

The Christmas Present

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“The manner of giving is worth more than the gift.” Pierre Corneille

Orville Korkoff, Ph.D., sat bolt upright in bed and knew immediately something was badly wrong. Usually, he would go to bed and not wake up until his wife roused him. He looked at the clock and discovered it was three in the morning. He had no urge to visit the bathroom, and he felt no pain. What had summoned him from a deep and delicious sleep?

He wondered if his wife was ill and needed attention, but he discovered that she was sleeping peacefully in the arms of Morpheus and did not require any assistance. What was it then? Obviously, there was something important that he had left undone. He reviewed his activities over the past few days. All of his grades for fall semester had been submitted electronically to the registrar's office, well ahead of the deadline. He had written and mailed the letter of recommendation for Paige Turner, an English major who was applying for a graduate scholarship at San Andreas Fault State University. He had filled out the assessment forms that the provost needed, and he had mailed out his article “Bifurcation as Image, Metaphor, and Idea in the Stories of Flannery O'Connor” to *The Journal of Postmodern Studies*. On the home front, he had insulated the doghouse and drained the fish pond. He had made a list of people to send Christmas greetings to this year. It seemed that he was caught up on the important things he had to do, but obviously he was missing something. Now what could it be?

Korkoff knew it was impossible to go back to sleep, so he decided to resort to a strategy he learned in his English 101 class during his undergraduate days. Orville had complained to Professor Herschel Musty that he didn't have anything to write about. The kindly old professor had smiled and said, “Here's what you do. Take a piece of paper and make a list of as many items that come to mind. Then go over the list and eliminate items one by one. After you have done that, then the last one remaining will be the topic for your essay.”

Not wanting to get out of bed and get a pen and a piece of paper, Korkoff decided he would visualize a sheet of paper and make a list. Over the years he had developed the habit of being thorough, so it was no wonder that his list had 50 items on it. Then, one by one, he eliminated them until he reached the last one: Find a Christmas present for Aunt June.

Korkoff upbraided himself for forgetting his Aunt June. She had been his favorite aunt ever since he could remember, but especially since that day in high school when his mother had come home to find him in a melancholy state—he was crying his eyes out. When his mother asked what was wrong, he had told her that his girl Cathy had broken up with him. In attempt to comfort him, his mother had said, “Don't worry, there are other fish in the sea.”

That wisdom didn't work because Orville had responded, “Cathy's not a fish.”

Mrs. Korkoff was nonplussed and didn't know what to say, so Orville turned to his Aunt June for help. She gave him a big hug and said, “Dear nephew, life has more twists and turns than the Snake River. Right now you feel marginalized by life, but just because one pulchritudinous nubile maiden has rejected you does not mean they all will. One day you will find a Significant Other who will empower you and you will be as happy as a little sea urchin in a gently rolling sea.”

Aunt June's inspirational words had cleared the skies and dried Orville's tears, and he felt like life was

worth living. As the result of her optimistic reassurance, Aunt June became very special, and Orville always went out of his way to give her a special present at Christmas. In the past he had given her a Swiss army Knife, a Ronco Vego-Matic, a gift card to Menards, A My Pillow, a Davis Double Donut, and a Popeils Pocket Fisherman. He didn't settle for the first thing that came to mind as most nephews would; the Christmas present had to be unique.

One Christmas he saved his money and went all out and bought two tickets to the Boxcar Willie concert at the Civic Center in Peoria. He was hoping Aunt June would invite him to accompany her, and that is what she did. When the Boxcar belted out "Rolling in my Sweet baby's Arms" followed by "You Are My Sunshine," Orville saw the sheer delight etched on Aunt June's visage, and he vowed that every year he would find a gift that elicited that reaction.

At breakfast, Korkoff explained to his wife that he had to find a special present for his Aunt June and that he would spend the whole day searching in Peoria if he had to. He didn't hear his wife mutter that it would be nice if he searched that hard for a gift for her. Actually, Cybil Korkoff was a bit jealous, if the truth be told, and who could blame her. Her husband and his aunt seemed joined at the hip.

Orville began his search in Peoria's two large shopping malls, but he found nothing remarkable. He was certain that Christopher and Banks would have the perfect outfit, but he saw nothing that knocked his socks off. The same with Bergners and Kohls. He almost settled on a stone troll at Jeffrey Alans, but the creature wasn't ugly enough. A novelty shop had an "I'm silently correcting your grammar" t-shirt, but that wasn't turkey-chic enough. He began to fear that he would come up empty this year, but the thought of disappointing Aunt June gnawed at him like a hideous reptile.

In desperation, Orville was ready to go to Menards and spend big money when he found himself walking by a pet shop. He decided to go in and look around. What did he have to lose? There might be an exotic pet that his aunt would love as much as she loved the Boxcar Willie concert.

The instant he entered his eye caught the perfect gift. It was a parrot whose bright colors of blue, yellow, green, red, orange, and purple took his breath away. Clearly, this bird was magnificent and awesome. Best of all, the bird had a distinctive, pronounced aristocratic air about it, an aloofness that is often seen in the crème de la crème of high society or those who consider themselves the intellectual elite of the academic world. Somewhat of a snob himself, Orville felt an intuitive connection with this bird. Without doubt, this member of the feathered tribe was no ordinary parrot.

"Voila! Perfect!" Orville muttered to himself. "Aunt June will love this bird."

Orville approached the proprietor, who bore an uncanny resemblance to Dog Chapman and asked, "How much for the parrot over there, my good man?"

The Dog Chapman look-alike smiled pleasantly, guffawed and said, "Friend, you can have that bird for \$4,999.00."

Orville was tempted to say, "Dog, who do you think you are, a Chicago politician or a pirate?" but then he realized that he was being redundant so he kept quiet. Instead, he rolled his eyes heavenward, flibbered his lips, whistled softly and said with a calculated nonchalance, "Isn't that a rather steep price for a bird?"

"Friend, you need to know that this is an educated bird. Why it can speak ten different languages

fluently. This parrot is special, so special that I probably should not sell it. In fact, I would keep it except I have just acquired an octopus that can play card tricks and pick pockets.”

Orville still thought the price was too high, but he was convinced that this parrot would be the finest Christmas gift he had ever given Aunt June. “Just think of the conversations she can have with a parrot that speaks ten languages fluently,” he opined to himself. Then he said to the proprietor, “I will take the bird if you can promise to arrange to ship it so that it arrives precisely on Christmas eve.”

“No problem, Old Buddy,” the jovial fellow said; then he guffawed again and offered to shake Orville’s hand to celebrate the deal.

Now Orville’s greatest pleasure came from Aunt June’s reaction to his presents. Usually she was effusive in her praise and went on and on in expressing her gratitude, but Christmas came and went with no word from Aunt June. Two days went by and still nothing. Orville was puzzled because he was certain his aunt would love the bird. Then a thought suddenly flashed across his mind: *Maybe the Dog didn’t deliver the bird.*

Finally, he could wait no longer, so he phoned her. “Aunt June, did you receive the Christmas present I sent you? Did you get the bird?”

Aunt June answered, “Yes, Orville I did, and it was delicious, scrumptious, much better than turkey, goose, duck, pheasant, or chicken.”

“Good God! You ate that bird? That bird could speak ten languages fluently and you ate it?”

“Well, why didn’t it say anything then?”

This postmodern story has an important moral that should be obvious, but I will state it just in case: An education is of little value if you do not use it.