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## Sloppy Joes and Carebears

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# Sloppy Joes and Carebears

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Please see the Editors' Foreword - [A Christian Response to Art and Literature: A Very Short Guide to Images and Texts](#).

## **Description**

A comedic recounting of a memory emblazoning the idea of shame into a young boy's mind.

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## **About the Contributor**

Born the child of a pastor and an aspiring English teacher, Nathan Harris was raised a lover of words, sounds, and ideas. Although blazing a new trail in the family as a STEM student, his passion will always be crafting stories and writings that elicit a response from the reader.

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# SLOPPY JOES AND CAREBEARS

*NONFICTION BY NATHAN HARRIS*

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Growing up, AWANA was a moral obligation for my family and my only social life. It was in the 80's grass-green carpeted pastures of wood-paneled classrooms where I was coloring contentedly with my classmates. Earlier in the evening my mom had wrapped me snugly in a fire-house red vest dripping with patches I had earned through stuffing verses in my mouth and spitting them out. Despite my accolades, my memory only lasted about a week. The vest pulled against my tummy swimming with a king's feast of goldfish crackers, so I unbuttoned it and reached for more of that classroom manna. Kicking my light-up velcros—I may have been homeschooled but I was still cool—I hummed “Bad to the Bone” as I wondered whether the elephants being squeezed out of the top of Noah’s Ark should be gray with blue stripes or yellow with polka dots. The squeaky chatter of crayons in the hands of intensely focused third-grade artists danced above the steady hum of the florescent lights. A thought struck me. I decided to share. “Care Bears are just really cool.”

A murmur of agreement and stolen “Amen’s” swept around the table. Encouraged in the spirit, I continued, “I have the blue one.”

Another voice piped up, “I have the elephant. He’s my favorite.” We all cooed in admiration and the brisk rattling of the snack cart trundled past the open door, and a draft of tile-cooled air swept aside the ancient funny smell that clung stubbornly to the carpet and walls of the classroom. One after another we went around sharing our heart for Care Bears like the prayer circles we’d witnessed many times before. Finally, one girl remained. Her hair was bound up in a ponytail so tight it almost seemed to pull her face flat. All eyes fell upon her expectantly. There was silence. Unable to stand the suspense I exclaimed, “Well? Do you have a Care Bear?”

“No.” Came the matter-of-a-fact reply. “I’ve never had a Care Bear.” There was a clatter of dropped crayons. I tried to open my mouth and console her, but nothing came out. How could I share the love of Care Bears with someone who had never experienced it? At that moment I set my jaw and turned resolutely back to coloring. I would get this girl a Care Bear.

Trotting out of the stuffy church into the crisp, spring breeze, I leaped aboard the waiting minivan and took a deep breath. I knew a hard battle awaited me. “Mom?”

“Mmhm?” She murmured distractedly.

“I met this girl tonight who has never had a Care Bear. We need to get her one.”

My breathing stalled, and I leaned forward. My fingers brushed a mysterious crusty splotch clinging to the seat that I clutched tightly in apprehension. The van lurched as Mom slammed on the breaks and whipped around to look me in the eyes.

“A girl?” She asked choking back burning curiosity, trepidation, and sadness at her boy growing up so fast.

“Yes. And she needs a Care Bear. She’s never had one before.”

Mom stared me dead in the eyes, and head lights whizzed past.

“Right. Ok. Yeah. We’ll get her a—” She raised an eyebrow loaded with meaning that promptly missed its mark. “Care Bear.”

Suspiciously, I settled back as mom pulled the minivan back on the road. Mom had proved a far more formidable opponent in the past when it came to purchasing toys; she believed they inhibited the imagination. And she did seem a bit too interested in the girl part of my mission. Scrunching my face in meditation, my eyes brushed the farmland rushing past searching for answers that would come much later.

Fast forward a few weeks and summer was picking up unusual heat and humidity for Northern Wisconsin. AWANA had finished, and I was at a stalemate in Mission: Spread Joy. I would ask mom

about getting the Care Bear and she would always fire back with questions about the “lucky lady.” We both avoided the questions. But there was always next year, and I still had an ace: Dad. So when summer rolled in, I was not defeated, but biding my time.

Summers were always fat bursts of sweaty, laughing, lung-squeezing fun in the long winters of school. Since my dad was the pastor, we went to every graduation party we were invited to. This had gone on since I was born. Thus, I was a pro at working the snack table, charming the dessert lady, and infiltrating high-school pick-up games of capture-the-flag and badminton. Evening was pushing back the heat, I had lead my team (from the rear) to victory in badminton, and my tummy knew it was time to grab some classic party grub. Strutting over to the food table I, as world-wise as I was young, double stacked the paper plates and piled high a glorious mountain of sloppy joe and baked beans. Carefully weaving around headless torsos that cracked open sweating pop cans and talked about things that no one truly cared about, I made it to heaven. The back patio was mostly empty and a rusted, green wire table sat with every chair empty and beckoning. No forced conversation with old, nosy church-goers and no uncomfortable silence with less old, apathetic teenagers. I eased my plate next to several forsaken solo cups and plopped myself down on a weather-beaten wire chair with an equally faded cushion leaking snowy stuffing. Cheers and shouting of the badminton game around the corner of the house were interrupted pleasantly by the chirrup of crickets and the occasional boisterous laugh from the adults inside. Savory barbeque aroma was lifted from plate to the heavens like an incense and I folded my hands, bowed my head, and praised God for the happiness about to fill me. Waxy, soft grass tickled my feet as I swung them joyfully. When the soft bun crammed with savory meat and manly sweetness hit my mouth I forgot all humanity and etiquette. Every eating rule I was taught became meaningless as the dust upon the wind, and I grasped life at that moment. The wind caressed my slobbery face, and the sun kissed my sticky nose good-night before sinking deeper into the suburban horizon. In the midst of my ecstasy I felt a tap on my shoulder. Opening my eyes, I turned. There stood Mom, and from behind her, like predators emerging from a cave, stalked the ponytail girl and her friend. What was Mom doing? Didn't she see I was busy?

“Nathan, this is the girl you wanted to—” she gave a wink and finished with a voice swollen with obvious romantic intention even to a level three Sparky, “—get the Care Bear for.” I froze. No. There

it was. Every fear and suspicion that had been festering in my mind rolled and released in hard real sound. Sound that ponytail girl heard very clearly.

The horror dawned on me as the sun set and a new warmth, a mocking warmth shoved aside the happiness in my face. My chest stuttered. Summer drained from my head and left something cold and dizzying. Never did I consider Mom would violate my trust. *No!* The lie of innocence clawed inside me, reaching for freedom. *It's not like that. That's not her. I don't know you. Leave me alone.* But instead I nodded dumbly, and my feet suddenly felt too far off the ground.

I felt a meat chunk drip from my chin and the girls giggled. Freckles and mocking chestnut eyes blazed with gross fascination. My strength crumpled like a soda can, and I stared at a weed pushing through a crack in the patio to hide the building threat of warm stinging tears. After an eternity of ten to fifteen seconds they whispered to each other and ran away. Mom faded like an escaping ninja into the cover of a passing crowd of adults, content to have slain my dignity and AWANA social life. I turned back to my wilted bun and weakly took another bite. But now it tasted of humiliation, shame, and ash. I ducked my head and felt my heart sink into a stomach bloated with terror and regret. I tossed my plate away and scrubbed my face with fistfuls of napkins. I didn't stop when my face was clean. I scraped on, hoping to somehow wash off this awful new feeling.