

The Gift of Magi

"That's when he shot him!" shouted Peter.

"But, I thought you said he was a pet!" I replied, shocked at Grans' statement. My chin quivered; I pictured a raven bleeding on the snow.

Just moments before, my brother and I demanded, "Tell us a story Grans."

I recall pleading to our great-grandmother, dozing in her favorite chair. Hearing the fervor in our voices, she stirred. One blue-gray eye popped open to inspect us. A crinkle of flesh at the far corners of the old woman's mouth, draped into many folds. Her face smiled and eyes sparkled. Mute, she motioned us to sit on the floor beside her.

"Yeah!" cheered Peter, as he plopped himself on the carpet.

"Thanks Grans," I whispered and crossed my legs beside my, then, six-year-old brother. I was eight.

We loved Grans, especially her tales, and anxiously awaited the forthcoming adventure.

Her story began on Kodiak Island, Alaska, early 1930's, involving a rancher, his wife and their two children. I would later learn, these stories were her childhood experiences. Grans inserted our names, Jenny and Peter, into her tales and we adored it.

"Aside from her family, Mama cherished her garden and chickens," Grans said. "This made it easy for Papa to get rid of invading vermin." Grans chuckled.

Vermin, meant ravens. I pictured Papa flaying his arms and shouting at those pesky birds. I giggled with Grans, I knew she enjoyed those "vermin".

Grans continued, "Winter had come with a light dusting of snow. Four, rowdy ravens hung around the cabin, squawking and carrying on, demanding morsels of food. It didn't take long for them to grate on Papa's nerves. One cold day in December, Jenny and Peter sat munching sandwiches as they watched Papa change shoes on Jake, one of their horses. Their dog, Tector, guarded escaping tidbits. Precariously, Papa held the Belgian's massive hoof between his knees. An advantage seen, one of the ravens swooped down and snatched-up Papa's sandwich on a stool in front of the big gelding. The unexpected assault was too much and he reared, levitating Papa several feet off the ground before he released the horse's foot. Papa landed on the frozen ground with a memorable *thump!* Barking, Tector chased after the fleeing bird. By the time Peter had caught up the frightened horse and Mama had come outside to see what the commotion was all about, Papa was on his hands and knees, gasping, his breath knocked out of him. "Get . . . my . . . gun," he wheezed as they helped him to his feet.

"Peter and Jenny's mouths gaped open. Papa had never shown such anger." Grans paused.

"That's when he shot him!" exclaimed Peter.

Grans gave her youngest great-grandson the look, *Don't interrupt!* She calmly replied, "Yes."

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Raven chatter filled the yard. The "thief", gloated on the roof of the barn, parading Papa's sandwich in its beak. The others rioted, wanting their share. The squabbling abruptly ended with an explosion of black feathers. The bandits scattered. Blue-gray smoke from Papa's shotgun left its tell-tale testimony of being discharged.

"Papa!" cried Jenny, "What have you done!" She ran to her brother.

Peter lay still on the ground beside the barn. Jake had bolted, tossing the boy, like a rag-doll, against the side of the barn.

"Peter!" screamed Mama, and ran to his side. Peter's eyes flittered open as she knelt to him.

"What happened?" he asked, groggily.

Papa shoved the shotgun into Jenny's hands and scooped up his son. "Should I call the doctor?" he queried his wife.

"Put him in our bed," ordered Mama, "Let's see how he does."

Jenny turned to follow when she heard frantic flapping behind her; a bleeding raven was attempting to escape. She lay the gun aside and cautiously approached the injured bird. Jenny was known to have a "gift". She sensed what animals were thinking. "Fly! fly!" she heard him scream. The screams waned and he lay still on the ground, panting. Steam rose from his nostrils.

Jenny loved all animals but respected those higher on the food-chain. This guy needs help, she thought and moved closer to inspect him. He was large for a raven, with a wide wingspan. She noticed a bloody wing, bent at an odd angle. Blood also matted the black, iridescent feathers on his breast. "I need to wrap you in something," she explained to the bird. Papa's hand-towel hung on a peg just inside the barn, this she used to carefully gather him in. "You're so light," she remarked. "I thought you'd be heavier." With great care, Jenny walked into the barn and lay him gently on the straw. "I'll be right back," she told him, and ran into the cabin. "I'd like to help him," she informed her mother. "Peter's good at nursing," she added. Then, she asked, "How is he?"

"Can we keep him?" asked Peter, in a shaky voice. He had propped himself on an elbow.

"Lay still for now," Mama replied. She turned to her daughter, "He should be fine. A bump on the back of head. Papa can call the doctor from the Ramey's, if need be." Jenny still waited for Mama to answer her first question. "If it's still alive in the morning, we'll tend it." she finally replied and placed a cool compress against Peter's growing lump.

Early the next morning, Jenny went to barn to check on the injured bird. She ran back to the cabin. "Mama, he's still alive!" she reported.

"Keep him warm and offer him some water," directed Mama. "The next few days will tell if he'll survive," she decreed.

Peter recovered quickly. That morning found him gingerly tossing a stick to Tector. After breakfast, the children set off to the barn to examine their new charge.

"He looks bad," declared Peter. "Look at that wing, we need to fix that."

With Mama's help, they splinted and bandaged the bird's wing. All three received bites in the process. Over the next few days, the bird responded to the children's care. "He may not be able to fly again," stated Mama, "But, he'll be alright."

Christmas came a week later and the bird's condition improved. "He's better, alright," claimed Peter, proudly showing his hands where he'd received more pecks and bites.

On Christmas Eve, Papa read aloud the story of the Christ child and how three wise men traveled great distances to pay homage to the infant Jesus. "These men were called Magi," he read.

"Magi!" Peter suddenly jumped up and shouted, "That's what we'll call him, Magi!"

"Call who?" Papa asked, stunned.

"The raven!"

Magi, became a pet. Yet, Jenny knew he would remain a wild animal. Because he couldn't fly, he adapted to hopping and could flap his wings enough to get out of Papa's or Mama's way, which was constantly. It was when he and Keeper, the cat, began to scrap, knocking the coffee pot off the cook-stove, almost destroying Mama's sewing project, that Papa decided to intervene.

Having acknowledged his daughter's gift of understanding animals, Papa gave Jenny an old leather glove with which to train Magi to perch on her hand. With a little patience, treats and Jenny's coaxing, he came to trust her. Papa would shake his head as he watched the children teach their "pet".

When the children were at their studies, Jenny tethered Magi to a perch she had made, near the cook-stove. He sat preening his feathers. When he'd finished, he'd squawk. Mama had Jenny take him outside. This routine persisted through the winter months.

One day in early spring, Mama and Papa had business in the town of Kodiak. Papa had given the children their instructions the night before; they'd be gone all day and be back late. In those days, it was not uncommon for children to be left at home to do chores. Jenny, almost eleven and Peter, nine, were of responsible ages. Both children replied, "Yes sir." With sufficient hugs and kisses, the children waved to their parents as Papa drove the horses onto the road.

"Come on!" shouted Peter, and tugged on Jenny sleeve. "I'm the man of the house now! We have chores to do."

"Okay, Man-Of-The-House," she taunted, "Let's see who can finish their chores first!" Both children raced off to their tasks.

Jenny bustled about. Magi watched from the cabin's roof, squawking, gurgling and chortling, cheering her on. Peter sped to stay up with her.

Just before noon, she went inside to make lunch. Tector started barking.

"Jen! C'mer! Quick!" called Peter.

She ran to the cabin door. "What is it Pe. . ." she began to ask.

"Shh! Listen!" he hissed. Peter had Tector in a headlock, with both hands around his muzzle to quiet him.

Jenny heard a grunting-growl, echo through the nearby woods. Magi gave a series of warning squawks and Tector struggled to free himself from Peter's grasp. Her mind raced, could it be Old Bear? A local name for a marauding old grizzly. "Pete, get inside! Now!" she ordered.

Peter released the dog and jumped onto the porch. Both children raced into the cabin and barred the door.

"It's out there - a bear!" gasped Peter, "Tector too!" He stared his sister, and gulped. Tector yipped and growled, threatening the intruder.

"Hurry, close the shutters!" Jenny shouted.

Peter ran to the window, aware of a huge, grayish-blond bulk ambling towards them. The old bear ignored the yapping dog but looked up, hearing the shutters slam shut. The bear advanced. *Huff, huff!* the bear chanted.

"That doesn't sound good," said Peter, with trembling voice.

Jenny shook her head and put a vertical finger to her lips.

The children continued to listen to Tector's clamor whilst the bear puffed. The bruin's breath seemed to penetrate the logs of the cabin. Frantically, Jenny looked around the room for a

weapon. Papa had taken the rifle with him, his shotgun hung in the barn and the axe stood out at the wood pile; nothing but kitchen knives remained. The family's bear attack contingency depended upon Papa and Mama being there.

Porch boards groaned in protest as they took the weight of the animal. The big bear sniffed.

"Food! He's looking for food!" gasped Jenny.

Mama baked a pie for the children's lunch, the aroma of cinnamon and apples lingered inside. Jenny thought hiding the food might disillusion him. She rushed to conceal what she could.

Boards continued to creak as the animal paced, searching to gain entry. Jenny and Peter held their breaths, listening. Suddenly, the wooden door shattered. It and a big grizzly crashed to the floor in front of Peter.

"To the loft!" Jenny screamed.

Peter leaped over the stunned animal and landed half-way up the ladder. Jenny scrambled up behind him. Once in the loft, they threw themselves against the far wall.

Jenny began to pray, "God, please bring Mama and Papa home."

"Now!" Peter added.

The bear quickly located the pantry and its treasures. Food items either went into the bear or strewn across the floor. Plates broke, pans bashed and clanged, shelves loaded with canned-goods crashed, all the while, the children huddled together, helplessly.

Unexpectedly, an eerie hush settled. Jenny wondered, where's Tector? His bark, absent, Jenny was worried.

*Caw! Caw!* Magi's agitated cackle broke the stillness, startling the children. Jenny carefully peered over the ledge and almost bumped noses with a food-smearred muzzle. Black, beady eyes stared at her. Too terrified to hear the animal's thoughts, Jenny got the impression he was looking for more menu items. The bear's flour-pie-jam-stained claws lay inches from the girl's head. He attempted to place a hind foot on the bottom rung of the ladder. *Snap!* went the wood. The big beast slipped and snarled.

*Caw! Caw!* screamed Magi. He stood in the gaping hole what was the front door. With a bound and a flutter, Jenny saw a mass of ebon feathers, claws and beak, spring onto the bear's massive head. Squawks and caws, growls and roars ensued. The furious bird was relentless in its attack. Blood dripped over the bear's caked muzzle where Magi's bill pecked out pieces of hide. The bear, finally, having enough, shook his head to rid the crazed bird and ambled out onto porch. Magi, in pursuit.

The children heard distant barking and then, *Bang!* "Don't shoot the bird!" It was Mama's voice. They're back, Jenny realized, relieved.

Another shot, *Bang!* This time the big animal flinched and roared. It ran into the woods, snarling and growling. Tector barked, following a short distance.

"Jenny! Peter! Where are you?" Mama's frantic voice called.

"We're here, Mama!"

Mama rushed in as the children scrambled down the ladder, eagerly embracing each one. "Thank the Lord, you're alright!" she exclaimed.

"Why did you and Papa come back?" asked Peter, as he wriggled free from Mama's arms.

"We met Mark Ramsey on the road. He told us about a grizzly in the area. I had a notion and we turned right around."

Papa entered the cabin. Stepping over the shattered door, he sighed and looked upon his children. Peter ran to him, his arms lassoing his father around his middle. He returned the boy's hug and surveyed the room. "What a mess," was all he said.

"Papa, Mama! Magi saved us!" announced Jenny. "He attacked the bear!"

Papa searched for the raven. Magi, perched on the woodpile, squawked at Papa's gaze and wiped his beak.

Always the skeptic, Papa countered, "Well, I don't know, maybe. I tried to scare the bear off with my first shot. I didn't want to - hit the bird," he said and looked at Mama. "But I'm afraid I've caused more trouble for us by wounding him with my second. I'll have to go after him and put him down." They all knew an injured wild animal was dangerous, especially a grizzly. "Before I go, let's take stock and get this place in order. That door needs to be repaired, too."

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At that point in Grans' story, my mother and father walked through the front door loaded with groceries. "Hi guys!" Mother called, adding, "Looks like everything's under control. Grans, we brought pizza. I'll set it out. Kids, you go wash up. Dinner's about ready," and disappeared into the kitchen.

"What's Grans' story this time?" inquired my father.

"Daddy, Daddy!" shouted my brother. "Papa wounded the bear and has to go kill it!"

"Well, it looks like Papa will have to kill it after dinner, young man. Please, go wash your hands."

Grans sighed and slowly rose from her chair. "Come on youngsters, let's get pizza in us so we'll have energy to help Papa search for Old Bear," Grans commanded.

We dashed to the bathroom, washed, and raced to the table. At the time I wondered, do bear's liked pizza?