

THE BIRTHDAY PRESENT

John Boston

David Gann was more than a little surprised when his doorbell rang that evening. He turned on his doorbell cam and could see someone on steps carrying a package in a small dolly.

"Can I help you?"

"I have a package for David Gann." said the delivery man.

"Seriously? It's seven o'clock on a Monday night?"

"I just deliver them, sir. I don't have anything to do with the shipping." replied the delivery man into the microphone on the side of the building.

"Just leave it there, I'll get it."

"You have to sign for it, sir."

David rolled his eyes. It then occurred to him what was happening. His beloved parents had sent him his birthday present. His mom had made it a habit of having him sign now for all of his packages after one was lost last year, even though it was scanned as delivered. He went downstairs and opened the front door.

The delivery man handed him a clipboard with some kind of official paperwork on it. David signed it without even really looking at it.

"I thought everything was done with digital signatures nowadays," he said.

"Some people still like doing things the old-fashioned way."

"Well, thank you," said David as he turned to grab the large package.

"David.....you have to master your fears.....or they will master you." said the delivery man.

David turned to look at him, but the man had already begun to walk away. He wasn't quite sure what to make of him, or what he had just said.

The package was quite unusual. It was a large box, wrapped with a red ribbon and covered in beautiful wrapping paper. It looked like a giant present. The tag read:

With love, from all of us

Don't open until your birthday!

That was it. Mom had really outdone herself here. He shook it a little bit and could feel something inside. It was large, but not terribly heavy. He carried it up the stairs, opened his door, and put it inside on the living room table. He went back to watching the ball game and pretty much forgot about it. He did have one very unbreakable tradition when it came to presents: David Gann never opened a present early. Not that it made any difference, but he liked to at least try and keep some family traditions around. He hoped someday to have a family and he could pass it on to his children. He had thus far had a very unblemished record when it came to opening presents early. He had opened a birthday present when he was twelve a day before his birthday. His mother was so upset, she actually returned it to the store. He didn't understand what the big deal was, but that was his mother's only rule he was expected to follow. That and to one day give her some grandbabies. She had patience. She could wait. He just hoped he could give some grandchildren before they were too old to really enjoy them.

Birthdays were just another day for David. When he was growing up, they were anything but ordinary. His parents spent the entire day reminding him of how special he was and how much his being born meant to them. The problem with having great parents is that they make the rest of humanity look like the selfish idiots they are. People who have no business reproducing were having children without a passing thought as to how they were going to care for them, if they cared for them at all. He wondered just how many pregnancies were actually planned and how many were just the unfortunate result of too much drinking.

It wasn't like he didn't have his opportunities. He dated his college sweetheart for five years before asking her to marry him. Unfortunately, she didn't quite feel the same way and politely told him no....if there is a polite way of telling someone you don't want to marry them. He was devastated but didn't want to be with someone who didn't feel the same way. He had even picked out their new house. He dated a few other women and quickly discovered he was just a small fish swimming in a shark tank. The older he got, he was finding fewer and fewer women that were his age and didn't have children. He didn't want to date a woman with children. He wanted his own family. Maybe it was selfish, but that's just how he felt. He realized full well that people marry young and are not ready, but when you have children with someone, you pretty much are married to them, whether it's official or not. His last girlfriend was nice enough, but she was newly divorced and just not ready to take the plunge again. He understood. He figured it was best to break it off before her children got any more attached to him.

That was almost four years ago. He wasn't rich. He did well for himself, but he certainly was no sugar daddy. He just for the life of him could not understand how some men could spend a fortune on a woman who were only with them because they were spending a fortune on them. They just became very expensive prostitutes. Maybe he was just old-fashioned. His parents had been married for almost forty years and were still very much in love with one another. He wanted to find that with somebody. If he had to wait until he was eighty, he would wait. She was out there, he just had to find her.

He walked by the giant present on his way to bed. He was almost excited now, looking it over. He was also genuinely curious to see what was inside. His birthday was six days away. He was just going to have to wait.

He fell asleep next to his cat, Sugar, watching the eleven o'clock news. He really didn't like watching the fake news, but the weather girl was hot, so he usually forced himself to stay up until the weather was shown, then he went to bed.

He wasn't sure when he woke up. It was Sugar who woke him up. His first thought was that something was wrong. *Sugar could sleep through a tornado.* She was pacing by the door as if there was someone outside in the hallway.

He reached into his nightstand drawer and pulled out his .38. He made sure it was loaded, then crept towards the bedroom door. He turned off the fan and could faintly hear something coming from the kitchen area. He was nervous. There had been two other break-ins last month in the building. He slowly opened the door and peeked outside. It was still dark in the hallway. He didn't want to turn on the lights and scare away the intruder. He waited until he was just a few feet away from the kitchen, then turned on the lights.

There was no one there. He went from room to room, opening closets and checking the bathroom and his office.

Well, shit.....that was weird. He thought to himself.

The clock read five thirty-two AM. He would have to be up an hour anyway. He couldn't go back to sleep now. He made a pot of coffee and poured some cat food into sugar's bowl. He turned on the TV. He couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. *Something just felt wrong.* He walked around his loft once more. Everything seemed to be in order. His front door was still locked and the fire escape window was bolted shut. So then what the hell had sugar so spooked?

It wasn't until he sat down at the kitchen table that it hit him. He looked over at the present. It was now at the other end of the living room table. He got up and walked over to it. He was certain he had put it down on the opposite side of the table. He hadn't moved it. The present was now at the other end of the table. It had moved almost five feet. He picked it up and looked at it. He was certain now, it had moved on its own. He gently shook it. He could feel something move inside. It wasn't heavy. Maybe it was something with a motor that got turned on. He put the package down and made himself a cup of coffee. He was still not completely awake, so the significance of what had happened didn't really sink in. He had a big meeting at work at nine AM that morning and wanted to be ready for it. He walked by Sugar's bowl and saw that she hadn't touched it. She hadn't even come out of the bedroom. That was weird. Sugar didn't have to be told twice that food was ready. She was usually in the kitchen when she heard him opening her food. The old gal was certainly a creature of habit. He went back into the bedroom and found her sitting on his bed.

"What's wrong sugar?" he asked.

Cats might not be able to calculate, but cats have an uncanny ability to sense danger, and right now, the look on Sugar's face was setting off all kinds of alarm bells.

David brought her food bowl into the bedroom. Much to his surprise, she didn't even go near it. Something had her spooked. He sat down next to her and could see she was shaking. He had

never seen her like this before. He picked her up and put her on his chest, where she remained for the next ten minutes.

"Honey, I got to get ready for work. You got this?" asked David.

Sugar gave him a look of death. *The poor girl was scared shitless.*

He brought her water bowl and litter box into the bedroom. He didn't know what else to do for her. He had to be ready for this meeting. The company had just gotten its quarterly results and the results were not good. He figured anyone who missed the meeting would be on thin ice.

On his way out the door, he looked around one more time. The only thing that had changed in the last 24 hours was the giant birthday present. Is that what set her off? Who knows. David locked the door and joined the rest of the poor slobs who had to work for a living. Catch the subway, catch another subway, then walk for half a mile to his office building. As pathetic as it sounded, his commute was far less hellish than most in the city. He paid an arm and a leg for this loft, simply because he didn't want to spend four hours of his day in traffic. No thank you.

The meeting did not get off to a good start. David worked for a bunch of soul-less corporate vampires, but they paid him well for his services. He was a slave and he knew it. As long as the price was right, he could put up with just about anything. His numbers were great and he had earned a performance bonus of many thousands of dollars, which he intended to use on a vacation to Thailand. He stayed at the office until five and then played subway hopscotch back to his apartment. It took him exactly forty-eight minutes to get from work back home. As long as he didn't miss a train, he could be home within an hour. It took some people in his building that long just to get out of the parking garage.

He wasn't sure why he noticed it. It was kind of an odd thing to notice. He put his mail down on the living room table and noticed the giant present was gone. He looked around the room, then went down the hallway. Much to his shock, the present had indeed moved.

It was right in front of his bedroom door.

David wasn't sure what the hell was going on. Was this some kind of a joke? What the hell was in this thing? This was way too freaking weird.

He opened the bedroom door and could so Sugar ran out from underneath the bed. He reached down and picked her up. She was shaking almost uncontrollably.

"What's the matter, princess? Who moved that present?" he said rubbing her head.

He put her down and picked up the present. How the hell did it get from one room to another? He grabbed his copy of the shipping invoice he had signed. The name of the shipping company was TRI-STATE SHIPPING. David couldn't understand why his mother would have gone through the trouble of using a private shipping company for this. Why not just use the regular post office. Something wasn't adding up here.

Packages aren't supposed to move on their own, now are they Mr. David?

No, certainly not. He might not be able to open it until his birthday, but that doesn't mean he can't call his mother and ask her just what the hell is inside of it.

Mom talked his ear off about their trip to Ireland. David was already on his second beer by the time she stopped talking.

"Mom, I gotta ask here, what on Earth is in that present you sent me?"

"What present?"

"The one you and Dad sent two days ago."

"Honey, we didn't send you a present. We were going to drive down this weekend and surprise you with tickets to the Yankees, but that plan went out the window."

"You mean you guys didn't send me a giant birthday present?"

"No, it wasn't from us."

"Ok.....mom, let me call you back, I've got work on the other line."

"Ok, we'll see you soon."

David hung up the phone and walked over to the present. He looked at the phone number on the copy of the invoice. He dialed the toll-free number and much to his surprise he was told that the line is not in service or may have been disconnected. He went online to look up TRI-STATE SHIPPING and found the company had gone out of business in 2002.

David had enough. He picked up the package and put it on the kitchen table. He got a pair of large scissors and tried to cut the ribbon around it. He tried and tried, but the scissors wouldn't cut the ribbon. It was like it was made out of steel or something. He went into his closet and got out a pair of wire cutters. He tried for nearly five minutes, but the ribbon wouldn't break. It seemed to be as light as a feather.

David was both worried and fascinated. He tried using the scissors to cut a hole in the box. It didn't work. No matter what he did, he just simply couldn't cut open the package.

It's made out of paper. The goddamn thing should be very easy to open.

Except it wasn't. He spent almost half an hour with it. He even brought out a cutting wheel. It cut right through the package, but somehow the package seemed to almost instantly repair itself. By the time he had cut a hole in it, the other side was completely intact.

David was floored. He took the box and jumped up and down on it. He hit it with a baseball bat. Every blow he made, disfigured it and within seconds, the present had magically healed itself. It looked completely undamaged.

David sat down and looked at the box. It was as if the present was teasing him, laughing at him. He picked up the box and went outside to the dumpster. He made certain there was no tag on it

and threw it in. Whatever the hell that thing was, he wanted no part of it. This would be a birthday he wouldn't soon forget. An indestructible birthday present that seemed to move on its own. No thanks. Part of him really wanted to know what was inside that present. Part of him was just too scared to find out. He walked back upstairs to his apartment. He and Sugar needed to forget about the present and move on.

Sugar seemed to be in much better spirits once the package was gone. She finally left the bedroom and ventured into the living room, where David was seated, watching football. She climbed up into his lap. He was still floored by what he had just experienced. He should have filmed it with his camera, but he was so scared of the damn thing, he didn't want to remember it. The present seemed to have a life all of its own.

As much as he would love to know what was inside of it, he was equally if not more curious as to who sent it. What did they want from him?

David heard the strange noise from his bedroom. He woke up and took his revolver with him. He turned on the light and could see the package sitting on the floor of his kitchen. He could almost feel his heart miss a beat. It started shaking violently. He raised his gun and was about to unload on it, when he saw something poke out from the sides of it.

Jesus, Mary.....mother of God.....it's growing legs.

Not people legs. Gross, long legs, bunches of them. *Like an insect.*

The present now had legs, stumbling across the room. David fired several shots at the thing, the last two hitting it. It made a horrible noise, then the tentacles came out. Just a few at first, then a dozen or more. They were growing rapidly. David fired one more time, hitting the present. He tried to run, but his legs turned to Jell-O.

It looks like something escaped from the depths of hell and was running loose in his apartment.

The present stopped right in front of him. It turned and saw Sugar. It grabbed Sugar and lifted her inside, making horrible shredding sounds as it devoured his beloved feline.

David tried to scream. You can never really make any sounds when you're dreaming.

He sat up in his bed. He immediately turned on the light and grabbed his baseball bat from the closet. He was relieved to see Sugar was only half awake, wondering just what in the hell he was doing.

He opened his bedroom door and peeked out into the hallway. It looked dark. Very dark and very quiet. He ran into the kitchen and turned on the light. He breathed a sigh of relief to discover his kitchen was just as he left it. The present was gone. He spent a few minutes looking over his apartment. The present was nowhere to be found. He was beginning to think he was free of the damn thing.

Good riddance.

He lay awake in bed for the next hour. It was just after 3 AM. He was wide awake as if his nightmare had filled his sleep requirement for the next 24 hours. He drifted in and out of sleep for the next two and a half hours. Sometimes he would dream the present was hiding in the apartment, just waiting to surprise him. Sometimes he would dream that he was inside the present, fighting wildly to escape its papered walls. Something about it just frightened him like no other. He hadn't felt fear like this since he was a child and watched some old Boris Karloff Movies. Everyone else his age was watching slasher flicks, but to him, they were just stupid. Karloff knew how to create fear...real fear, like the kind that keeps you up at night and kicks you when you least expect it. He woke up a few minutes before his alarm was set to go off. He hopped out of bed and made a pot of coffee.

The day could only get better from here. He was supposed to get his bonus today. By the end of the day, he'd be about five thousand dollars richer. Thailand here I come.

His office was populated by a bunch of middle aged suits and ties with no real love for anything except their money and position. These were corporate men and women, who had been groomed since birth to be good little slaves for the corporation. Most of them had no idea what they were doing, as long as they looked good doing it, they were fine. One of the suits bumped into him in the elevator.

"Did you get our gift?"

"What gift?"

"The giant present we sent you."

"That was you?"

"Yes. Just a little something from all of us. We wanted to thank you for all your hard work. You're top dog around here now, we figured you out to be rewarded."

"Oh.....well, thanks. That was very thoughtful of you."

The suit stepped out of the elevator. David felt both relieved and worried. He should have known it was work. This is exactly what suits and ties do. Still, he hoped he could fish it out of the trash today and save it. They might ask him how he liked it. That could get awkward.

One major mystery about the gift had been solved. He just had to figure out how in the hell they made the damn thing so indestructible. Whoever designed it is some kind of engineering genius. Still, he felt silly for his reaction. He called his building superintendent and asked him if he could get the present out of the dumpster for him. For what he paid in rent every month, that was the least they could do for him. He called David back ten minutes later and told him that the trash had been emptied that morning and the dumpster was empty. David thanked him and hung up. So much for that.

He arrived home early that afternoon and when he came to the top of the stairs, he saw the package sitting in front of his door. There was a note on it from his super. It seems that the trash men saw the present and thought it was worth saving. They put it off to the side and saved it.

David was delighted. Now that he knew who it came from, it seemed far less mysterious. He picked it up and carried it inside. He saw his neighbor John Carrington coming up the stairs. The two were friendly with one another, but he would stop short of calling them, friends. In this city that was about the best you could hope for.

"Hi, John. Got a minute?"

"Sure."

"I'm going to ask you to do me a favor."

"What is it?"

"I'd like you to try and open this present here."

"That's all?"

"Yes, there must be some kind of riddle or clue associated with it. It looks easy enough, but wait till you try."

"I'll give a shot," he said and took the present from David.

He felt his phone vibrate. He looked down and could see it was his boss. Not just any boss.....*the big boss*.

David answered and spent the next forty-five minutes helping him determine how seventy thousand dollars was missing from one of their client's accounts. Even for a seasoned accountant, it was difficult, but not beyond his ability. When they found the mistake, his boss sounded very relieved. They spent the next ten minutes talking about basketball. The old man actually invited him to a preseason game. Not too bad for a day's work.

John knocked on his door and came in, holding the present.

"Give up?" asked David.

"No, it took me exactly eighteen seconds to unwrap it and another twenty minutes to re-wrap it. I've never been very good at wrapping presents. Whoever wrapped this had got some serious skills.

"You really got it open in eighteen seconds?"

"Yup."

"Wow, okay then. Thanks for your help."

"Do you want to know what was inside?"

"No, I'll find out in a few days. I might have you unwrap it for me on my birthday."

"No problem. Happy birthday."

"Thanks, man. Tell the wife I said hi."

David tossed and turned in bed. He woke up and almost seemed to be called to the present. Like sirens luring sailors of long ago to their deaths. He knew he shouldn't go, but he couldn't help himself. He had a serious itch that needed to be scratched. He had to see what was inside of the box. The weird and oddly beautiful box seemed almost hypnotic. He turned on the kitchen lights and ignored the tag that warned him not to open it until his birthday. The box was much easier to open this time around. He was almost giddy with excitement. He carefully removed the top of the box and looked down inside. He was horrified at what he saw. He only saw two slabs of c-4 and a very angry-looking stopwatch. A flag popped up that read:

I fucking told you not to open it!

David very briefly felt the explosion rip off his skin and break every bone in his body as the impact from the explosion sent him through the wall into John's apartment. In his dream world, he tried to scream, but nothing came out of his mouth. When you scream in your dreams, you almost always wake up. For him, it was a very, very long few seconds. He didn't know if he was dead or not.

He sat up in bed. He was now petrified. Was it just a dream, or was some other very unused sense of his, trying to warn him of his impending doom? He walked out into the kitchen and grabbed the box. He walked downstairs with it to the basement, where each tenant had their own personal storage unit. He unlocked the door and put the present in the storage unit. It might seem like overkill, but for a few very brief seconds, David knew what it felt like to be killed by a homemade bomb. He would just leave it there until his birthday which was in three days from now. He could hold out till then. He had no choice. That gift was not going back in his apartment.

No way, no how.

David finally had his first real vacation from work for a three-day weekend. He thought about going to visit his parents, but his father said they were going to his brother's house several hours away. He and his brother hadn't really spoken to one another in a few years after David told him not to marry the girl he eventually did. Said he would be making a terrible mistake. The two brothers had nearly come to blows and had to be separated by their father. Not a pleasant moment by any stretch of the imagination, but David hoped one day his brother would understand....some day.

Instead, he decided to just lounge around his loft and watch some movies. Hang out with Sugar, maybe even go fishing upstate. He hadn't gone fishing in a few years.

Instead, he came down with a nasty cold that Friday afternoon. He left work after lunch and came home. Even Sugar kept her distance. She didn't want any of that. He took some cold and flu medicine and fell asleep about five.

David knew he was dreaming, but he seemed unable to wake up. The present was calling him, screaming at him to be let out from that horrible place. He walks downstairs and opens the door. He unwraps the present and backs up. A beautiful woman crawls out. She is completely naked. She puts her arms around him and starts kissing him. He has never been so turned on in his life. He looks down and sees the woman has a tail. He doesn't even seem to care. He has never wanted to make love to another person so badly in his life. The woman breaks away and climbs back into the box.

"You can come with me if you want or stay here and be lonely and miserable. It's up to you."

"What is this thing?" he asked the woman

"It's whatever you want it to be."

"If I go with you, will I ever come back here?"

"I don't think you will ever want to come back here."

David took her hand and climbed into the box with her. He closed the lid and was instantly embraced by the light. It was the brightest light he had ever seen. It seemed to shine right into his soul.

He woke up in bed and began sneezing. He could feel his body fighting the cold virus, doing everything possible to keep it from spreading. He took some vitamins and laid back down. He had been asleep for almost three hours. He was going to have a hard time getting to bed tonight. He made sure sugar had food and water, then turned on the TV. He took some more cold medicine. This one had an ingredient to make you drowsy. David was back asleep in his favorite chair within half an hour.

Sometimes his dreams were violent. Sometimes they were peaceful...almost serene. He wasn't always thinking about the present, but it was never too far from his mind either. In one of his dreams, he opened the box, only to realize that someone had somehow recorded the voice of God and had put it in the box, for him to enjoy. In another one, he opened the box, only to discover he was reading his own obituary.

He had a few dreams about the girls at work, including one he really, really wanted to ask out but figured she was just out of his league. In another dream, he dreamt he could jump from the rooftop of one building to another. Fifty or so feet in the air. Gravity doesn't mean shit in the dream world. All that mattered was your imagination.

He had no idea what was inside the neatly wrapped box. He wasn't sure what they wanted. Why his work sent him this box, he had no idea. Suits and ties as a general rule of thumb are not very creative. This is certainly no exception.

Maybe he would find Jesus.

Maybe Jesus would find him first.

It's just a box.....it's just a goddamn box with awesome wrapping paper on it. There's nothing magical about it because there is nothing magical about this world we live in. all the life and love has been sucked out of it by evil corporations like the one he works for. That's all there is in life.....empty promises and empty people.

He had three days left until he could open the present. He was half tempted to just ask John what the hell was in there, but he had his opportunity and passed. He could wait. It's not like the gift was going anywhere.

He took it easy that morning, watching golf and sipping coffee. He was getting worse by the hour. He finally had some time off from that corporate sweatshop and he had to spend it in bed or laid out on his couch. He almost felt cheated. He was working almost sixty hours a week and had little to show for it. As much as he wanted to go to Thailand, he knew he should just put the money in savings. Life has its own plan and sometimes it can be very costly. His rent would be going up next year again. This city was in desperate need of rent control, but the mayor seemed more interested in regulating the sugar content of soft drinks. David remembers reading that in the newspaper and thinking someone in that newspaper had quite a sense of humor. Things we used to joke about twenty years ago were now becoming reality. The harder he worked, the poorer he became.

By four o'clock that evening, he was full-blown sick. He called his parents and spoke with his father for a while. He always felt better after talking to his father. His old man had pretty much stopped progressing in 1990. He said once that he almost felt like an alien living in 2019 America.

Christ Dave, in my time, people knew their place. Things weren't really a whole hell of a lot better, but at least people stayed in their lane. Technology has made it to where any asshole can broadcast their opinion all over the planet. That's not progress.....I don't know what it is, but it sure as hell ain't moving forward.

By that afternoon, he really didn't want to leave the couch. He ordered some soup from the deli and had it delivered. Twenty-five dollars for soup? If it made him feel better, he figured it was worth it. He was about to pass out when his doorbell buzzed. He stumbled over to the intercom and pressed the button on the wall.

"Hello?" he said still half asleep."

"Hi, I've got a delivery for David Gann?"

"Okay, I'll be right down."

He threw on some clothes and went downstairs. He opened the front door and there was a postman with a very large package.

"Mr. Gann. I'm sorry, this should have been delivered a few days ago. My relief was scanning in packages as delivered then just leaving them until I got back. If I ever catch the son of a bitch....I'll...."

"It's fine. Do you want me to sign anything?"

"No sir. Here you are. I'm very sorry about all this. I'm encouraging the customers on my route to complain to the postmaster. Totally unacceptable."

"Right...thank you."

David took the package and walked slowly up the stairs. It was small. He figured his parents rushed something out the door in time for his birthday. It was in a small box. He decided rules were meant to be broken. Maybe it was the flu medication he took, but he didn't really care about tradition at this point. He was too sick to care. He opened the package and found a small envelope. It was dated four days ago when it should have arrived. He opened the envelope. Reading the small note that was attached.

Happy Birthday, David,

Thanks for all the hard work. Enjoy.

It was from his company. Two tickets, almost courtside to the Knicks game next week. David was floored. This was far and away from the coolest present he had ever received.....from just about anyone. As much as he hated this company, he was reminded that rich people give some pretty awesome gifts. They might still be borderline psychotic, but they know how to say thank you. Just as he was putting the tickets down on the table, it hit him:

Um.....Davy.....if this was your gift from the office, then who the hell sent the other one, you know the one you locked in the basement?

As sick as he was, he stopped in his tracks. Yeah, who the hell did send that thing? He sat down on his sofa. He kept a notebook of poetry he wrote. He had been doing it since high school. He never showed it to anyone. He had written volumes of poetry and never showed them to anyone. They weren't meant to be read by anyone but him. He just wrote whatever came to mind.

I had a birthday, but nobody came

Except the creatures of the forest

But it just wasn't the same

I had a funeral, but nobody came

Except for the dead

But, it just wasn't the same

I had a party but nobody came

Except for my darkness

But it wasn't the same

Selling coke on the white hot

Streets of Bethlehem.

She was nervous when I

Removed her bra

And so was I.

On the day you die

There won't be a cloud in the sky.

Not bad, but not his best either. Real poetry, the stuff that moves masses comes from some other place that science has yet to identify. It's not your heart and it's not from your head. He wasn't sure where it came from, but he was glad it was there. The world can be so horrible sometimes. Maybe not horrible, but definitely not wonderful. He just described what he saw. That's what poets do. They don't create, they just report. They just do it in a way most people have never seen before.

He was getting tired now. It was only four-thirty and he was close to falling asleep. The flu medication must have had something in it to make him drowsy. He knew if he passed out now, he would wake up in a few hours and be up all night with this. He tried not to fall asleep, but it was hopeless. It was as if every single cell in his body was just shutting down. He fell asleep right after golf ended.

In his dream, he was walking down the hallway into the basement. The gift was calling his name. It was the most beautiful voice he had ever heard.

He unlocked the door to his storage unit and slowly opened it. The present had grown arms and legs. Not like before, this time it was as if someone was wearing a nylon suit covering their arms and legs with the present for a body. He had no idea what to make of this thing in front of him.

What did it want?

He could see that the storage locker had turned into a giant present. He was now inside of it. The walls seemed to almost vanish. So did the floor. He was falling. Faster and faster, he gained speed, until it felt like he was falling at a thousand miles an hour. He fell hard on the floor but got up, unhurt. He looked around and could see dozens, if not hundreds of these things with some kind of covering over their arms and legs and had small presents for bodies. They had no heads

of any kind. He was in their world now. The strange, beautiful world that existed inside the birthday present. He was not walking, but rather just floating in place. The laws of physics had no place inside here. This world had rules entirely of its own.

A present walked over to him. It took him by the hand and began speaking to him.

"Do you want to know the greatest secret in your world, David?" it asked

"Yes, please, tell me."

"You can leave your world and go to other worlds, right next door to yours. Worlds few people ever see. Worlds few people could ever imagine. This world is just one of many. In some of them, you could be a God. In others, you will be the lowest form of life there is. Remember, we all make our own afterlife. We make our heaven.....and we certainly make our own hell. Goodbye David."

He wasn't sure what was happening. He heard some kind of alarm and was instantly whisked away from the strange world inside the gift. He opened his eyes and was back in his apartment. He heard his doorbell ringing.

He got up off the sofa and walked over to the intercom. He turned on the camera and could see it was his parents. They had come into the city to surprise him.

"Hi, guys....I'll be right down."

David was still reeling from one of the most incredible dreams he ever had. Some dreams literally change you forever. This was one of them. The full significance of which would not be understood until much later. At the moment, he was just thrilled to see his parents once more. At their age, you just never knew if this was going to be the last time you got to see them. He wanted to make every moment with them count. Not that he was in any mood to go out. He pooped some more flu meds and went out to dinner with his parents.

He knew it was a bad idea to mix medication and wine. His mother wouldn't even let him have a sip. When he was younger, his mother would take him to wine tasting events. They would both be too tipsy to drive and his father would have to come and pick them up. She instilled a love for good wine and food into her son, along with a love for the arts and cinema. For his eighteenth birthday, she took him to see Fritz Lang's masterpiece "M". For a movie that was almost seventy years old at the time, it didn't seem to age a bit, a testament to Lang's skill as a director. She taught him how to read a wine list. She spent most of her free time investigating restaurant reviews. She had her favorites. Dining out in the city can be expensive. The owner of one restaurant sent her a bottle of expensive wine for her birthday.

Mom spent that much money at his little eatery. His dad always paid, even though he couldn't always afford it. He wasn't going to let his son pay for a meal on his own birthday. They decided to just order a pizza.....*not just any pizza.....a forty-three-dollar pizza.* In New York City, a forty-three-dollar pizza is still considered food for the thrifty. It was expensive, but it was also the best pizza he had ever eaten. There were meats and vegetables on it, he didn't even know existed. It was that good.

"Hey, Dave.....call me crazy, but isn't that Andy Jackson sitting over there with his arm candy?" said his father in between bites.

Dave looked over and was stunned to see Andy Jackson sitting with two gorgeous ladies enjoying a slice of pizza in the booth at the end of the row. Jackson was the hottest pitcher in baseball right now. He was only in his mid-20s and he was already shattering records. He had a fastball that was just downright scary.

"Dad, I do believe you are right."

"Wow.....man, what I'd give to be able to sit down with him for just a few seconds."

"I hear he had a place in the city. He lives here in the off season," said David.

David's father was a baseball nut. He had surprised his dad with season tickets to the Yankees last year. His father was so happy he actually broke down and cried. Being able to talk to Andy Jackson would be like sitting down and having a beer with Jesus for some.

"He doesn't want to be bothered, dear. He has company." said his mother.

"Yeah, he probably wouldn't be some old fart like me begging for his autograph. I'm sure there will be another pitcher that throws four shutouts in one season."

"Would you like me to ask him for his autograph?" asked David.

"Oh, no. We should just leave him alone. I mean I guess, if he would take a picture with us, that would be cool too."

"I'll see what I can do. Time to turn on the charm here."

"Do you think he paid for the girls?" asked his dad when his mother got up to use the ladies' room.

"Maybe they came with the pizza," said Dave.

He waited until one of the girls got up and walked outside. Dave made his move and casually slid past them on his way to the restroom. He turned and smiled at Jackson, who had his arm wrapped around one of the ladies. Dave was about to ask him if he would have his picture taken with his parents, but before he could, Jackson looked up and gave him a death stare.

Don't even bother dude. Don't interrupt a man while he's working.

He didn't say anything, but that look was enough. Dave just kept walking and went into the men's room. If Dave was in his shoes, he would have stopped for two seconds and taken a picture. It's people like his father that pay his salary. You can't forget the fans. Dave just shook his head. By the time he got back to the table, Jackson and his ladies were gone.

"Sorry dad, I tried."

"No problem son. He looked like he had bigger things to worry about."

"I'll say. He had to figure out which one of his skanks he was going to bang first."

"He's got a big game tomorrow. He needs to be rested."

It was getting late. His parents still had to drive back home. Even in good traffic, it could take them over an hour. He gave them both a big hug.

"Thanks, guys.....I needed this."

"If you don't feel better in a couple of days, I want you to go and see Dr. Feldman. I'll make the appointment." said his mother.

"I'm sure I'll be fine mom."

He put them in a cab and sent them on their way. He tried to walk home but only made it two blocks before he called it quits. He got a cab and went home. He got back to his loft and turned on the TV. He figured he'd watch the news, catch up on the scores. He was asleep within twenty minutes. He was sicker than he realized.

It was five-thirty in the morning when he woke up. He looked over at his watch. Oddly, the first thought that popped into his head was that tomorrow night at midnight he could open his present and finally see what the hell was inside. His father told him that they had to go and help his brother move tomorrow, so they would not be able to stop by on his birthday. His brother had bought a "fixer-upper" in Queens. He thought his brother needed fixing up as well, but decided to keep his mouth shut. The deteriorating relationship between him and his brother was a sore spot for his parents.

He knew if there was something magical or unusual in the gift, John would surely have said something.....or at least hinted at it. He made it seem like there was nothing special at all inside. There probably wasn't. Still, people don't send gifts to complete strangers. He spent the next hour and a half sipping coffee and trying to figure out who he knew that would have gone to such extremes. An hour and a half later, he still really had no idea. He had few friends. A lot of acquaintances, but few friends. Certainly, no one who he was close enough to warrant such an extreme reaction. This was like a gift you give a girl on your thirty-day anniversary. Not someone you work with. Did his work send two gifts? Seems unlikely. How the hell do you top ringside seats at a Knicks game? He put some shoes on and walked downstairs, which was difficult. He was so congested, he could hardly breathe. He sneezed so hard, he thought he broke something on the way down to the basement. He opened his storage locker door and scooped up the present. He painfully climbed back up the stairs to his apartment. If he didn't improve soon, he might actually go and see Dr. Feldman. He put the package on the table. He shook it a few times, gently. There was definitely something inside. It wasn't very heavy, but it had something inside of it. He made some soup and laid back down on his sofa. It was Sunday afternoon and that meant pre-season football. He just had to stay awake long enough. He laid down and closed his eyes.

He got up and walked over to the package. This was ridiculous. If he wanted to open the damn thing, he shouldn't have to wait until his birthday. He wasn't ten anymore. He tugged at the ribbon and it fell on the table. He ripped off the paper and gently removed the top of the box. The instant he took it off, they came out. The bugs. The strangest-looking insects he had ever seen. Just one or two at first, then a few more, then a few more until there were thousands of them, pouring out of the box, inundating his apartment. He tried desperately to put the lid back on the box. It was as if they were being shot out of a cannon. The lid just wouldn't go back on top. The gift was angry. It was like a girlfriend you just dumped. It was very, very angry. It was not supposed to be opened until midnight. It knew that. You knew it too and yet here you were, breaking rules you set for yourself. There were so many insects, they were covering everything in his apartment. It was as if he opened some kind of portal to another world that couldn't be shut off. They were biting him and stinging him. He looked over and could see one of the bugs, lift sugar off the ground and was carrying her in mid-air. He ran into his bedroom and slammed the door shut. His body was on fire from the bites and stings. They were massing outside his bedroom door. Millions of not billions of insects and bugs. Every insect that has ever existed on this planet was outside his bedroom door. He opened the fire escape and tried to climb down, but the insects were everywhere. He knew he had screwed up. The gift had given him a free pass once. It was time to own up. He walked over to his bedroom door and opened it. There was nothing there, except bugs. So many bugs, it blocked out the sunlight. In an instant, they all rushed him. In an instant, it was over.

He sat up and looked around. He ran over to the box and was relieved to see it was only a dream. The gift had sent him a warning.

Don't even think about it.

He knew he had to wait until midnight. Whatever this thing was, he knew not to make it mad. He knew it was calling the shots now and he better follow suit...or things were going to get mighty unpleasant.

He never left the apartment that day. He ordered some soup and a sandwich from the deli. He took more cold medicine. He watched two football games. He was waiting for midnight. It was the longest twelve hours of his life. The day ticked by hour by hour. Minute by minute. He stood in front of the gift for an hour wondering what was inside. It was like slow torture. Sugar still kept her distance from the gift. She might not know what was inside, but she could sense it and wanted no part of it. He reflected on the dreams he had and what they meant. What if there really were worlds next to ours few can see? What if he were meant to live in one of those worlds. What did they mean when they said we all create our own heaven and hell? Is the afterlife just an extension of this one? None of it made any sense. He was beginning to wonder if it were just the cold medication causing him to have such lucid dreams. He had never in his life experienced dreams like these. It was like he was communicating with beings from another world. A world that made ours look drab and boring. He was beginning to question almost everything and that bothered him. Up until this point in his life, it had been a very boring existence. A very predictable existence and now here he was, thrown completely off his game by a *freggin birthday gift? How does that happen?*

It was only ten-thirty and already he was getting nervous. He was hoping for some kind of clarity. He was hoping that when he opened the gift, its contents would make this whole crazy week make sense.

The last hour and forty minutes were the longest of his life. He was like a kid on Christmas Day, waiting for the sun to come up. *Waiting for the magic to happen.*

He waited until five minutes past midnight. He poured himself a drink and began slowly unwrapping. Carefully, not wanting to rush into it. He still had to be careful. He gently cut off the wrapping paper and folded it neatly on the table. It was time now. Time to take the top off. He lifted the top of the gift off and looked inside.

All he saw was a small block of wood with a note attached that read:

Congratulations!

This is a chain gift. Give it to

Someone who needs some cheering up,

Or someone who needs a new direction.

Give it to a friend, or an enemy.

Let them know you care.

David couldn't believe it. He sat down on the sofa. He felt like an idiot. He looked over at Sugar who still wanted nothing to do with the gift.

"Sugar, I just won the Nigerian Lottery."

He was just about to throw the gift away when it hit him. He knew someone who needed some cheering up. It was absurd, but he and his father would have a good laugh about it.

It took a while, but with the magic of the internet, he was able to find Andy Jackson's street address here in the city. He doubted Jackson would be home, but he figured it would be worth a shot. David just couldn't believe he had fallen for something this ridiculous. A chain gift.....he did not see that one coming.....not at all.

Jackson was young and like most young people, never really thought about security, or privacy when purchasing a home or condo. David found his street. It was in a trendy little neighborhood in Park Slope. Close to the fake dive bars and fancy restaurants for art students with giant trust funds. Jackson even had his name on the mailbox. This was just too easy. He rang the intercom button twice before someone answered.

"What?"

"I have a delivery for Mr. Jackson."

"Just leave it with the doorman."

"It has to be signed for. The instructions are very specific."

"Whatever, I'll be right down."

A few minutes later, Andy came downstairs. He was barely dressed. David had prepared some fake shipping papers and even wore a fake name badge. It was the name badge he wore for an IT conference last year. He doubted Jackson would even look twice. He was hoping he would not recognize him from the bar two nights ago. Jackson never even looked twice. Never said thank you, or anything. He just scribbled something on the papers and went back into his apartment building.

"Andy.....the only thing that teaches humility is helplessness."

He looked at David for a second, then went back into the building.

That was it. He figured Andy would just run upstairs and open it. David would be gone by the time that happened.

Within a few days, David was back to his normal routine. Work, sleep, work, sleep. Work, sleep, die. Sometimes a routine is deadlier than smoking. He was wasting his life away and he felt powerless to stop it. The gift had powers, magic powers. It had shown him there is more to life than just sitting in meetings and waiting for your next check to arrive. Incredible things were happening all around you, but most are simply too blind to see them. It was a lesson Andy would never forget.

Five years after that week, David Gann was married with a one-year-old child. He met his wife one night when they both caught a cab together. She was from Lithuania studying for her doctorate. David was floored when she scribbled her name and number on his arm. He was still at the same job but was now making double what he used to. His wife worked for a major bank and was pulling down almost 300,000 dollars a year, enough for them to have a nice apartment in Manhattan. His parents were still alive and kicking. His father had a heart attack a year ago and thankfully made a full recovery. His father was now a full-time grandpa.

Things were going well. He told his wife about that crazy week when he got a fake birthday present. He still had no idea who sent it or why. It was the closest thing he had to a religious experience.

"It was just crazy. The whole time, I'm thinking it's some kind of magical box with something incredible inside, turns out it was empty except for a note that said pass it on."

His wife couldn't believe he gave it to Andy Jackson. She couldn't believe he just drove over to his apartment and dropped it off.

David was so busy with work and life, he barely noticed that Andy Jackson went from being the hottest pitcher in baseball to being demoted to the farm team, to playing in Japan, to just disappearing off the face of the Earth. There were rumors of mental illness and drug use. No one

was sure what the hell happened to him. His own wife had not seen him in two months when she filed for divorce. He never even showed up at his own divorce hearing. Once in a while, a picture or video of him would surface. One last year, showed him eating food out of a dumpster. Clearly, the man had hit rock bottom. No one was really sure if it was drugs or just the pressure of being a superstar athlete, or if he suffered from some kind of schizophrenia. Whatever the reason, the man's stock was worthless at this point.

It was ironic that while on their way to a Yankees game with his father, they passed by a homeless man on the street. It was his father who did a double-take.

"Jesus, that's Andy Jackson." said his father as he stopped a few feet from the man.

"Come on dad."

"Poor kid, we should give him a few bucks."

"Dad, I doubt that's him."

"No, it's him alright. He looks like shit, but it's him."

David's father walked up to him and put his hand on Jackson's shoulder. Jackson jumped back and was nearly run over.

"Whoa, easy son. Here, take this, go get something to eat." said his father.

Jackson was barely recognizable to David and his father. This was not the young, brash, all-star athlete they had met in that pizza shop years ago. Life had beaten the shit out of this guy. What the hell happened to him?

He took the money and then stopped when he saw David.

"You!.....you're the one who gave it to me that night! It was you!" he said. Jackson swung violently at David who quickly moved away. Jackson was like a man possessed, he was chasing David down the street. His father was trying to catch up, but it was hopeless. David fell over and Jackson was on him instantly.

"WHAT THE HELL IS THE MATTER WITH YOU?" screamed David.

"YOU DID THIS TO ME! YOU AND THAT GIFT.....THAT HORRIBLE, HORRIBLE GIFT. IT TOOK EVERYTHING FROM ME!" said Jackson, backing off and sobbing.

"It was a joke man. It's a chain gift. You're supposed to just give it to somebody else, it was just a joke, there wasn't anything inside of it." said David bewildered.

"Yes, there was.....there sure was. I don't even know what it is. It's always there. I can't get rid of it. It follows me everywhere. That gift is evil man, pure evil. Why did you do this to me? What the hell did I ever do to you?" said Jackson as he sobbed.

"Just wait man, hold on a second," said David getting up.

Jackson turned and ran in front of a bus flying down the street. The driver never had a chance. It smacked into him and killed him instantly.

David was stunned. A woman screamed and the bus came to a screeching halt, resulting in another accident. David didn't even look back as he heard the tires screeching and the metal being ripped apart. He ran back over to Jackson's little makeshift homeless camp on the street.

Right in front of him was the gift. The same one he had given him five years ago. It looked brand new. *Just like when he had given it away.* It was now his again. It was the gift that just keeps on giving.....and giving.....and giving.