playing, the boy decided to give his one-legged tin soldier a special mission: he was to guard the house. So he picked him up and placed him on the window sill of his room.

But soon, storm clouds as black as night blew in, blotting out the blue sky. A terrible storm broke out; lightning flashed and thunder crashed. The little tin soldier stood his ground as best he could, but suddenly, he slipped and plunged into a puddle on the street.

When the sun came out, a group of children playing in the street found the lost, dirty little soldier.

"Oh, poor thing. Look, he has only one leg," said one of the children.

"It doesn't matter," replied another, "Pick him up and we'll change him into a fearless sailor."

And that's just what they did. The little tin soldier was soon sailing on a paper boat in the

rainwater flowing down the gutter. That was how the little soldier became a sailor. The boat went whirling along until it sailed into a sewer.

Then, everything turned dark and the little soldier began to tremble with fear as he sailed in silence among the rats that lived down below.

Finally, the sewer water flowed out into the sea and the boat sailed away towards the horizon. When the little soldier could no longer see the shore, a swirl of water sank his tiny craft.

The little soldier thought he was going to drown. He sank and sank to the bottom of the ocean when suddenly a huge fish that was swimming by opened its mouth and gulped him down, thinking he was a squid. But before the fish even had time to digest, he was caught in the net of a fisherman on his way back to port to sell his fish.

And as luck would have it, the mother of the boy who had put the little soldier on the window sill was walking through the market when she passed by the fish stall and saw the fish. "What a nice fresh fish! I'll make it for supper tonight," she thought. So she bought it and took it home with her.

When it was time to prepare supper, the boy's mother began cleaning the fish. She slit open its belly with a knife and lo and behold, there was the little tin soldier! The boy was very happy to find him again. This time he decided to keep him safely on the mantelpiece and... surprise!...right next to the lovely ballerina! The soldier began telling her all about his adventures, about how he had sailed among rats, then out into the open sea until a big wave had sunk his paper boat, about...

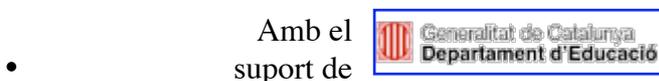
But just as he came to the most exciting part of his story, a strong gust of wind blew the ballerina straight off the mantelpiece and right into the flames of the fireplace.

The little soldier couldn't bear to see his ballerina burn. So summoning up all his courage, he threw himself into the flames.

The fire very slowly began to melt their bases and the tin of one figure started melting into the other, but in the shape of a heart. When their bodies were also about to melt together, the boy rescued them from the fire. Ever since then, the little tin soldier and the ballerina have always been together, joined in love on their heart-shaped base.

"From now on, I'll never let them be separated again," said Margaret. An looking, the ballerina and the little tin soldier gazed at each d when no one was other in joy.

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