

## The Birthday Present

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It was a cold, frosty morning in mid-January, and Boone Fowler and Dr. Wanton Slaughter were having their early morning coffee at the Tally Ho All-Nite Diner and discussing fishing plans for the coming year. Although the fishing season was at least two months away, these friends could endure the winter only by making elaborate plans for fishing expeditions to be implemented the minute they heard the piping of Pan on the south wind. Those of you who do not enjoy fishing can scarcely imagine the deep bonds of fellowship that are often formed among those who love fishing.

Indeed, the relationship between humans and fish itself has a depth and complexity of spiritual meaning that is celebrated in stories like Jonah and the Whale, Ahab and Moby-Dick, the Old Man and the Sea, and the folk tale of the Fisherman and the Genie in the bottle. I hasten to add the personal note that some of the best friendships I have enjoyed throughout my life have been with men who loved fishing, starting with my own grandfather, who, according to my mother, held a live fish in front of my eyes the day after I was born and said, "I'm going to make a fisherman out of this boy." From that magic moment on to this very day, I have considered myself a dedicated fisherman. But back to our tale before I lose it.

The good friends were making plans for a fishing trip to Canada when the door of the Tally Ho was flung open, and in rushed an agitated young man. He was none other than Troy Hart, a senior at the college. He dashed up to Boone Fowler and said, "Mr. Fowler, I need your help. There's a new girl at the college. She is the most wonderful, pulchritudinous creature I have ever laid eyes on. I have to act fast or those cads from the Beta Alpha Delta fraternity will move in on her for sure. What is the best way to approach her? I must win her heart. Please help me. Tell me what I should do."

Then, Troy turned to Wanton Slaughter and said, "Excuse me, Dr. Slaughter, I did not mean to ignore you."

Wanton smiled and said, "No offense taken. I can see you are troubled. Perhaps I, too, can be of assistance."

"Thank you. It is a matter of the heart, but it's not a physical problem; it's an emotional problem."

"Yes, Wanton, but I welcome your help. Sometimes two heads are better than one," Boone said. Then he turned to Troy Hart and asked, "Who is the young woman, and what do you know about her?"

"She's the perfect girl. Her name is Floral Gardens, and she is a transfer student from the University of Illinois. She was born on February 2, 2000, in Quincy Illinois. Her parents are Marvin and April Gardens. A few years ago, Marvin moved the family to Rushville because of political issues in Quincy. He wanted her to go to the big state university, but after one semester she thought it was too impersonal for a small-town girl, and so she transferred here to major in banking and high finance. In addition to that, she wants to join the Delta Zeta sorority. She loves classical music, books by Ray Bradbury, mountain climbing, her several pets, and donating her time to the Red Cross. She is a devout Catholic but is very tolerant of the religious beliefs of others. She believes that to live life to full measure she must strive to balance the physical, the intellectual, the emotional, and the spiritual dimensions of life. Furthermore, she considers herself a Reagan Republican and ...."

Here Boone interrupted, "How can you know so much about her?"

“You are forgetting that I am a criminal justice major at the college and that privacy and secrecy are impossible in this world ruled by technology and sophisticated surveillance systems. Secrets are a thing of the past. By the way, if you ever plan to commit a crime, you need to leave your cellphone at home,” Troy offered.

Since Wanton Slaughter had been invited to participate in the discussion, he said, “Troy, why don't you simply approach the girl, introduce yourself, and inform her of your feelings? After all, you are a handsome and intelligent young man whose attention most young women would welcome.”

“Ordinarily, I would do that, but Floral is so perfect that I am afraid I might do or say something untoward or unseemly and lose her forever. The fear of failure gnaws at me like a hideous reptile. Gripped in fear's saurian teeth, I am incapable of acting. Please, tell me what I should do.”

Boone pounded the table and exclaimed, “There is only one thing to do: **Strike while the iron is hot!**”

Troy's eyes lighted up and he said, “Then I should act immediately.” And he started for the door.

But Wanton Slaughter gestured like a traffic policeman holding up his hands to stop a speeding automobile, “Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.”

Boone then said, Troy, time waits for no man.”

Wanton then opined, “But a stitch in time saves nine.”

Troy nodded and said, “I guess I should go slow and be careful, play the waiting game and bide my time.”

Boone countered, “He who hesitates is lost.”

Troy rose from his chair, but was stopped by Wanton. “Discretion is the better part of valor.”

Boone then said, “Opportunity knocks but once.”

“All right then. I'll call her immediately and ask for a date. “

Wanton had one more bit of advice: “Just remember that haste makes waste.”

Boone wanted the last word, and he saw his chance. “We should always remember that the early bird gets the worm.”

Then Wanton Slaughter demonstrated his firm command of the obvious when he observed, “Floral is not a worm. She is a fine young woman with a brain, and a heart, and a soul.”

Before anyone had a chance to respond further to the bird-worm imagery, the telephone rang, and Grubby Crocker, the cook at the Tally Ho, answered. After a muffled conversation, Grubby turned to Boone and said, “They need you at Menards. They have a moral crisis because a customer has trouble accepting the rebate policy.”

“Tell them I will be there as soon as I can.” Then he turned to Troy and said, “Think about what I have told you and decide what to do. I’m sorry but I have to go.”

“I have to go as well. I have a morning schedule full of post-nasal drip patients, and I had better be on time,” the good doctor said as he rose and started for the door. Then, as an after-thought, he turned and said, “But I believe we have given you a range of wise suggestions that should help you decide what to do.”

Troy was left with Grubby Crocker, who felt sympathy for Troy in his plight. Grubby felt it incumbent upon him to offer his help, so he said to Troy, “I heard you say that the girl’s birthday is February 2. That is about two weeks away, enough time for you to think of the best birthday present you could give her. The key to a woman’s heart is to celebrate her birthday. Since this young woman is perfect, I would go all out to give her the most special gift I could find. Forget about candy and flowers. Give her something truly unique. “

Grubby Crocker’s suggestion made good sense to Troy, but for the life of him he could not think of a special present. He only knew that he didn’t want to ask Boone and Dr. Slaughter for advice about choosing a gift. Thus, he reviewed the information he knew about Floral. He made a list of possibilities on a sheet of paper and, one by one, marked them off. He was left with one: an exotic pet.

The next day Troy went to Peoria to visit a pet shop advertised as “Paws, Fins, and Feathers.” He approached the proprietor and explained he wanted a special pet, but before the man, who bore an uncanny resemblance to Don Knotts, could respond, Troy’s attention was captured by a gorgeous parrot whose bright colors were breath-taking. This parrot was majestic in hues of blue, red, green, yellow, orange, and purple. “Eureka and Voila!” Troy exclaimed. Then he turned to the Don Knotts look-alike and said, “I want that parrot. What price are you asking?”

The proprietor shook his head and said, “You don’t want that bird. I have a carp over here that can float upside down. I have an ant that can tap dance. I have a cat that can imitate Elvis. Indeed, I have any number of unusual pets.”

“But I want the parrot,” Troy said. “Why don’t you want to sell him to me?”

“Because that parrot is nothing but trouble. He sings filthy bawdy songs and uses the most vulgar, obscene language I have ever heard. The political correctness people will be on you like a ton of bricks, not to mention the animal rights people and the First Amendment defenders.”

Troy was puzzled. “What has this parrot to do with animal rights and the First Amendment?”

“I asked you not to mention animal rights and the First Amendment, but since you did, I will explain. You can’t see it from here, but the parrot is wearing a mask like Hannibal Lecter. Without that mask the air in this room would be filled with the filthiest sewer language imaginable. It would be so bad you would want to go straight home and take a long shower.”

Troy wasn’t ready to give up. He said, “Vulgar language and profanity do not offend me. I worked on construction two summers in Meredosia. I have a vocabulary of profanity that would surprise you, but I don’t use it. Besides, I believe I can cure the parrot of his infelicitous language. How much for him?”

“Well, don’t say I didn’t warn you. It’s your funeral. You can have this bird for \$4.99.”

“Don’t cheat yourself. I will give you \$5.00 for the bird.”

Troy took the parrot home and removed the mask. He was greeted by vulgar obscenities he had never heard before. The language was so bad that even Lennie Bruce would have been offended, and Troy realized how difficult it was going to be to correct the parrot’s language. But he had almost two weeks before Floral’s birthday, and he had a great deal of confidence in his ability to transform the bird into the perfect gift for a perfect girl.

Troy tried reading beautiful poetry to the bird as well as some of the finest passages of prose he could find. He read Cyrano’s speech to Roxanne. He even played a recording of the song of a nightingale, but all of his efforts to correct the parrot’s vile language were in vain. In fact, the parrot’s profanity became even worse. But at least the bird didn’t say “you know” in every sentence.

Finally, only two days remained until Floral’s birthday. Troy said good morning to the parrot and was answered by the usual ugly, foul stream of profanity.

It was the last straw. Troy suddenly grabbed the parrot by the neck, opened the freezer door of his refrigerator, threw the parrot in and slammed the door shut. For the next few minutes, Troy heard an awful racket coming from the freezer. There was scratching, tapping, clawing and pecking, but suddenly complete silence. Not a sound from the freezer.

“S--t!” Troy said to himself, “I didn’t intend to kill the bird. Then he rushed over and opened the freezer door.

The parrot flew out, landed softly on Troy’s shoulder, and said, “Sir, I realize that my language has been offensive to you and that I have been rude and nasty in singing those filthy bawdy songs. From this moment on, I assure you that I will give you no cause for complaint. Au contraire, I will be the very model of eloquence and graceful behavior.”

To confirm this promise, the parrot sang the most beautiful rendition of “My Love is Like a Red, Red Rose” that Troy had ever heard.

Then the parrot pointed one wing at the freezer and said, “If I may ask, Kind Sir, pray tell, what did the chicken do?”

