

## The Gift

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I SAT IN THE FOLDING CHAIR WAITING FOR THE SOCCER GAME TO BEGIN as a torrent of life's recent pressures pulled me deeper into a murky river of depression. Normally upbeat and fueled with realistic or possibly unrealistic optimism, I usually don't allow things like fear-injected headlines, overly demanding clients, or rude grocery store clerks ruin my mood. Today was different. After a week of nonstop drama that included bad news about a friend, a family member's illness, and a wide gamut of other challenges, I was losing the upstream battle.

The referee's whistle pulled my attention to the game and I watched the action unfold. The smell of freshly cut grass acted like a tonic to my anxiety and I began to relax. My son, Conner, was playing midfield, his favorite position because it gave him the most opportunity to run the length of the field and be fully involved in the intensity of the game. Midway through the first half he ran towards an airborne ball in an attempt to make a difficult header. Flying through the air in the opposite direction was a player from the other team. As they both went up for the ball, their heads collided and I heard a sickening thunk. Conner fell to the turf and I clung to my chair telling myself to stay put, don't go on the field. He shook his head, was a little slow getting to his feet, but ran back to his position as the game continued.

Afterward, I asked him about the play and he said that there was a ringing in his ear right after the collision. I checked his eyes but they looked clear and lucid, and other than a slight bump on the head, he was fine.

On the way home we stopped at a nearby shopping mall to buy some chocolates for my wife. The next day was Mother's Day and I wanted to make sure I covered my bases. Unfortunately, there was no place that had decent Mother's Day cards so we drove a little further up the road and entered a grocery store. I'm somewhat particular about choosing cards for people. I normally like to pick out something funny, but with a touch of class; not some folksy wisdom that can be found on the back of a rusty Nevada truck bumper.

At the front of the store was a basket of roses, and Conner suggested that we buy one to go with the cards. I reminded him that we had already purchased the chocolates and that was enough. The aisle with the greeting cards was surprisingly empty. I had envisioned bumping elbows with a lot of other late gift givers but it looked like we had the section to ourselves. We stood in front of the cards and stared, my head dulled by the variety of choices. I pulled the first humorous one off the shelf and looked at the cover. It had a loosely drawn sketch of an overworked mom, the slashing style of irreverence. You know, the kind of cartoon illustration that looks like it's been ripped out of a *New Yorker* magazine.

A voice behind me said, "Not that one."

I turned around to face a man with wiry grey hair, matching beard, and a brightly colored Hawaiian shirt. He had a broad grin and the first thing I thought was, *Great, that's all I need right now; some aging Dead Head instructing me on how to purchase something in a grocery store. Please go away.* But instead I said "Huh?"

"Is this for your wife?" he asked. The gleam in his eye made me suspect he might be on heavy meds.

"Yeah." I looked down at the card. After opening it and reading the not-so-funny nor tasteful message, I had to agree with the weird little man that seemed to come out of nowhere. I already despised the "writer" who had banged out this crap.

"It's all right to have fun sometimes, but not always," the man said in an accent I couldn't readily identify. Later on, Conner would say he spoke like Robin Williams with an accent. "Humor's good, but you also need to be honest. Find a card that's from the *heart*."

"I guess that's good advice." I thought of my wife—my impatience when she kissed me as I walked out the door on the way to the game.

“Look at me,” the man said. “I’ll be eighty years old next week.”

I looked down, a feigned attempt at contemplation. The man was wearing shorts that exposed tanned legs with tightly toned muscles. *Shit*, I thought to myself, *I hope I look like this guy when I’m eighty. More importantly, I hope I’m as happy as he is.*

“I was born in Switzerland *eighty years ago.*” His hands stretched outward as if parting an imaginary sea. “I’ve never been seriously ill once in my life. You know why?”

“Muesli?” My weak wisecrack caused Conner to roll his eyes.

“Honesty,” the man shot back and grinned wide. We looked at each other for a few seconds in silence. He then took a deep breath and puckered his lips as if ready to blow into a trumpet.

“If you’re honest with everyone and yourself, you’ll always be happy. If you’re not, you carry around a great weight, and it grinds you down. It’s too much for one person to lug around.” His hands waved in the air as he spoke and the smile continued to punctuate each remark. “Oh, and I fight. Yes, I’m definitely a fighter when something’s wrong. I’ve fought against the IRS, the government—all the corrupt ones. There’re a lot of bad organizations that lie and say they’re doing what’s right and good, but they’re often the worst. I don’t let all that untruthfulness and negativity in my heart. I don’t accept dishonesty, no matter who it is.”

It was my turn to smile. There should be a guy like this at every grocery store. Maybe an “attitude adjustment” aisle where you could load up with a week’s worth of mental supplies. Hell, I’d pay for it.

“And I always remember,” the man said, his voice slowing down, “that the most important person you need to be honest with is *yourself.*” His outstretched fingers reached across his chest. “If you take care of yourself, then everyone around you will be better off.”

He then reached down and chose several cards to look at. A couple of women walked up the aisle talking in faint whispers. It looked like a mother and daughter and the man quickly made room for them to view the cards.

“Plenty of room ladies, plenty of nice cards.” He made a single wave of his hand like he was on stage introducing an opening act. “Always be good to the ladies,” he said and gave me a wink. The woman grinned and wiped a lock of hair from her daughter’s forehead.

After choosing a couple of cards, Conner and I walked to the checkout aisle. I looked over my shoulder to see if the man was behind us but he was nowhere to be seen. We stood in line with all the other people hurrying to purchase their items and rush home to start their Saturday night rituals. Walking back to the car, the words of the man still bounced around in my head. I put the card (not the humorous one) in the back of the Jeep along with the box of chocolate, then sat a rose on top.

“How’s your head feeling?” I asked my son.

“A lot better,” he said.

“Mine too.”