



THE GIFT





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In 1959, a week after her seventeenth birthday, Catherine missed her period in February, and then in March. By late April she was not sleeping well and most of her waking hours were spoiled by nausea and hating everything she ate. Her mother Agnes made an emergency appointment with Dr. Crowder.

“Stay here,” Dr. Crowder said to Catherine before he left the exam room. The receptionist had brought Agnes into his private office where she sat in the wing chair for consultations.

“She’s pregnant,” he said.

Agnes’ face paled with the accusation. “She’s a child,” she said.

How often mothers would not let their children grow up. He gave her time to absorb the truth. “She’s a young woman who is going to have a baby,” he said.

Agnes wept with her hands to her face. Dr. Crowder handed her tissues from a desk drawer. After some moments, Agnes blew her nose and breathed deeply with a long exhale.

“Have you told her?” Agnes said.

“I’ve told only you. But she’s not stupid.”

“Can something be . . . you know . . . done?”

Dr. Crowder stared. He had been the family physician for over thirty years. He had delivered Catherine. “You might find someone. But never ask me, Agnes.” he said. “I do not approve.”

Agnes flushed. Now she was ashamed. “It will ruin us,” she explained.

Bullshit, thought the doctor. Birth is a miracle. Oh, yes. Life was fragile, dangerous, and loaded with inexplicable injustices, but he still loved humanity. And he stayed in practice well beyond retirement to marvel as his patients juggled life’s inflated minutia in their own creative ways.

“I’ll send her away,” Agnes continued.

“Let her make the decision,” Dr. Crowder said.

“No. I’ll make up an excuse.”

“Think about it . . . there would be gossip if she stayed. But if you and Harold were supportive and proud, the gossips would cease caring after a while. And life would go on.”

“It’s a sin,” Agnes said.

“I doubt having a baby is a sin,” Dr. Crowder said.

But Agnes could not trust the advice of an idealistic doctor who she thought was immune to reality, nor the judgment of her errant child who was too young and too stubborn to know what a her slip-up would do a prominent family.

At home, to her husband Harold who knew otherwise, Agnes dismissed Catherine's nausea as tummy upset and refused to discuss the baby with Catherine for hours. She blamed Catherine's problem on Harold's family, all of whom were pig-headed and arrogant.

After dinner, alone with Catherine in Catherine's room, she demanded to know the father of the child. She shouted the most likely possibility. But Catherine refused to answer. "So many you don't even know?" Agnes said. Then Agnes sent Harold into the bedroom for a one-on-one (she hoped he would beat the crap out of Catherine). Agnes leaned with her ear against the bedroom door so she could hear every word. She was appalled: he was lucky to have a grandchild; birth was God's gift to each of us, and how lucky this baby was to have Catherine for a mother. Not one word of condemnation. It was typical of her husband to turn disaster into a conspiracy against all she had accomplished.

Agnes kept her plan simple. After birth, far away, an immediate adoption was the only solution, and after the town no longer remembered or cared, Catherine could return to live out her penance.

Dry-eyed, Catherine lay on top of her bed covers on her back, which was already the most comfortable position for her. Her father's visit had renewed her confidence. She was a good girl, a girl who made love to only one and with a sincere passion and respect that justified her action. Even with her first suspicions, she could not

destroy her lover's future with burdens he could not yet handle. There was virtue in a love baby, far different from sluts who made love to anyone, and whores who got paid, a fact she had shouted to her mother when her mother had used the word.

In the days after the doctor's appointment, Catherine endured her mother's frequent side glances and wet hissing sounds, and turned away when her mother reminded her how evil premarital sex was. But soon her mother's unpredictable outbursts became so irrational that Catherine ignored her, and turned to prayer for her baby. Her mother then developed a distracting twitch under her right eye, loud speech and short sentences . . . and long cold silences.

In due time Agnes found the priest who was hesitant at first to help. Agnes made him admit he had arranged clandestine solutions to similar problems, saying she knew, at least second hand, of a girl he had protected. He soon admitted compliance. He said infant victims of accidental pregnancies deserved a life away from the debauchery of their mothers who must spend their life seeking fulltime repentance to receive grace. He would help.

Two weeks before school let out for the summer, Agnes took Catherine to the airport. She gave Catherine numbered instructions on a folded piece of notepaper tucked in a paperbound English/French dictionary. Agnes cried briefly at the gate but she felt only relief when the plane finally took off. She was profoundly afraid of flying but she felt no apprehension about Catherine's trip and although she had hated the pain and discomfort of her own pregnancy, she did not worry about

Catherine's delivery in a foreign country. Whatever happened, good or bad, Catherine had brought it on herself. All was in the hands of God now. She could not be expected to do more, and she was confident many parents would have done much less, and much less effectively.

The convent school looked like a fortress with a high stone wall around the buildings that were set next to a wide, rapidly flowing river at the northern edge of the town, which was in the south of France where the trees were already full with spring and the air warm even at night. From the hill, visible from the school and anywhere in town, a thirteenth-century buttressed cathedral jutted two spires into the heavens.

The Mother superior was cool and distant but not mean or dismissive, and Catherine, after a few weeks, liked her authoritative efficiency. Catherine began school and attended mass daily, but understood almost nothing. To help, a novice taught her French at private sessions after Matins and after the evening meal.

For weeks, Catherine's sickness came on her at unexpected times. But the Sister in the infirmary gave her medicines and arranged special foods from the kitchen and soon Catherine felt fine.

Catherine's best friend was Sister Mary Margaret, an impish little nun who rarely thought of God outside of church, but who was eager to be involved with Catherine's delivery of God's gift. Sister Mary Margaret listened to Catherine's fear of dying when the baby came out. "It is impossible," Sister Mary Margaret said

confidently in French although she had never seen a birth. “What if God punishes me with a hairy monster?” Catherine said hesitantly. “God does not always seem to care, but He is not mean,” Sister Mary Margaret said. Then Catherine told her of her fear of being stoned by French peasants—she had seen that in a film, for other sins, with Boris Karloff. Sister Mary Margaret gave her lyrical bubbly laugh that Catherine loved and frowned as she tried to find the right words in English. “*C’est fou,*” she said.

Agnes did not write to further emphasize her indignation at her daughter’s sin. Catherine sent only rare postcards to her mother, but sent long letters about her new life to her father at the office. Catherine counted the days for her father’s return-letters about home that he faithfully wrote.

And Catherine wrote to her priest.

Dear Father O’Leary:

The Mother Superior speaks English okay and spoke of you at both my meetings with her. She smiles with her memories of when you met. She introduced me to the people who want to adopt. The woman put her hands under my blouse on my bare belly to feel her “petite poupée”. I didn’t like it but I try to be Christian.

Except for Sister Mary Margaret, one of the nuns, I still can talk to only a few here. The novices laugh when I use French words and they don’t try to understand my English.

But I take walks through the town with Sister and visit the Cathedral daily that is half a mile from the school.

The women here sew beautiful clothes they sell in Paris. They have taught me and I now make baby booties and soft nightgowns for my baby. I crochet lace for the sleeves and the hem, even though Mother Superior says new parents will be waiting to take him . . . or her, away. She says it is best for all that way. As time grows close, I want to keep my baby, but I will not go back on my word.

I help the grounds keeper herd the goats that graze on the lawns of the school. He is a gentle man who sings lively songs in a high voice while he works. He makes goat cheese to give to the poor that tastes awful. But I pretend to like it to please him.

Yours in Christ,

Catti

When labor pains started regularly, Catherine went to the convent infirmary where there were two iron beds with mattresses. Sister Teresa, the midwife, gave Catherine a draught after the delivery. Catherine slept. When she woke, Sister Mary Margaret sat on a chair next to the bed, her back six inches from the splat. The

sheets were clean. Catherine accepted a glass of apple cider from her friend. Catherine's body hurt when she rose up to drink. She handed the glass back and fell back, exhausted at the effort.

"Well?" Catherine asked Sister. "Did you see my baby?"

Sister was silent.

"Was it a girl?" Catherine asked.

"A little girl," Sister said in English.

Catherine found her friend's hesitancy unexpected, and she turned on the bed to see her friend better. Sister was sobbing.

"What's the matter, Maggie?"

Sister stood up and turned so Catherine could not see her face, then she hurried out the door.

"Please don't go," Catherine called. But Sister did not stop.

Catherine slept that afternoon. Sister Mary Maggie returned in the evening. Catherine was glad to see her.

"I want to see my baby," Catherine said again.

"The baby is gone already."

"So soon."

"It was Mother Superior's plan."

"What's gotten into you? I thought you were my friend."

Sister Mary Margaret cried again.

“You’re useless,” Catherine said immediately sorry when Sister turned her head away. “I want to talk to Mother Superior.”

“It is not possible,” Sister said.

Catherine threw her feet over the edge of the bed, wincing with pain. “I will go to her,” she said.

“No! I will be punished. I was not supposed to tell you.”

“Tell me what?”

Sister began crying again.

“What? Tell me, Maggie.”

“The baby.”

Catherine knew her friend too well to not fear the worse.

“Is the baby dead?” Catherine finally asked.

“Oh, no, not dead.”

“What then?”

“She is . . . alive good.”

“What is that? What is not right about a baby? Tell me!”

Sister did not speak but squeezed her eyes shut, helping Catherine stand, and holding her arm as they went to Mother Superior. Twice Catherine had to sit on benches to rest. Her friend could not speak for her sobs. “Run ahead. Tell Mother Superior I’m coming,” Catherine said. Sister hesitated. “Go,” Catherine said, disturbed by her friend’s crying.

Catherine was surprised that Mother Superior hugged her for the first time ever, firmly and long. Mother Superior stepped back. "The family would not take her," she said.

Catherine looked to the floor away from Mother Superior. "Why?"

"The baby is not well. They were afraid."

"What is wrong?"

"I didn't see her. But she has no feet."

"That is ridiculous," Catherine said. "I must see her."

"I had the baby sent to a special hospital for children near Lyon. She will be given special care."

"And the parents?"

"They have refused to be involved."

"I must go," Catherine said.

"No. She will have the care she needs to grow . . . and serve Christ."

"I must see her. I will pay the way. Father has sent me more than I need."

"It is not the money."

"I will go. I do not need your blessing."

"You always have my blessings, child."

"I must go too," Sister Mary Margaret said looking directly into the eyes of Mother Superior.

Catherine used her savings and she and Sister, with the now silent gardener and cheese maker driving, took a wagon to the train station in the next town. With

stops, the train took six and a half hours to the city. To save money for the return trip, Catherine and Maggie walked two miles from the station to the hospital.

At the hospital, Catherine looked down at the baby, covered in a nightgown. Catherine has already decided her name was Patricia, not Audrey, as the nun dressed in a black and white starched habit had told her. Patricia was in a little nightgown with buttons on the back. One arm in a sleeve waved. The other sleeve partially covered a short arm that ended in three finger stubs that jerked up and out. The nightgown hem lay flat. Catherine retracted the edge. The right leg ended in a smooth knob above where the knee should be. The other leg tapered to an end above where the ankle would be—with no foot. The corner of the baby's mouth tried to smile in a strong effort with unsure results, and the eyes wiggled and waved, sparkling as if sharing the irony of trying to make everything all work right.

“You have seen enough?” the nurse said. Her harsh accent was difficult to understand.

Catherine removed the little nightgown. She smiled at her child, and the child's roving eyes seem to fix on her, at least for a few seconds, until they wandered off, but they came back again. And how soft her skin was, her red hair so fine. Her eyes were faded of color, but inquisitive and sharp. Her lips continued to wiggle at times in an uncoordinated smile.

“She is mine,” Catherine said.

“She must stay here with us,” the nurse said firmly.

She put the nightgown back on her daughter. She touched the side of her cheek. The little arm waved. She touched the chest with her index finger. There was a little passage of gas with a squeeze of the face.

Searching for French words exasperated Catherine. “Tell her Maggie,” she said to Sister Mary Margaret. “Tell her who I am. And get some milk and food for the trip.”

Maggie explained in French. The nurse listened intently without response.

Catherine began to take off her sweater to use as a blanket, but the nurse, with a gentle hand on Catherine’s arm, let Catherine know to keep her sweater . . . and then wrapped little Patricia in a hospital blanket. “It is for you,” she said in broken English. When Catherine was holding Patricia against her breast, the Sister leaned over and kissed the back of Patricia’s head. “*Elle est miraclée,*” she said.

At the convent every nun and novice were immediately infected with motherly instincts for Patricia. Even the gardener/goat-herder, as the *pater familia*, made daily visits with milk and fresh cut pansies. Sister cooked while Catherine fed Patricia, and she rocked Patricia when Catherine needed rest to regain her strength. And Catherine took Patricia to church, to market, to herd the goats. She sewed, after many trial designs, a special sling that supported Patricia. Patricia was comfortable carried on Catherine’s chest or back, and she could face in or out, and sleep when she wanted.

Catherine with Patricia became a common sight in town and surrounding fields and wooded paths. Strangers to Catherine waved with pride and familiarity. Catherine loved Patricia's laugh as she jiggled her in the sling; loved her intense stares at a new flower they found in the gardens or in the wild; loved the "ooh" of watching a worm on a stone, or a hawk circling in the sky.

Patricia became adept at getting around the house, using her stumps all together to scurry like a tilted crab. But she was limited outside and Catherine could see that Patricia would need some upright means of mobility.

Catherine visited veterans who lost limbs in the war, and talked to them about support. They used limbs usually provided by the army, pre-made, and not specially designed. But she learned unique problems for each disability, and studied the principles of various prosthetics. She found a furniture maker and explored different woods—ash and yew and oak—for strong support for Patricia's shorter leg. For the other leg she needed a sturdy foot. At first, a foot replica in walnut was tried, but eventually, a functional design looking like a miniature toboggan with laminated woods from saplings was found to be best. Catherine used her sewing skills to attach and brace the prosthetic legs with shoulder straps and snug waste bands. These were attached for stability to the wooden prosthetics by threading through multiple holes. And Patricia, with a laugh, toddled around for a while, tumbling often, and then adapted with the speed of the young, until she could walk, albeit stiffly and with a tilt backward. This worked for almost a year. But it was not

enough. In the leg without a knee, Catherine knew she needed a hinged prosthesis. She wrote Father O'Leary and received a quick response.

Dear Catti,

I was pleased to discover our own Dr. Crowder went to school with a world authority. Poor Dr. Crowder has had a stroke and cannot walk and he speaks so slowly we can barely understand him. But his mind is sharp and his wife now writes letters for him, and records drafts he dictates for his memoir. I am sure he would help in any way he can.

God Bless,

Father O'Leary

She received a reply from her letter to Dr. Crowder in two weeks.

Dear Catherine,

How nice to hear from you. You are one of my favorite patients. And I was also glad to hear your little Patricia is saying her first words. I imagine they're all in French, which is a beautiful language.

I do know about artificial arms and legs. But you must come home to see the best. She will need to be refitted often as

she grows, and you will have to travel to Boston. But it is a very good idea.

I am a mess with this stroke. But I love my memories.

Sincerely,

Amory F. Crowder.

When Catherine and Patricia left for home, more than a hundred people from the convent and town came to wish them well. Even Mother Superior cried and Sister Mary Margaret had to be pried away from her hugs of Catherine and Patricia.

Harold and Agnes were at the airport terminal gate when Patricia and Catherine arrived.

Little Patricia took her first look at Grandma and howled.

“Is that any way to treat you grandmother,” Agnes said curtly.

“It’s not you, mother. The trip has her constipated.”

Catherine picked up Patricia and snuggled her on her shoulder, Patricia’s footless longer leg poked out below her dress.

“She doesn’t look so bad,” Agnes said.

“Let me show you mother.” Patricia loved to be touched, and loved to be moved. She gurgled with pleasure. “Your grandchild.”

“I didn’t mean she wasn’t perfect.”

"Dis 'bon jour'," Catherine said to Patricia.

Agnes frowned at the French. Although she thought she knew what it meant, she was always suspicious that there was some meaning in the foreign words that might be against her.

"Say hello," Catherine said, sensing her mother's feelings.

"Lo," Patricia said, and waved her arm at her grandmother, and she smiled.

"Lo," she said again.

Agnes gasped at her impulse to reach out and hold her grandchild, and she took back her hands before she had extended them too far, slipping them in the pockets of her sweater.

"Take her," Catherine said.

"Oh, I'll scare her."

"I'll take her," Harold said stepping forward.

Agnes reached out quickly. "I'll do it, Harold," she said.

As Agnes took Patricia, clutching her chest under the arms, Patricia smiled.

"Pooh bear," she said with a little spittle.

Catherine handed a Patricia small brown bear with one button-eye missing, and Patricia held it out to her grandmother.

Agnes held her face rigid in resistance to revealing any pleasure. Catherine tensed. But Patricia could not contain her natural affection for people, and she grinned with a warm bubbly sound. Patricia held out her bear again to her grandmother who smiled taking the bear and giving it a big hug. Catherine relaxed

as her mother jiggled Patricia from side to side, and thanked God for Patricia's magical gift of making others happy.

Agnes held Patricia in her lap on the ride home.

Patricia discovered Catherine's toys in a trunk and in dresser drawers in Catherine's room that had not been used since Catherine left. Harold had bought a child's bed, but every thing else was the same. Agnes found energy she had not had for years: she baked and swept, she arose early before the alarm, and she took daily photos of her family. Catherine got a job as a receptionist in the office of a doctor Dr. Crowder knew. And the newest advances in jointed prosthetics were fitted to Patricia in Boston and they were waiting the results any day.

Three times a week Catherine took Patricia to the YMCA pool and taught her to swim dressed in a one-piece red bathing suit Catherine had sewn herself from a design she had seen in a magazine. Patricia learned to swim quickly, smoothing out her first awkward movements, and Catherine was pleased to think it toned muscles in new ways that Patricia did not normally use and would prepare her for heavier, more complicated prosthetics.

One evening, after Patricia was asleep, Harold and Agnes sat with Catherine in the living room after dinner.

"I don't like you taking Patricia swimming," Agnes said. "People will stare."

Catherine had sensed her mother's disapproval weeks ago. "Why should she not go swimming?"

"It will make her feel different."

"She is different, mother."

"But you shouldn't make her feel bad."

"She has to learn to accept the stares and not feel bad."

"At least you could cover her. That skimpy bathing suit doesn't hide anything."

"That skimpy bathing suit is what most of the children wear."

"But they're different."

"She's not ashamed, mother. She's pretty and very smart. And she has every reason to be proud."

"I didn't mean that, Catherine. Don't twist my words. I just don't want her hurt by those who think her differences should not be exposed. That's all."

"They are curious, mother. People do stare. But for most it isn't mean and it doesn't last long. And Patricia can be seen for who she is."

"She'll never go out on her own if you keep it up."

"I want her to go out on her own able to handle anything that she might face."

"Be quiet, Agnes," Harold said.

"Don't talk to me like that, Harold. This is important."

"It's not your business. Stay out of it," he said.

"You're always against me. I am not pleased, Harold."

Harold folded his paper, running the dull edge between his forefinger and thumb until it was sharp and then placing it on the footstool. "Take her swimming," he said to Catherine. "Take her everywhere she wants to go."

“That’s not what I meant and you know it,” Agnes said.

“Be quiet,” Harold said as he left the room.

Six weeks later, for Patricia’s birthday, they had a party in the kitchen with a cake and candles, balloons and presents. Harold gave Patricia books. Catherine gave her a necklace with a garnet single-stone pendant. And Agnes went to the garage and carried in a small wheel chair with leather seat support and shinning chrome spokes on thick rubber-tired wheels.

“Look at that!” she said to Patricia.

Patricia smiled.

“Can you say thank you?” Catherine said.

“Thank you,” Patricia said to her grandmother.

That night, after Catherine heard Harold finish reading one of Patricia’s new stories, Pinocchio, to Patricia in bed and she had fallen asleep, Catherine approached her mother in the living room. “You must take the wheel chair back.”

“Nonsense. I had it specially made,” Agnes said.

“She doesn’t need a wheel chair,” Catherine said.

Harold came down from the upstairs and sat in his armchair.

“She can’t keep up,” Agnes said. “I almost lost her in the store.”

“She does very well, mother. Just slow down a little.”

“The new leg has been good,” Harold said.

“She’ll be going to school soon. She can’t always be strapping on legs.” Agnes said.

“She is not a victim, mother. Ignore what she can’t do. Help her do what she can.”

“How unloving that is, Catherine. How selfish,” Agnes said. “You are making her life miserable. You’ve always been selfish. From the beginning.”

Harold’s jaws were clenched, and his hands balled into fists. “I will not allow this, Agnes. Take back the chair.”

“Ridiculous.”

“Take back the chair!”

“It’s all right, Daddy.”

“No, it’s not all right.” He stood.

“Don’t you walk out on me,” Agnes said.

He went into the kitchen. Catherine followed. He had the chair in his hands.

“What are you doing?”

“You’re right. She is not a victim, Catherine. I don’t want this around.”

She had never seen her father this angry.

“I’m taking it to the office for now. Tomorrow, I’ll be sure it’s returned—or destroyed.”

Agnes came into the kitchen as Harold left through the back door taking the wheel chair to the car.

“Don’t you dare . . .” Agnes began.

“Say one more word and I’ll explode.” He shut the door.

Two weeks later, Catherine went to her father's office at the bank during the lunch hour. She had brought sandwiches and sodas for both of them.

"We have to go back," Catherine said to her father.

"Because of Mother?"

"We both miss Maggie . . . and all the nuns."

"But it's your mother, isn't it?"

"I hope to find work. But could you help with our trips to Boston?"

"Of course," he said.

They ate in silence for a few moments.

"Your mother loves you both, you know."

Catherine thought for a moment. "She seems ashamed of Patricia sometimes. And she's always been ashamed of me. I don't think shame and love can mix."

It was sometime before he responded. "After I married your mother, I discovered that what she wanted most was to love, but she never knew how," he said while he was stuffing his sandwich wrapper in a bag. "She didn't know what she was searching for. A true disability, I think."

"Do you still love her?" Catherine said.

"She gave me you . . . and Patricia."

They finished eating in silence and then arranged return to France within the week.

Patricia returned to the States fifteen years later when Catherine, who had established a clothing design business in France that had gained worldwide attention in Paris, moved to New York to expand her designs to the American market. Patricia went to Stanford the same year. She wore knee length dresses or pants when she wanted, her choice made on what was appropriate for the occasion. Harold died of a heart attack, and Catherine and Patricia returned home to visit Agnes on Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. Pleasant times for all, except for Agnes's silences smoldering with unstated resentment about how life and her family had treated her unfairly, silences punctuated by biting remarks about how Catherine and Patricia's choice of apparel failed to meet her approval.