

CHRISTMAS GIFTS

By James Montgomery Jackson

The metronome clicks of marching heels announce my sister-in-law's approach. My face broadens into a smile as I hear my niece burst into song--melismas on the Gloria, with no attention to her mother's beat.

The aide appears at my door. "Miss Anderson, you have visitors. Would you like to see them?"

I overheard the staff talking a few nights ago after I was supposed to be asleep. Asking permission is now added to their "dignity in dying" initiative. Imagine trying to bring decorum to the indecency of bone cancer.

I nod assent and squeeze my morphine pump. A tear works at the corner of my eye as I remember the last time they visited. My clairvoyant sight informed me I had many months before I would die. I feel no dignity in the wait.

Jessica careens around the corner, pouring into the room with all the enthusiasm of the Niagara thundering over the falls, her mother's words of caution lost in the tumult. She circles the room like a whirlpool, arms twirling in ever faster circles until she bumps into the bed and falls down in a pile of giggles.

"Jessica! Stop fooling around. You know how to behave in the nursing home. You could hurt one of these old people if you knock into them. Merry Christmas, Jody. How are we feeling today?"

"But Aunt Jody's not old."

"Jessica, what do you say to your Aunt Jody?"

"Merry Christmas, Aunt Jody. Why are those tubes sticking into you?"

Her mother bends into the child's face. "Jessica, you know what we talked about. Now behave yourself." I find my voice. "I can't eat solid food any more, so they feed me through the tubes. Merry Christmas to both of you. I'm glad you came."

"Why not, Aunt Jody?"

"Jessica...shush."

"It's fine. She can ask anything she wants; it's fine. Jessica honey, have you ever been sick to your stomach?"

"Uh huh."

"When they feed me through the arm like this, I don't get sick to my stomach."

"What's it taste like?"

"Jessica..."

I turn my head toward my sister-in-law in her tailored suit, starched white blouse, freshly coiffed hair and precisely plucked eyebrows. "Doris, maybe you could leave Jessica with me for awhile. We have lots to talk about, don't we, Jessica?"

Jessica vigorously nods. "Yeah, Mommy. We want our special time alone. Just like always."

Doris checks her watch. "You have to give Aunt Jody her Christmas present."

Jessica breaks into a gapped grin. Her two top teeth, half emerged from pink gums, are upside down tablets large enough to contain five commandments each. Her bottom teeth have not yet risen.

"Jessica, let me see your teeth."

She sashays over to the bed. "I got a gold dollar for each one, Aunt Jody. The tooth fairy took away my teeth in the middle of the night and left gold dollars...you know, the one with the Indian on them...left them under my pillow. And this one..." She opens her mouth wide enough for me to inspect her tonsils, and points.

"I got a dollar even though I swallowed the tooth when I ate an apple. It wasn't my fault that I couldn't put it under the pillow."

"No, not your fault at all."

She leans in close, peering back under her arm at her mother and whispers, "You know, I don't believe in the tooth fairy, but I keep pretending I do."

Doris pulls a package wrapped in reds and greens and yards of tape out of her oversized leather purse and calls her daughter over to her. "Give this to your Aunt Jody."

Jessica runs back to the bed and drops it on my chest. It's about the size of a book, but much softer, which is good because I don't have the energy to read books anymore. I miss reading books.

"Aren't you going to open it?" she asks. "I wrapped it myself."

"I'm sorry. I was thinking about something. Why don't you open it for me?"

She grabs the package and tears off the paper like Tyrannosaurus Rex ripping into dinner. "I picked them out all by myself," she says as she holds out canary yellow socks with individually colored toes.

"Grandpa told me that when you were little you liked socks with toes and I told Mommy that's what we had to get you." She cups her mouth to my ear, "Mommy thinks they're dumb, but I think they're great."

"They're wonderful, Jessica. Thank you very much. They're so colorful, I'll stick my toes out from under the sheets to show them off. Everybody'll be jealous."

"Put them on."

I can't reach my feet, so I look toward her mother, who checks her watch and comes to my rescue.

"Give them to me; I'll do it."

After placing her purse carefully on the room's sole chair, she takes the socks from Jessica, moves to the foot of the bed, undoes the bottom covers and slides the socks onto my feet. I smile my thanks. Jessica gapes at the process.

"Aunt Jody, how come the bottom of your legs are purple? Did you hit them against something?"

"No dear, they get that way if I stay in the same position for too long. I can't play around like you and pretend I'm a horse anymore."

She whinnies a reply and admires the socks.

"Do they tickle your toes?"

"They feel nice and warm. I love them. What a special present they are." I catch Doris's eye. "Thank you for putting them on. And thank you for coming and bringing Jessica today."

Doris's smile is tight, forced. "Everyone should have company for Christmas. Your brother decided he had to chauffeur your Dad and my parents. My brother and his family are coming over too, so we've got nine for dinner. Your Dad said he'll try to get here when the roads aren't so icy. He doesn't drive on--

"Jessica, get out from under that bed!"

"Aw, Mom. I was just looking for something."

"Well, leave it alone. You'll get dirty under there. Now put your coat back on; we need to go. I have to get back and finish cooking."

I try pleading with my eyes, "I know how busy you are, Doris. Can you leave Jessica with me for a few minutes? We enjoy our little chats."

She hesitates and I hold my breath, willing her to say yes. "Well, I do need to use the facilities and I want to talk to the nurses about your new socks. I guess she'll be all right for a few minutes."

"We'll be fine," I say.

She picks up her purse and walks from the room, stops, glances back and goes on her way.

"Jessica, I don't think your Mom's going to be long. Quick, get the book."

"That's what I was doing, Aunt Jody, when Mommy yelled at me."

She holds my high school yearbook in front of me, opened to the center. At Jessica's age, I discovered people's names sometimes shimmered when I read them. I found out no one else saw what I saw, and I learned to keep quiet about my gift.

I first understood the gift's meaning in high school. Names of people glimmer if they are going to die within the year. I can't explain the phenomenon, but it has remained an accurate predictor of death.

Once I broke my silence and shared the truth with my best friend--about her name. The knowledge drove her to suicide. I never made that mistake again.

Jessica thinks it's a fine game to get my yearbook so I can look at the picture of our high school class. She doesn't know I scan the names next to the picture for the shimmering that presages death, hoping to see my name shine.

Jessica, as always, asks, "Which one is you?" Continuing the fun, she giggles and points, "It's this one. Right?"

I smile at the dance steps of our game. At first, I was relieved my death was not near. Now I'm so tired and so pained I hope to see my name. Today is like the others: not the least twinkling. Nothing.

She stares at me with Anderson eyes, "What are you looking for, Aunt Jody?"

Jessica has never asked before, but I had decided some time ago I would answer with the truth--or at least part of it.

"Sometimes I see words come alive, kind of like they have twinkling lights with glowing colors. Other

people can't see it. It's a special gift I have."

She looks carefully at the yearbook.

"I can see them too, Aunt Jody."

An unbidden spasm runs through me. Surely, she is just trying to make me feel better. She's such a sweet child. She must have discerned my look of disbelief.

"Really, I do. There's one," she says pointing. "And there's another."

I follow her finger to the two names that stand out. Throughout my life, I've mostly cursed my gift. After my best friend died, I forsook having children in case it was hereditary. But here is my niece, sharing sight I thought only I had. Jessica is still talking and I break out of my contemplation.

"What did you say, Jessica?"

"I said, your name shines too, Aunt Jody."

"My name?"

"Yep. It's been that way for a long time. I thought maybe it was because it was your book, that's why your name stuck out like that--they used special ink or something. I thought the others were a boo-boo. Did I get it right?" She twirls around the room in delight at her guess.

"Oh honey, come give your Aunt Jody a big hug. You've given me three wonderful gifts today. I'm always glad to see you; I love the socks; and thank you for telling me about my name."

I change my voice into our conspiratorial whisper. "Now remember, almost no one else can see this shimmering, so it's best if we keep it our little secret and not tell other people. Not even your mother."

"Sure. I like sharing secrets with you. Mommy's coming."

I listen and hear the metronome too.

Jessica takes the yearbook and replaces it under my bed.

"All set, Jessica? Make sure to bundle up. It's cold out, and I don't want you catching the flu. We'll see you in a couple of weeks, Jody. Merry Christmas."

They're out the door, Jessica reprising her Glorias. My face hurts from my idiot grin as I wonder at my hubris in thinking I could foresee my own death. Unlike my cursed precognition, Jessica has unknowingly brought joy with her sight. I'm ready to embrace whatever comes next.

In my mind I join Jessica's retreating song. Gloria in excelsis deo.