

# The Joy of Giving

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The sky was as blue as her hair. Not now though. The hair's still blue, but the sky has those white puffy scudding clouds that scoot in a high wind across the sun, leaving passing shadows on the ground below. As it does now as she stoops to pick a penny from the ground. She straightens up, looks round, sees him, comes up and holds it out.

'Your Grace,' she says bowing, with deep reverence. 'The Archbishop of Canterbury.'

He's not anyone's grace, but she's seen the dog collar and the cassock and drawn her own conclusions. This is Canterbury after all. The High Street is buzzing, a typical summer Saturday, rammed with tourists, fifty different languages, strolling up and down on the aged and not so aged cobbles, licking their ice creams, queuing for coffees and sit-down meals, idling to watch buskers or peruse market stalls. People from everywhere, every age and season, looking to see whatever there is. She wants him to take the penny.

'I think your need is greater than mine,' he says gently, trying to give it back.

'I have no needs,' she tells him. 'I have everything. Give it to a fund, or someone else who needs it. Waste not, want not.' She looks round at the crowd flowing past them, each dancing to the lonely rhythm of their lives, separate and so unique they are all the same, despite their desperation to be different. She is like a tropical island in the middle of a drab dull river, with her frayed purple bedroom slippers, her long paisley skirt and her loose shocking pink blouse, her blue, piled up hair, her jangling bracelets. 'It's not the penny that matters,' she says. 'It's not who receives it. It's the act of giving it that counts.'

He murmurs that she is too kind, unnecessarily so, but he is touched and accepts the penny, bowing back.

'I am a sinner,' she says. 'Deeply flawed.'

Her clothes are somewhat eccentric, but obviously her heart is in the right place. He asks if she would like to pray with him. She nods, and as they walk together to the Cathedral's main entrance, she recounts the difficulties she has experienced today.

It's not, apparently, a good idea to pick the flowers in Dane John Gardens.

'When I asked the policemen why I couldn't pick them, he said that the flowers belong to everyone and must therefore be enjoyed by everyone.' She still has some of the contraband in her hand, stopping every few paces to make an offering to a passer-by. Some accept with a harassed smile; others turn their shoulder in dismay. 'I asked him, who says you can't pick them?' she continues. She presses his arm confidentially, lowers her voice. 'I don't think he knew. He said, maybe the council?'

‘It’s probably the council,’ he agrees. Everyone blames the council, after all. ‘What happened then?’ he asks.

‘Well, I gave him a red rose, young, fragrant, without a thorn. Flowers must be enjoyed by everyone, I reminded him. Even you.’

‘And he took the flower?’ he asks her. ‘The young policeman?’

‘He didn’t know how not to. Flowers bring joy. I gave him joy. What more can you give to anyone?’

At the main entrance to the Cathedral, he’s recognised and waved past the queue, the Japanese tourists, the sweaty day out parents with their hot bouncing kids.

He conducts her into the cool, cavernous interior with its sedate pillars and golden-grey stone. The choir is rehearsing, the trebles of young boys blending with tenors and bass in indescribable beauty, filling the corners, touching the edges of the soul with timeless emotion. Despite the hum of ignorant visitors who don’t know or can’t be bothered to understand the deep holiness of this place, the space exudes calm and serenity. He leads her to a chapel marked *Private*, just off the nave, and together they kneel before the altar, knees sinking into hassocks perfectly embroidered by the devoted. He looks at her, she looks at him, they both smile. He folds his hands, bows his head, she does the same, he closes his eyes and begins to pray.

He prays for her kindness, for her gifts and her desire to give, for her welfare, both spiritual and material, for God’s deep understanding and lovingkindness, and for His benevolence to be bestowed upon her in her innocence. For as much as fifteen minutes he remains there, communing with the Almighty, receiving that sense of deep completeness that so rarely blesses his prayer, except when he is truly concerned with the welfare of the world or one person in particular.

Coming back into himself, repeating the blessings, the benedictions, he senses absolute stillness from his companion, the deepness of involvement, the peace that abideth above all other.

He lowers his hands, raises his head, opens his eyes in heartfelt gratitude. Looks to his companion. She’s not there.

He hoists himself carefully to his feet, leaning on the altar rail for support. The knees protest from years of overuse.

He bows to the altar and backs off, heading for the nave. He must find her. Make certain she is all right. The Cathedral in all its magnificence, can be overwhelming at times.

As the cathedral sounds filter back into his consciousness, he realises the choir has faltered to a halt, there is a discordant vibration in the motionless air. A fluffy purple slipper has been laid neatly at the feet of the stone effigy of a long dead bishop in his tomb. The second has been left in supplication to a saint. There is a crowd, not of the touristic variety, but of the voyeuristic, gathering, shifting, around the steps up to the choir. Craning necks and pushing, murmuring.

As he draws nearer, he sees the paisley skirt draped over a rail. He can hear sniggering among the gathering tourists.

Her blouse is lying like a corpse across the wide stone steps. Her bra adorns a pinnacle of the choir screen. Worst of all, her underpants, slightly grubby, are hanging from the microphone on the pulpit.

She is dancing, dappled with sunlight from the stained-glass windows, the colours moving with the motion of her sinuous body. His curate is approaching with a hastily grabbed vestment to cover her. She glides away from him with a sly smile, arms waving, hips swinging, thin breasts pendulous. Pounding feet echo down the central aisle as security arrive. One places his heavy jacket around her shoulders.

‘Giving is everything,’ she says to the crowd that is already drifting away, embarrassed now that the show is over. She leans in and says something to the curate as the guards hustle her off, gathering her discarded clothes as they pass, heading through a door and out of sight. They will allow her the chance to dress in private, offer her tea and biscuits and then discreetly remove her from the premises. Before the door closes on her she looks back and gives him a smile of unattainable loveliness, an offer of everything.

The curate’s face is red, puzzled, shocked. He has never seen anything like this.

‘What did she say to you?’ he asks the boy. ‘What did she say?’

‘She said,’ the curate murmurs, his eyes still looking at the closed door, the vestment still held up between his hands as if to cover her, ‘she said she wanted me to know, the most important thing of all, that her name is Faith.’