

The Gift of an Unjealous Heart

by

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"My Mom found it at Goodwill. Then we bought these streamers. You can ride it, if you want to."

As my daughter ended her sentence, her voice went up in childish innocence. Sharon twisted the red and blue plastic strips that resembled pom-poms as she sat, left foot on the pedal, right foot on the ground.

"The bike is too short," I thought. "and so are her jeans."

The heel of one white sock extended above the shoe, the ground-in black of barefoot playtimes now gray. Two inches of bare leg showed above the sock. She was in the driveway, talking with the ten-year-old neighbor of the Wexels. We were house-sitting.

The two girls, the bike, and the mailbox by the road all spelled neighborhood. The sky seemed bigger here than at our apartment, where multistory structures created an unnaturally close horizon. Here, sky merged with earth a great, soothing distance away. It was quieter, too. Trees and open space muted the sounds of dogs barking and the occasional sputtering chug of a go-cart.

Sharon and I visited the Wexels often. The friendship between our little family of two and their family of four gave her a yard and a neighborhood. I was company for Dorothy during her husband's business trips, and Sharon was a playmate for her girls.

I looked at my beloved ten-year-old astride her second-hand bike silhouetted against the neighbors' two-story house. Brenda turned and walked away without a word.

Sharon looked at me, eyebrows raised.

"Don't worry, sweetie." I walked over and patted the wobbly back fender of the bike.

"She must not feel well. Ride to the corner, and I'll watch."

"Okay, Mommy! I'm steady now." Off she went, waving backwards.

Love for Sharon had blossomed the first time I traced her infant, rosebud mouth with my fingertip and saw myself reflected in her facial structure and length of limb. As she wobbled to the corner on the scratched bike, the longing to protect her was fiercer than ever. How long before she would recognize put-downs like that?

A breeze carried the scent of fresh-cut grass and stirred the strands of Spanish moss hanging from the gnarled old oak in the front yard. Higher up in its branches, two squirrels chattered noisily before bursting into a fevered game of chase around the trunk's thick circumference, their flying feet scabbling across the brittle gray of the corrugated surface for toeholds.

I leaned against our car as I watched her, feeling I should pat its hood for being the faithful beast of burden it had been for us. With silent eloquence, it spoke of my struggle to provide for Sharon and myself since the divorce. Its predecessor, a pale blue Maverick, had stranded us once too often, so with the \$400 cash six months of typing at home at night had

earned, the heady promise of continuing to be paid, per page, for all the medical dictation I could handle, and the self-serving generosity and mendacity of a new car salesman, I'd incurred my first big debt in my own name.

"The peace of mind about being stuck somewhere dangerous and no repair bills are worth it," I told myself.

Of course, I should have purchased a used car. Of course, I should have read the document I signed to ensure the 12 percent interest the salesman quoted me was written in the appropriate blank instead of the 16 percent I discovered three months later. Of course, I should have looked over the papers before I signed. But, I had no one to advise me as I began learning how to take care of things like cars all by myself. Like many newly divorced people, I had no time to make new friends. Working eight hours at the office, taking care of Sharon and then typing at night used it all. Adding to that particular problem was debilitating shyness. So, my lack of financial savvy had deepened our financial strain.

We were lucky, though. The car payments had been hard but not impossible to make. For the first few years after the divorce, Sharon received child support payments and I regularly lugged that typewriter, transcribing machine, and medical dictionary home so I could type at nights and weekends, when Sharon was asleep and did not need my attention. Had I known what lay ahead, I would have worked even more overtime, and somehow been even more frugal. In a couple of years, the child support grew irregular, then stopped. My supply of work, which regulated the size of my paycheck, followed a similar, though more prolonged, downward spiral.

The other parties to a fender-bender an a side collision had no insurance, so rather than increase my monthly insurance payments, I opted for the dented door, crumpled rear quarter

panel and crooked bumper. After the accidents, the Mustang's appearance was more appropriate for our circumstances. It looked like it was barely getting by, too.

Now, as I looked at its faded surface, complete with rust spots on the accident sites as well as my clumsy attempts to apply primer, I smiled. It had encountered few mechanical difficulties, in spite of its prematurely-aged appearance, and had only recently required the major repairs that foretold the victory of planned obsolescence over just plain luck.

I frowned as I kicked at the acorns dotting the driveway. If our car told an accurate story of just getting by by doing without, so did certain aspects of my appearance. There, in all their boney glory, were my ankles, visible, en toto, below the hem of my pants. I hadn't outgrown them, of course, like Sharon had outgrown hers. But one pair of pants in a size fourteen tall equaled one week of groceries. The choice was simple. So was the choice to buy my clothes from a consignment shop and to do without a nice watch and expensive haircut, and etc. and etc..

As I watched Sharon and kicked more acorns, my mind compared and contrasted our life with that of the Wexels and the other families in Delwood Estates, as if I were composing an essay for my beloved seventh grade English teacher. The homes in this neighborhood, many of which were two-story, were spacious, new houses on large lots. Sharon and I had a one bedroom apartment facing a parking lot on two sides and the back of another apartment building on the other two. These residents here in the neighborhood had upscale family sedans or vans; we had our faded silver Mustang. Their children had fathers who came home every night; we had a father whose only influence after the divorce had ceased years ago when the infrequent child support checks stopped completely. These children had vacations at theme parks and designer jeans; Sharon had stay-at-home vacations and clothes purchased whenever we received money for birthdays.

Sharon had reached the end of the street, and I held my breath as she traversed the cul-de-sac. The sidewalks in our apartment complex afforded no turning practice. From a block and a half way, I could see the smile on her face as she finished the semicircle with barely a wobble. A look of concentration immediately replaced the smile but it reappeared as she drew near. I walked towards her, clapping my hands.

"That was wonderful, baby!" If we were in a bicycle class, I'd give you an A plus and a one hundred and a smiley face!"

"Oh, Mommy." Sharon tucked her chin in, lowered her eyes, and gave a tight-lipped little smile as she braked to a stop at the foot of the driveway.

I patted the back of her hand as she gripped the handle-bars. It was still so much a young child's hand. Soft flesh concealed the exact location of all bones, save wrist and knuckles, and there remained a certain charming hint of plumpness that would disappear only after years of use had thickened and elevated the underlying muscles, tendons, and ligaments.

"That'll happen soon enough," I thought to myself. "all too soon." I resisted the impulse to lift her hand and kiss the back of it. Instead, I reached out and twisted the streamers around my finger.

"These look really great when you ride, baby. I think we had a good idea to buy these instead of the basket, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, Mommy," was her fervent reply.

"You did a good job making that turn way down there, too. I was watching the whole time. Go one more time then we need to go inside and eat. It's getting dark."

Fifteen minutes later, Sharon played Pacman and Frogger while I fixed supper. Shouts of "Oh, no!" mingled with the arcade-like tinkles, bells, and explosions and one pacman ate another and that poor frog lurp-lurped across the freeway.

Using grilled cheese sandwiches for walls, carrot sticks for a roof, and dill pickle strips for grass, I made two houses on our plates. Carefully placed raisins became two eyes, a nose, and a mouth in two bowls of warmed, cinnamon applesauce.

I walked into the living room and knelt down by Sharon, watching a few moments until another frog ended his short career crossing the video screen freeway.

"Are you ready to eat, baby?"

"Oh, Mommy! Can I finish this one game? Puh-lease." Sharon's eyes never left the screen as she crouched in that intense, forward-focused lean of the obsessed video gamer.

I decided the temperature of her food that night was less important than the chance to catch up, a little, with the Wexel girls. They had already grown bored with such games like Frogger and Pacman that came in the Atari package their parents had purchased long before joystick became a household word.

"It's always the same with the Wexels," I thought as I watched Sharon maneuver froggy successful across the road.

"They bought the first word processor, home computer, and automatic pool cleaner that were made. One more point of comparison and contrast for my essay."

Splat! Froggy's luck ran out. Sharon's shoulders slumped as she frowned.

"Don't be upset, baby. You can play again just as soon as we eat. Besides, you got over 500 points this time."

"Yeah, but Carla and Karen always get at least 800."

"Well, we have two more days, you know, before they come home. I bet you can make it to 800 by then. Come on, now, let's eat and you can get back to practicing. Being hungry probably interfered with your concentration. You know you rode that bicycle a long time today. I bet you're starved."

One supper, two hours, and 18 games of Froggy later, Sharon and I were finally in bed, reading a Beverly Cleary book. She was our most recently discovered children's author.

"Okay, sweetie. Time to go to sleep."

"Oh, Mommy!"

Sharon put her book down on her chest and turned to look at me.

"Remember when Henry forgot to take out the garbage for a week and he had to jump on the garbage can to pack it in and he fell on top of Ribsby and Ribsby howled so loud the neighbors complained and Henry's dad got really mad?"

"Of course, I remember," I replied. "I read that one three weeks ago that time you couldn't finish all the books we got from the downtown library. But I still remember that. Did you already reach the place where Ribsby goes fishing?"

"Not yet."

"Well, then, I won't tell you about it so I don't spoil it. You can read that tomorrow. Right now, let's both close our books. I promise I won't read any more tonight either. Here, let me tuck you in."

"Okay," she said. "But will you lay down with me?"

"Sure, baby. Sleeping in a different bed in a different house feels strange, doesn't it?"

Only ten minutes and two sleepy-voiced questions later, Sharon was snoring. The exertion of her unusual swimming, biking, and running suddenly exacted their price on her energy level.

I slipped out of bed and walked to the kitchen. Lolly, the Wexel's pedigree beagle, followed me. We went, parade fashion, down the long lushly carpeted hall, across the wide foyer with the 50 gallon saltwater aquarium, through the formal dining room, then the family room, and finally the kitchen. Once in the kitchen, Lolly plopped her furry belly on the cool tiled floor at the edge of the bar and watched as I put water on to boil.

"Are you lonely, Lolly girl?" I knelt down to pat her small, noble head.

Lolly looked at me with the trademark soulful eyes of her breed and wagged her tail.

"Your family will be back soon, girl." I tried to make my voice comforting. Since the Wexels had left that morning, Lolly had shadowed me around the house, and not just to tell me she needed to go potty in the fenced-in back yard.

The tea kettle whistled. I fixed my tea, opened the sliding glass door for Lolly's last potty trip of the day. Then I sat down in the living room. The overstuffed goose-down sofa conformed itself to my hips and back as I snuggled into its contours and looked around the living room. I was amazed, as I always was during the Wexel's home Bible study each Friday night, by the ambiance of affluence afforded by indirect lighting, rare ferns and ficus trees, cobalt blue carpet and sky blue walls, crystal chandeliers, gilt-framed mirrors, and most of all, simply by the abundance of uncluttered space.

Startled, I looked up. Lolly zipped by the sliding glass doors in hot pursuit, I surmised, of some squirrel sufficiently emboldened by previous success avoiding Lolly's frenzied chases to set paw on the pool deck while she was outside.

The lights in the pool shimmered through the water, illuminating the sides and bottom of the pool, painted yet another hue of soft blue. The extended pool deck, white resin inlaid with river rock, covered the entire back yard right up to the wood fence, except for the picnic table area under the oak tree and a small grassy run for Lolly on the far right. During the day, the oak provided shade for the palms growing in huge Grecianesque urns. At night, the oak's branches obscured most of the view of the night-time sky. A handful of stars alternately twinkled then disappeared as a soft breeze shook the smallest branches and rippled the surface of the water in the pool.

I closed my eyes, then opened them, seeing not the tastefully appointed room or the spacious back yard but rather the look of innocence on Sharon's face as she'd offered to share her second-hand bike with Deborah. Deborah, like the Wexel girls, had the best three-speed bike, just their size, money could buy.

"Why did that hurt so much?" I asked myself.

"Because," I concluded after a moment's reflection, "I understood the disdain in Brenda's face and the stinging insult her silent walking away from Sharon implied. I understood she thought Sharon's bike and Sharon herself weren't good enough for her to play with."

I understood, and I knew Sharon would too, some day soon. All too soon she would know the embarrassment I had felt as a child over things like durable saddle oxfords, fit for a clown in my size, and home-made clothes when other kids had store-bought. Too soon she would perceive the differences between our car and those unmarred by unrepaired damage. She would understand the wide gulf between being treated at a fast-food restaurant and

regularly dining at the best steakhouse in Tampa Bay. She, to, would surely come to despise the statement, "We can't afford it" and the ubiquitous questions, "How much does it cost?" She would know the same of pang of feeling less than and inferior to everyone else and of feeling rejected by friends.

Tears ran down my cheeks.

"I can't stand for her to feel that way," I thought. "Everyone is not as wealthy as the Wexels and the rest of the families in this development but just about everybody is better off than we are or than we're likely to be – ever!.

"I can't get a better job, and I'm lucky already to be transcribing because it pays more than normal secretarial work. There's no way for me to go to school and even if I did, I'd have to neglect Sharon to attend night classes and study. Child support payments have probably stopped forever and there's no one else to help us. I can barely afford a safe apartment and nutritious food for her. She'll never have expensive clothes or trips or music lessons and all the other advantages most children do, even if they're not rich like the Wexels."

I slid off the sofa and knelt on the floor next to it, frowning as two tears made tiny spots of dark on the blue and gold velour. The faded pink cotton of my robe felt rough as I wiped my eyes on the sleeve.

"Dear Father," I prayed with a quivering voice. "Please help me take good care of Sharon, and please, please, show me how to protect her feelings."

I blew my nose, let Lolly inside, checked all the doors, turned out the lights, and walked back down the hall. I turned back the covers on my side of the king-size bed, and slowly wiggled my way over next to Sharon. I patted the bump of blanket that covered a slender hip,

took a deep breath, and smiled. Her hair smelled of sunshine, with just a hint of chlorine.

"I'll find a way," I told myself. "I just have to find a way."