

THE GIFT
By Dr. L. Jan Eira

An excerpt

SCENE 1

Harriett's home.

ELEANOR is sitting on the couch doing homework.
HARRIETT enters.

HARRIETT

Oh good, you've started on your home-fun.

ELEANOR

(Rolling up her eyes) It's homework, Mom. What did the doctor say? Bronchitis again?

HARRIETT

No, things are getting more interesting in my life. Who wants to have plain old bronchitis when they can catch walking pneumonia.

ELEANOR

I didn't know pneumonia could walk. Can it roller skate?

HARRIETT

Very funny.

ELEANOR

Let me guess, he gave you a prescription for penicillin.

HARRIETT

(Showing a prescription bottle) No, he wants me to try this new antibiotic. I tried to talk him into giving me a prescription for penicillin, too, just in case the new antibiotic proves to be near fatal. But he wouldn't.

ELEANOR

Whatever you take, let's hope it works fast. You're not pleasant when you're sick, Mom.

HARRIETT

(Reading from a paper) This new prescription has a whole bunch of possible side effects. Knowing me, I'll get them all.

ELEANOR comes to HARRIETT and takes the list of side effects from her then reads it.

ELEANOR

Nausea, vomiting ... rash ... headaches ...

HARRIETT

(Looks at the paper and points) I'm more worried about these.

ELEANOR

Hallucinations, confusion, vivid dreams ... But Mom, these occur in less than 0.1%. You have a better chance of getting bitten by a shark.

HARRIETT

That's what worries me. I was almost bitten by a shark last year, remember?

ELEANOR

That was a dolphin and it was swimming a mile away.

HARRIETT

All of a sudden you're an expert on sharks and dolphins, huh?

ELEANOR

OMG, Mom, don't get on 'Are you smarter than a fifth grader!' I would be so embarrassed.

ELEANOR holds her head in pain. HARRIETT is looking at her new prescription bottle and doesn't notice.

HARRIETT

So, which antibiotic should I take? Should I go back and insist on well-established, reliable, good-old penicillin or take this never-before tried, new drug that can result in me getting bitten by a dolphin?

ELEANOR

(Recuperating) Look, you paid good money to see your doctor to get his opinion. You should follow his advice. Take the new antibiotic and quit worrying about it.

HARRIETT

You're no help!

ELEANOR

I'm no help or my opinion doesn't matter?

HARRIETT

Oh, Honey, your opinion does matter. And you're right, I should take the new antibiotic.

ELEANOR

(Holds her head again in pain and shakes it. She becomes dazed and confused for a moment. She looks around as if disoriented. With a serious tone:) Mom, I've been noticing some things in my head recently. New things and I don't know what they mean.

HARRIETT

Honey, at your age there are a lot of new things happening. It's normal.

ELEANOR

No, Mom, this is different.

HARRIETT

What do you mean?

ELEANOR

I don't know. I can't explain it.

HARRIETT

I'm sure it's hormones or a growth spurt or something like that. *(Looking at her prescription bottle; over-dramatizing:)* Now, will I get god-awful side effects from the new antibiotic? Or will I survive to tell about it?

ELEANOR

There's something going on ... weird things ... in here *(pointing at her head)*.

HARRIETT

(With a smile) All along I thought you were mental. Now you're confirming it!

ELEANOR

Mental ... yeah! You're right. But what does it mean?

HARRIETT

It means you got the hypochondria gene from your mother. Well, time to be brave. Let's see what the future holds. Better living through chemistry!

HARRIETT removes a pill from the prescription bottle and places it in her mouth. ELEANOR holds her head in pain again. Mystic sound to indicate the beginning of a vision. Then lights out and quiet.

SCENE 2

Harriett's home.

HARRIETT and ELEANOR sit on the couch. ELEANOR looks sickly and holds SNUGS. Each writes on a piece of paper. Once done, the two exchange papers and read what the other one wrote. Both look at one another and nod. HARRIETT places the papers in separate envelopes then places them on the table. HARRIETT gives ELEANOR a kiss and a long hug. Then she gives her a pill. HARRIETT takes a pill, too. HARRIETT sits on the couch and ELEANOR lies down with her head on HARRIETT's lap. After a few beats, ELEANOR gets up and picks up the teddy bear, SNUGS. She kisses and hugs SNUGS then looks deeply into its eyes. After another beat, HARRIETT gets up.

HARRIETT

This new antibiotic really throws me for a loop. *(Reading from a typed paper)* I told you I'd get all of these: Drowsiness. Sedation... Yup, I'm having these. Next, I'll get hallucinations, confusion and vivid dreams. *(Looking back at Eleanor)* I think I'm better off with pneumonia than ... this treatment. I want my penicillin back. How are you feeling? How are your headaches? I'm sorry if I gave you my bug. I hate to see you sick.

ELEANOR

I'm OK. *(Points at the teddy bear)* Dr. Snugs here was able to fix me up. Maybe he can help you, too.

HARRIETT

That would be nice since Dr. Bozo I've been seeing sure isn't helping much. He helps one problem but creates another.

ELEANOR

(Speaks to HARRIETT as SNUGS) You'll be OK. But you need lots of rest and take all your medicines.

HARRIETT

Why, thank you, Dr. SNUGS.

ELEANOR

(Imitating SNUGS' voice again) You're welcome.

HARRIETT

(HARRIETT looks at her watch.) Eleanor, I have an appointment in a couple of hours. I'll rest a bit longer then I have to get ready.

HARRIETT gets on the recliner and tries to fall asleep. ELEANOR holds SNUGS' hands and looks deeply into its eyes.

ELEANOR

Mom, when I get older, will I be special, like you?

HARRIETT

What part about 'I need to rest' didn't you understand?

ELEANOR

People say you have a special talent.

HARRIETT

This so-called special talent brings on many responsibilities! And can create terrifying sadness.

ELEANOR

And happiness too, right? I mean the gift helps sometimes, doesn't it?

HARRIETT

I suppose ... yes, at times.

ELEANOR

I want that same special gift! I want to see the past and the future. I want to—

HARRIETT

We can't control when we first get it, or even *if* we get it at all.

ELEANOR

Will you tell me the story of how you got your special gift? Please?

HARRIETT

Again? How many times do you want to hear the story?

ELEANOR

Tell it to me just one more time, please!

HARRIETT

Eleanor, I need to rest before my meeting. You need to go do your home-fun.

ELEANOR

It's homework, not home-fun, Mom. Besides, if I could see the future, my homework would be a lot more fun!

HARRIETT

That would be an unfair advantage. Now go do your home-fun while I take a nap.

ELEANOR

First tell me the story about Clara and her son. Please! Just one more time.

HARRIETT

OK, I'll tell you the story again. But then you have to let me rest. Deal?

ELEANOR

Deal!

HARRIETT

It all started the day Clara walked into our home. She entered through that door with a lot of questions...

HARRIETT points at the entry door. CLARA enters, walks slowly and sits down. Lights on her are dim. HARRIETT gets up and continues to talk to ELEANOR though at times she engages directly with CLARA, too.

HARRIETT (continued)

I remember every detail as if she walked in just a moment ago.

CLARA

I need your help. I need to understand the past and I need to know the future.

HARRIETT

'You need *my* help?' I asked. I was intrigued ... confused.

CLARA

I have many questions... Please, Harriett, relieve me of this ... torment.

ELEANOR

Torment?

HARRIETT

There was something awful bothering Clara. But she looked healthy, well fed and dressed. I thought to myself: What could you possibly know of torments? At first I thought she may be a bit off her rocker.

ELEANOR

What do you mean? Off her rocker?

HARRIETT

I wondered if she was a bit crazy. But I would soon find out, Clara was sane, not crazy at all. I was the one who wasn't quite all there. I asked her: 'What kind of torment?'

CLARA

I need to understand what happened...in the past. And I must know what the future holds.

HARRIETT

I saw the agony...the pain in her eyes. That much was obvious. I said: 'Whatever torments you, you must find someone you trust. But, I'm a stranger to you. I'm not the one to help you!' She took a deep calming breath.

CLARA

(Takes a long deep breath) You're wrong! No one else can help me but you, Harriett!

HARRIETT

Her words went around and around in my brain for a while: 'No one else can help me but you!' Clara closed her eyes for a long moment as if she was praying ... or meditating. Then she looked back up at me.

CLARA

Or maybe, even you are incapable of helping me understand this.

HARRIETT

She shook her head. 'No!' she repeated emphatically!

CLARA

No! You *can* help me! I have faith in you.

HARRIETT

Faith in me? Hope that I would be able to give her the right answers. I wish I had that same faith in my abilities. But I didn't.

ELEANOR

Why not, Mom?

HARRIETT

What could I do? I was just a regular person. I struggled with anguish, confusion and despair, like everyone these days.

ELEANOR

But you agreed to help her, right?

HARRIETT

I didn't think I was strong enough, wise enough, clever enough to help this woman. I said to her: 'I'm sorry but I can't help you.'

CLARA

But you must, Harriett!

HARRIETT

And that's when she told me:

CLARA

You have a special gift.

HARRIETT

‘A special gift? Me?’

CLARA

You have certain abilities others don’t have.

HARRIETT

‘No, I’m not special in any way,’ I told her. ‘I have no *special* abilities!’

CLARA

Can you not see beyond the here and now? Do you not sense other people’s pain in a most intense way?

HARRIETT

‘No, you must have the wrong house, Miss,’ I said. ‘I’m not the one you’re looking for...’ She walked to me and stood right in front of me. ‘Hold my hands!’ she pleaded.

CLARA

And look deeply into my eyes.

HARRIETT comes to ELEANOR and holds her hands.

HARRIETT

Nervously, reluctantly, I obeyed. I gripped her hands ... tight. I gazed into her eyes.

CLARA

I know things about you, things you don’t yet comprehend.

HARRIETT suddenly lets go of ELEANOR’s hands.

HARRIETT

Suddenly, I let go of her hands. Her touch brought me a jolt of agonizing sorrow. A reality I wasn’t ready to accept. I told her: ‘I can’t help you! You must find someone else ... a friend ... a family member.’

CLARA

Like you, Harriett, I have no friends or family to turn to. No one but you.

HARRIETT

‘What do you know about me and my family?’ I asked her. ‘I have a daughter and she’s all the family I need.’ She looked at me with sorrowful eyes...

CLARA

Harriett, do you know where your daughter is now?

HARRIETT

I called for you: Eleanor. Ellie! But then I realized you were gone. That made me very sad.

ELEANOR

Will Clara be back? I'd like to meet her.

HARRIETT

Probably, yes. And when she does, I'll make sure you two meet.

ELEANOR

Get to the part about her son!

HARRIETT

I'm getting to that. But first, Clara told me something I had never shared with anyone. Not even you, Eleanor.

CLARA

You were told that your mother killed your older sister!

HARRIETT

'Yes!' I said. 'My sister had brain cancer and was suffering more and more each day... The doctors couldn't help her.'

ELEANOR

Your mother took her own daughter's life? That's insane!

HARRIETT

You shouldn't judge until you walk in somebody's shoes. Can you imagine loving someone so deeply and seeing her suffer from a medical condition that can't be cured? Life becomes a constant nightmare ... nothing but a horrific nightmare.

ELEANOR

I guess...

HARRIETT

Clara told me what had happened:

CLARA

Your mother wrote a suicide note and asked her child to write one, too. Then, both of them took an overdose of morphine to end their agony.

ELEANOR

You lost your mother when you were young?

HARRIETT

Yes, about your age.

ELEANOR

I can't imagine what it would be like if you died, Mom!

HARRIETT

I did lose my mother, but she didn't die. The doctors were able to save her. But by living, my mother's agony got worse ... much, much worse.

ELEANOR

What happened to her?

HARRIETT

She was placed in a psychiatric hospital and I never saw her again. I was told she tried to kill herself every day. Until, finally ... she succeeded.

ELEANOR

How awful! And sad!

HARRIETT

I sat there ... dumbfounded ... trying to recall the painful memories. Then Clara said to me:

CLARA

There's more, Harriett. After the suicide pack, you were placed in a foster home.

HARRIETT

That one day, I lost all the family I had – my mother and my sister.

CLARA

Your sister didn't die from that overdose, as you were told. She was in a coma for a long time but then she woke up and, even more miraculously, eventually survived her brain cancer and was placed in foster care, just like you.

HARRIETT

(Speaking to CLARA) How do you know all this about me and my family?

CLARA

Because, that sister is me!

HARRIETT

(Speaking to ELEANOR) When I heard these words, I began to cry ... tears of joy. I said to Clara: 'You're my sister? Is that how you know about my special gift?'

CLARA

Yes. This gift runs in the women of our family. Our mother had it. And her mother before her too.

ELEANOR

Mom, if her mother had the ability to see the future, why didn't she see her Clara's brain cancer ahead of time?

HARRIETT

I asked her that too.

CLARA

Mom saw my cancer but refused to believe it. By not acting on it, she robbed me of the opportunity to be cured from the cancer before it spread everywhere and became inoperable and incurable.

HARRIETT

She must have felt awful.

CLARA

That's why she willingly took the suicide pack with me when it looked like I was just suffering with no hope for a cure.

HARRIETT

I am so sorry about all this!

CLARA

Our Mom prepared me for the gift before I got sick. Now, I'm here to prepare you for the arrival of your gift.

HARRIETT

So our mother foresaw that I would eventually get this ... this special gift?

CLARA

She looked into the future and realized that my abilities would be trivial ... small! But she assured me that yours would be substantial. And your daughter's even more so.

HARRIETT

Could she tell when mine would begin?

CLARA

Our mother told me that this upcoming Thanksgiving will be extraordinary in many ways. But I don't know the details.

HARRIETT

So my ability to see the future will begin this Thanksgiving? That's coming up soon.

CLARA

No, Harriett, your gift begins today.

HARRIETT

I was shocked! I have a gift? To see the future ... and the past? Could this be true?

ELEANOR

Your mother was right about her prediction. I do have a special gift. But what else did she say about *me* and *my* gift?

HARRIETT

Clara said that our mother told her your abilities would arrive much earlier than mine and they would be the strongest ever. You'll be able to predict the most amazing things!

ELEANOR

I can't wait! What else did Clara tell you about *your* gift?

HARRIETT

She explained it all.

CLARA

You must find ways to help people with your extraordinary talent – people going through difficult times in their lives.

HARRIETT

I said to her: 'The only person I want to help is my daughter. She's my world. The only one who really matters to me!' Her face became very saddened:

CLARA

Harriett, you can't help your daughter anymore. Eleanor ... is—

HARRIETT

Her words made my blood boil! Angry, I said to her: "Of course I can help my daughter! It's *you* I can't help! I don't want to get involved...'

CLARA

I'm sorry to say, but you're already deeply involved!

HARRIETT

And she was right. I *was* already deeply involved. From that moment on, my life would take a different path. One very different from the life I'd imagined before.