

The Gift
by
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The box had materialized on the living room coffee table. Max had been exterminating zombies for several hours when he was plunged into darkness. The screen faded; the lights perished. The boy felt a surge of annoyance and groped for his phone. As if expressing solidarity for its compatriots-in-electricity, the cell refused to awaken; Max had a problem remembering to charge it. The clouds outside strangled the moonlight in its attempts to struggle through the veil and find the earth, rendering the living room a cave. Max sat in obscurity, weighing his options, wondering what to do.

A decade into life, solitude held no abhorrence for Max, being the child of a workaholic parent and possessed of no siblings, but he did not savor the thought of solitude without the company of his friend and companion – technology. He found his feet and navigated to the kitchen, his goal a candle and some matches, which he discovered in a drawer. Max returned to the couch and, having made preparations against causing a conflagration by arranging space around the candle, he stuck the match along the matchbox. Phosphorus blazed, light flared, and he wed the flame to the candle's wick. Shadows sprang to paint the walls, undulating and writhing at the command of the luminescence, turning the living room into a phantasmagoria. That was when he saw it.

The box glowed on the tabletop in the candlelight. A leaf of card stock leaned against the box's front; it read, "To Max – From Pandora... with love." A flood of emotions and thoughts cascaded through the boy's head. Max's brain switched to scanning through scenario after scenario. Was this a joke? Is there danger here? Had someone broken in? Had a STRANGER broken in? Max continued to breathe despite his heart thrashing against his ribcage, adrenaline racing through his veins. To his knowledge, STRANGERS who hurt children did not break in and leave gifts for their victims. This had to be a joke. Why else would the box have his name on it? Max pondered. He didn't

know who Pandora was and because there was no electricity and his phone was a brick, he couldn't Google it. It was not his birthday, so there was no occasion for this parcel. His eyes scrutinized the mystery before him.

Making up his mind, he seized his present. As his fingers grazed the lid, pain pricked at his skin and he jerked his hand to safety. The temperature of the box was like that of ice. Max reevaluated his decision. Gritting his teeth, he hefted the cover off the container and tossed it into the corner of the living room; his fingertips tingled and burned. Max lifted the candle to peer within and as his gaze fell upon the contents, he laughed. There was a box inside the box. This both delighted and annoyed him, but he set to work, freeing his query from its confines. He was unable to do so without brushing his hands along the interior of the packaging and pain flashed through his limbs, but he did not drop his prize. He set it on the table next to the candle and, out of frustration and necessity, needing to make room, he removed his shoe and batted his antagonist across the room. He replaced his shoe and turned his attention to the object before him. He knew what it was, but he had not had the occasion to see one with his own eyes. Upon the table before the boy sat a Jack-in-the-Box.

Designs from yesteryear danced across its exterior, whorls and chevrons pirouetting upon the façades, the shadows cast by the candlelight lending locomotion to their aspect. A metal crank sprouted from the box's flank. However, what caught Max's eye and piqued his inquisitiveness were the chains that encircled the coffer. Coffers... the word sprang to his mind from nowhere; he was not familiar with it, but that is what it was – a coffer. Max chuckled; that word sounded like coffin.

The chains met at the coffer's apex, above the door (whence would spring Jack himself he supposed) and were joined by means of a lock, its stature matching the proportions of the chains and crank. In the lock reposed a key, inviting Max's wonder. As he shifted his weight upon the couch, his eyes espied a tag hanging from the chains. It read, "DO NOT OPEN!" Max's brain seized like an engine without oil; why provide the key to a lock that is not meant to be opened? Curiosity polluted his synapses, seducing him down the path, but where did that path lead? Max extended his hand, mesmerized.

In that moment, the coffer jumped.

It lurched a half-inch to the left, the chains rattling, their racket rebounding throughout the living room, speaking a warning. Something was off. Before he could reflect on the risks and rewards of his situation, Max's hand, as if of its own accord, hastened to the lock and turned the key...

Nothing happened.

Max realized he had been holding his breath so he exhaled and deflated with a sense of anticlimax.

CRASH!

The coffer jumped.

CRASH! CRASH!

In the dim, Max watched his present slam itself into the tabletop, each impact loosening the chains until they pulled against the mechanism of the lock and opened it. Max observed this tarantella of violence, unease courting his heart. Had he made a mistake?

CRASH!

The chains fell to the floor in a heap. The room lapsed into silence, the candle's flame daring to defy the stillness that permeated the air. Max's eyes caught motion, to his consternation, as the crank, with the deliberateness of a dirge, started to turn. The strains of Saint-Saëns' *Danse Macabre* tinkled from the depths of the coffer. Presented with this happening, Max's tongue desiccated. What was he witnessing? He did not know the song, but he could feel the sense of anticipation building, like waiting for a thunderclap or sitting in the doctor's office after a checkup and knowing that a shot was coming and resigning oneself to Fate. The music crescendoed and just as Max decided it had been an error of judgement to turn the key, the music ceased and the lid of the coffer opened.

Max's heart stopped.

Yet still nothing happened.

Max exhaled, relief filling him; he had no desire to see what was within.

He sat, counting his breaths, feeling like a baby and was just beginning to chastise himself for this weakness when the candle sputtered... and died.

The room plunged into darkness. Fear, the consort of Panic and Madness, leapt into Max's chest. Dread invaded his bloodstream and with each pump of his heart, which was railing against its confines, it sent Terror to his nerves as Paralysis enfolded Max in its embrace.

CRASH!

Max's heart slammed into his throat. He knew that sound: the coffer had crashed over the edge and fallen from the table. A cry of fright and surprise escaped his lungs, but before he could regain his breath, he heard what he could only describe as the pitter-patter of feet upon the carpet. Max owned no pets, yet there was scurrying in the darkness, skittering in the black, moving around the room. Pain lanced his wrist and drenched his right hand, stinging his fingers, his palm, his knuckles. What had happened? Outside, a storm broke and thunder shook the house, the sky opening and sheets of rain came pouring from the clouds. Max didn't notice. The pain morphed into agony and a chill overtook his hand as he heard tearing, as of a piece of paper that had been doused with water being ripped. Max screamed. His mind clicked and the pain lessened as urgency bloomed in Max's consciousness – he had to get the candle lit!

He fumbled for the matches on the table in front of him and found them, but alas, his right hand won the scavenger hunt. As he grasped the box his hand plunged into magma and he dropped the matches on the floor. His left hand descended to do the job the right hand couldn't, though it trembled. He managed to locate a match and, with Fear driving him like an animal to slaughter, he situated the matchbox between his feet and ran it along the striking pad. The matchhead flared and he lit the candle on the table, his spirits rising with the flame as light engulfed him, inviting safety.

Max took several breaths, relief welling inside him, his suffering evaporating as he came back to himself. He felt his hand itch, but with his vision restored, his eyes focused on the coffer, which lay on the floor. Max bent to take in the details before him and what he saw chilled his blood. The door in the coffer's lid gaped, a trail of straw and fluff led from its recesses. A piece of fabric of the sort one might see on a clown or harlequin lay amidst the straw, a small silver bell sewn to it; the seam had been gnawed. There were

footprints that led across the floor, around the sofa, and into the darkness. Max inhaled and smelled the odor which pervaded the room: copper. Max's stomach hurt. He made a face at the smell and began to push himself up onto the couch, bracing his hands on the coffee table. However, as his right hand contacted the table, pain tore through it. Max shrieked and fell to the floor, shaking. He turned his gaze to his right hand and there in the candlelight, he saw the source of his pain.

His right hand had no skin, no flesh covered it.

Max couldn't believe his eyes. His muscles twitched, the tendons and ligaments rippled as he moved his fingers, bones peeking from the tangles of muscle fiber and pain held court there. Max saw that his fingernails endured and he considered this. Understanding crashed over him; the scent of copper was blood, his blood. The cushions, the table, his clothes swam in it... he was staining everything and every heartbeat pumped more to the surface so that his hand oozed and dripped. Max didn't want to think about how his mother might punish him for making such a mess! In the shadows on the carpet at his feet, a sheath of skin sitting in a pool of blood mocked him: that was his skin, his flesh.

Max's shaking intensified and he began to hyperventilate, but he managed to force himself to continue to examine his hand. Around his wrist, at the spot where his skin had been peeled off was a pattern of marks that could only be from teeth. Lucidity dropped over the boy: he needed help! No phone, no power, no adults... He had seen a show about survival out in nature and he knew he must stop the bleeding, then he could find aid, perhaps at a neighbor's house. Max struggled and managed to remove his shirt. He screamed as he wrapped the ruin that used to be his hand in the shirt, applying pressure. Tears flooded his eyes, blurring his vision. Max concentrated on breathing, allowing his eyelids to shut and focus on cultivating calm. He knew that panic killed; he had watched enough documentaries to know that. Then a sound reached his ears which gave him the chills... pitter-patter-pitter-patter... then respiration that was not his own. He opened his eyes, only to see halos, tears obscuring his sight. He blinked to clear his vision and there on the coffee table before him coalesced a

silhouette – Jack himself, Max presumed. The figure inflated as it drew a breath and then, with a sound akin to a death rattle, it exhaled and the candle was extinguished. Max heard music and then nothing else.