

THE GIFT

HAL AMES



Even at thirteen years of age, Jocelyn had beautiful dark smooth skin and deep brown eyes that always had a twinkle. Her teeth were not perfect, yet her big smile brought joy to those around her. Her hair was dark and thick and it had a gentle wave to it. She had never cut it and it reached past her knees. It had the shine of healthy hair. Usually, her hair was the first thing people noticed when they met her.

She shared a bed with her sister Julie who was two years older. Being the youngest in the family had its benefits and disadvantages.

On the plus side, her older siblings pampered and protected her. They always made sure they took good care of her.

What she did not like, was that all her things were hand-me-downs. Some of her clothes had small holes, as well as little rips that her mother had sewn the best she could. She wanted new clothes, but she knew she would have to wait. Because of the economy, the family was unable to buy many new things.

It was late November and in a month Christmas would be coming, yet she knew, even though the family didn't have much money, there would be something nice under the tree just for her.

The weather was getting colder. It had been a long hot summer, typical of where she lived, but now winter was coming and everyone wrapped themselves in warm coats with woolen scarves around their necks.

Jocelyn remembered how her grandmother used to sit for hours in her favorite chair knitting something for each of the kids. The things she made were always special. Jocelyn's favorite was a knitted pink hat with a small yellow flower her grandmother had made just for her. She wore it all winter long because she was so proud of it.

When her grandmother died during the summer, Jocelyn and each of her four siblings were allowed to take something to keep as a remembrance. Jocelyn chose her grandmother's hairbrush. It had white bristles with an ivory handle covered in silver. It was the most amazing thing Jocelyn had ever seen. She brushed her hair with it every night in front of the mirror on her dressing table. It was the most special thing she had ever had, especially since it had belonged to her grandmother.

Jocelyn's mother, Ray-Anne, was from Barbados in the Caribbean. Her parents had come to America looking for a better life when she was a teenager. She still had a hint of her accent, which the children loved to hear. She told stories about her childhood in Barbados. Life there was so different from the life she had now.

Joseph, her father, worked in a factory on the assembly line. His relatives had been slaves in Alabama. They had moved to Detroit after the Civil War looking for work. The work was hard and the hours were long, but he did not mind. When he was able to work, he was provided for his family. He was a gentle man and when he came home from work, he would make sure he spent time with each one of his children.

Before they went to bed, he would read a story from the Bible to them. He did not have more than an eighth-grade education, and because of this, he encouraged his children to do better than he had. He wanted all of them to go to college and get fine jobs.

It was a family with a lot of love to share.

It was especially difficult when her father's company had laid him off from his job during the last financial crisis. The family managed to survive, and now that her dad was back to work, things were now improving.

Jocelyn's oldest brother Jayden had already graduated from college and was an engineer. He helped the family whenever he could.

Jasmine, the oldest sister, was married and had a young son named Tyree. It was always fun to have Tyree over to the house. He was very energetic. Even though he had a lot of energy, overall, he was a very good boy.

Julie and Jordan, Jocelyn's other sister and brother, were twins and were in high school. They did not spend a lot of time with the family. Jordan was good at sports and played football and basketball for his school. Julie spent most of her time with her friends.

Jocelyn, being the youngest, spent most of her time helping her mother or doing her homework. She was good in school and had many friends who she loved to talk to on the phone or text. She was a normal teenager.

Thanksgiving came and many of her relatives joined them for dinner. Her mother prepared a large traditional Thanksgiving meal with turkey, mashed potatoes, green bean casserole, white rolls, and sweet potatoes.

After the dinner, the family sat in the parlor and listened as Jocelyn played Christmas songs on the piano. The family sang along and then they laughed as they shared stories of the past. It made everyone happy and laughter filled the room. Her father sat in his armchair and smiled. Jocelyn loved this time of year. The holidays always made her so happy.

On Sunday, the family went to buy a Christmas tree to put in the parlor. The whole family climbed into the van and headed to the nursery where they purchased a tree every year.

When they arrived, the owner greeted them and took them to the back of the lot where he had saved a tree just for them. Everyone agreed it was the prettiest

tree they had ever seen.

Jordan and his dad tied the tree to the top of the van, and then began to drive home.

It was cold and it had snowed during the night. A blanket of white soft snow covered the ground making the holiday feel just right. The decorations on the street lamps fluttered in the wind reflecting the colors of the tinsel. Jocelyn stared out the window of the van and sighed in the comfort of the season.

Suddenly there was a loud noise, a crashing sound. Jocelyn looked up just in time to see a red car come flying at them. It slammed into the front of the van and then she hit her head on the seat in front of her.

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She opened her eyes. As she looked around the room, she realized that she was alone. Her vision was not very good so nothing was in focus.

“Hello, is anyone there?” she yelled out.

The door burst open and into the room walked a nurse.

“Oh, you’re awake. This is good. Hold on a moment, I’ll get the doctor,” she said as she turned to leave.

“Don’t go! I don’t want to be alone!” Jocelyn screamed, but the nurse walked out anyway.

Jocelyn’s head hurt. She looked down at her right arm and there were tubes taped to her wrist. She looked up and saw a bottle of water hanging over her head, and next to her there was a machine with bright lights that was beeping.

She looked back at the door. It opened slowly as the doctor entered, reading a chart on his tablet.

He approached the bed and then looked up at her.

“Well young lady, you’ve got quite a bad bump on your head, and you have broken your nose. Do you remember anything?” he asked.

Jocelyn answered in a weak voice, “We were coming home from buying a

Christmas tree, and then we hit something. I'm not sure about anything else."

Then after a pause, she asked. "How's the rest of my family?"

Ignoring her, he made some notes on his pad, then, he said, "It seems that your memory is okay."

He seemed to be distracted.

Jocelyn waited until the doctor looked up from his reading and then asked again, "How's the rest of my family?"

"Oh, sorry. Everyone is going to be just fine. Your dad is hurt the most. He broke both legs, a couple of ribs, and he has a concussion. It's a good thing he was wearing his seatbelt. He's in surgery right now to repair his left leg, but after he has physical therapy, he'll be okay.

"If you had been wearing *your* seatbelt, you wouldn't have gotten hurt so badly.

"The rest of your family is doing well. You and your dad are the only ones here at the hospital," the doctor explained.

"How long have I been here?" Jocelyn asked.

"You got here yesterday," the doctor replied. "You spent the night and now it is afternoon. By the way, your mother would like to see you. She's right outside. Are you up to seeing her?" the doctor asked.

Jocelyn nodded her head and then her mom walked in.

"How are you doing, baby?" her mom asked with tears in her eyes. "We were so worried about you."

Jocelyn looked at her mother. She had cuts on the side of her face and a cast on her right arm.

"Are you okay?" Jocelyn asked.

"I'm fine. Just a broken arm and some cuts from the glass. Otherwise, I'm doing well," she answered.

"What about the others?" Jocelyn inquired.

“Everyone else is okay. They’re all worried about you. They’ll be by to see you later,” her mother told her.

She sat in the chair next to the bed and watched Jocelyn as she fell back asleep.

The doctor explained, “She’ll sleep for a while. We gave her a sedative. It will help her rest for now and help her to recover faster.”

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When she got home two days later, the entire family was waiting for her. They were sitting at the dining table. Her sister had fixed a big supper for the family. She was not hungry so she went up to her room.

She looked into her mirror to see how she looked. Jocelyn’s face was black and blue from the accident. Both of her eyes were dark because of her broken nose. The doctor told her when they fixed her nose, they did a little extra to make it perfect. It was going to take two or three weeks before all the swelling would go down and then she would be able to see her new nose.

The first thing she wanted to do was take a shower. Her hair had been in a ponytail since the accident and it looked terrible. It felt so good to let the hot water flow over her head.

After her shower, she sat in front of her mirror and brushed her long hair with her grandmother’s hairbrush. Her hair was so much shinier now without the blood and oil that had built up in it. She sat for a long time brushing her hair and thinking about how lucky she was to be alive.

Later that evening, the family went to see the van to take out the things that had been left behind after the accident.

When Jocelyn saw the van, she could not believe that anyone had survived. The front of the van was completely gone. In order to get her father out of the van, the firefighters had to cut it off.

Jocelyn saw where her head hit the seat in front of her. There was a lot of

blood on the seat. On the floor, she found her pink knitted hat her grandmother had made for her.

“Mom, I found my hat!” Jocelyn yelled out.

It was dirty, wet, and had some blood on it. She picked it up and held it close to her chest. She was happy.

When they returned to the house, the family went to the parlor and sat down. Jocelyn’s mother began to speak.

“Your father is going to be in the hospital for a while. Then he will be home for two or three months before he can go back to work again.

“Luckily, his insurance is going to pay most of the bill, but for now, we won’t have much money, especially for Christmas. We have some savings, but when your father was out of work before, we had to use most of it. Things are going to be difficult until he can go back to work again.

“Your brother has offered to help us as best as he can. As for me, I’m going to look for a job starting tomorrow. I’m sure I can find a job in town in one of the shops for the Christmas season. We’ll all need to do our part.

“We’ve had bad times before and we’ve always survived. We’ll survive this bad situation as well.

“I’m going to visit your father in the hospital tonight. While I’m gone, I want each one of you to think about what you can do to help out. We’re a strong family. I know you can find a way to save money. If each of us does our part, we’ll get through all of this just fine. I love you all,” Mother finished her talk.

The family all gave her a hug and cried.

“We love you, Mom,” they all said.

The family sat in the parlor and talked about ideas on how to make Christmas special for all of them. Jocelyn sat quietly. She was too young to get a job, and she wasn’t spending any money.

When it was time for bed, Jocelyn went to her room. She sat on her bed

trying to think of a way to help her family. An idea came to her mind. It was going to be hard, but she knew what she needed to do to help her family.

She lay back, closed her eyes, and began to cry. She came up with a plan. This was the only thing she could do. She didn't want to, but she knew she had to. She fell asleep with tears in her eyes.

In the morning, she got up, helped clean the house and put up the Christmas decorations. She wasn't going to go to school for a few days because of her broken nose. The whole time she was thinking about her plan.

"Jocelyn, why are you so quiet?" her mother asked.

"Nothing, I just have a lot on my mind right now," she replied.

When the work was done, Jocelyn went up to her room. She sat at her mirror and brushed her hair for a long time. She put a pink ribbon in it to pull it away from her face, and tears began to fall down her cheeks again.

Before she ate her lunch, she took her pink hat to the kitchen sink and washed it the best she could. When she was done, there were still a couple of small stains on it, but it looked much better than when she found it on the floor of the van. She set it near the fireplace so it would dry.

She looked around the parlor. It made her sad that she did not see a Christmas tree. It just wasn't the same, especially with her dad not there reading his stories and singing Christmas songs with them.

After helping her mother, she went to her room to change her clothes. It was cold outside so she made sure she would be warm enough. It would be a long walk to town.

When she came down the stairs, her sister Julie was sitting in the parlor. She had just gotten home from school.

Julie asked, "Where are you going? Mom said we're supposed to think of ways to help out the family while dad is in the hospital."

"I have an errand to run. I'll be back before dinnertime. I'll see you then,"

Jocelyn responded. "I have something very important to do."

"Like what?" Julie asked.

Jocelyn didn't answer. She put on her coat, wrapped her scarf around her neck, and then placed the still damp pink knitted hat on her head. While she was walking out the door, she put on her mittens.

She said, "Bye", and left the house.

It was cold and windy as she walked along the sidewalk. Most of them had been shoveled, but the wind was blowing the snow back onto the path. Jocelyn's cheeks were turning red.

It took about fifteen minutes for her to get to the edge of the town. It made her happy to see the decorations in the windows. If it had not been so cold, she would have stopped and looked inside each one of them, but she had something she had to do, so she continued to walk.

When she got to the café, she decided to go inside to get warm. She sat down in a booth, took off her mittens, and rubbed her hands together.

"Jocelyn, is that you?" Paulette the waitress asked.

Jocelyn looked up at her and answered, "Yes, it's me."

"Wow, I heard about the accident. Are you okay?" Paulette asked seeing the injuries on her face.

"I'll be fine in a few weeks. I broke my nose on the seat in front of me," Jocelyn explained.

"Can I get you something? It's really cold outside," the waitress inquired.

"No thanks. I just came in to get warm," Jocelyn said, as she continued to rub her hands together trying to warm them up.

"OK, if you change your mind, let me know," Paulette said, and then walked away.

"Thanks, I will," Jocelyn answered.

Jocelyn sat for a while thinking about her dad. She decided that she would

go with her mother the next time she went to see him. She missed him a lot.

Paulette surprised Jocelyn as she placed a cup of hot chocolate in front of her.

“Here, this is for you. It’s on the house. I think you need it,” Paulet offered.

Jocelyn looked up in surprise.

“Thanks. I appreciate it,” Jocelynn grinned up at her.

Sitting in the booth, she sipped on the hot chocolate while she thought about what she was going to do. It was not going to be easy. In fact, it was going to be the hardest thing she had ever done.

The clock on the wall said it was almost four o’clock. She needed to leave and finish what she had started to do, or it would be too late.

She took a deep breath, buttoned up her coat, put on her mittens, and got up to leave.

“It was nice seeing you again, Jocelyn. Come back soon, OK?” Paulette smiled as she waved goodbye.

Turning to Paulette, a small smile was all Jocelyn could make and then she left to walk toward her destination. Her decision was making her sad. In fact she was having second thoughts about it.

When she walked past the shops on the way, she looked quickly into the windows admiring the Christmas displays until she got to where she was going.

There was a ding from a bell as the door opened. She had never been in this shop before.

A nice lady looked up at her from behind the counter at the door.

“May I help you?” the lady asked.

“I think so,” Jocelyn replied.

“Do you have an appointment?” the hostess asked.

“No, do I need one?” Jocelyn answered.

“It’s not required. Right now, we have another customer. We can help you in

about ten minutes. Would you care to wait?" she asked.

"I guess so," Jocelyn answered as she looked for place to sit.

"Would you like some hot tea while you wait?" the lady asked.

"That would be nice. It's really cold out there," Jocelyn responded with a smile.

"May I ask what happened to your face?" the lady asked a bit shyly.

"My family was in a car accident. I broke my nose, but I should be okay in a few of weeks," Jocelyn informed her.

The woman left and then brought her a cup of hot tea. Jocelyn took off her mittens and held the cup with both hands. Steam rose from the cup and warmed her face. Tears began to flow down her cheeks again. She knew that this was what she had to do.

Fifteen minutes went by, and then the lady came back.

Jocelyn looked up at her.

"We're ready for you," she said as she pointed to the door to the back room. Then waving her hand motioned for Jocelyn to follow her.

She got up slowly and followed the woman. She took off her pink hat and put it into her pocket.

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The walk home was even colder than when she had left her house. It was dark and the light from the street lamps glowed on the white snow showing her the way to her home. She pulled her pink hat down as far as she could over her head to keep it warm.

Jocelyn didn't really notice the cold as much since she was crying and thinking about her family.

When she arrived home, she walked into the house, took off her mittens, and put them into the pockets of her coat. Then she hung her coat on the rack by the door, putting her scarf over it.

When she turned toward the parlor, everyone was there talking, but as soon as they saw Jocelyn, the room went silent. No one said a word.

Jocelyn walked into the parlor, sat down at the piano and began to play. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. While she played, her family got up and hugged her.

“What did you do?” her mother asked.

Jocelyn took off her pink knitted hat and placed it on the piano. Then she reached into the pocket of her dress and took out an envelope. She handed it to her mother.

When her mother opened the envelope, she found three hundred dollars.

“Where did this come from?” her mother questioned her.

Jocelyn looked up at her mother, and with tears in her eyes, she said, “I did it for our family, mom. I sold grandma’s hairbrush so the family can have a wonderful Christmas. I love all of you so much!”

Her family hugged her. No one knew what to say.

The End