

The Gift

When the first chords of “Amazing Grace” hit my ear, something touched me. I couldn’t stop myself. I put down my soup ladle, and a few steps brought me to the side of the grand piano in the corner of the dining room. My heart opened and the sound flowed. The pianist found my key, and the chords he played embraced my voice. I was at home—in the lyrics, in the music.

As I reached the climax of the stanza, from behind me a high-pitched voice interrupted, “Please, Shayla, could I have some more lemonade?” Looking up at me, a bib covering her chest, Alice sounded like an aged Oliver Twist.

I came to earth in an instant. I was working for minimum wage in a nursing home and was glad of it. In a few minutes, entrées and desserts would be up. The old and lame would eat, then return to their rooms or sit in the hall and watch passersby while I cleared tables and recorded how much each person ate. Good nutrition is critical for the elderly.

I turned to get Alice’s lemonade and the pianist said, “You have a nice voice, Shayla. You should sing more.”

I said, “Oh, I can’t sing.”

He said, “You sound pretty good to me. I’ve played for quite a few singers.”

That night when I got home, I sank into an upholstered chair that had sprung its last spring years ago. Mama reigned from her newer chair to my left. I told my family what the pianist had said.

My younger brother said, "He must be crazy," and laughed himself into the kitchen. My sister rolled her eyes. Mama sighed and said, "Baby, different folks have different gifts. You'll find yours."

I thought, *Could it be that waiting tables in a nursing home is my gift? I like the patients and the people I work with. I make a lot of the patients smile.*

The following day, five minutes before the door opened for lunch, the food was ready and bibs rested beside each plate. Residents can't come in until a CNA is present, just in case someone chokes on food or has an attack of some sort. Marvin, at the piano, said, "You got time to belt one out?"

I thought, *Why not? What have I got to lose?*

He played the opening phrase of "How Great Thou Art," one of Mama's favorites. The song swept me along like a bird winging its way through the air.

"I like your voice. Perhaps you could do something with it."

"Like what?" I asked.

"Like sing."

I said, "Nobody thinks I can sing."

Still fresh in my mind were the words of the music director at New Harmony Church. Eight of us were

practicing a gospel arrangement, backed by a small band. In the midst of rehearsing “The Road to Glory,” a message of hope, my voice was moving up and down like a ship in a storm. The leader motioned me aside and said, “Shayla, I’m sorry. You’re not fitting in. You can’t seem to keep the beat.”

I was crushed. I was singing what I felt, feelings I have that only come out when I sing. The choir was dead silent. I was afraid to even look up as I took my coat off the hanger and dragged myself out the front door.

The third time Marvin invited me to sing, I didn’t know what I would sing. I just knew I would do it. After the drinks and soup were out, there were a few minutes before the entrées arrived. I went over to the piano and said, “Marvin, I’d like to try again, but we have to do it quickly. I need my job. I don’t want to do anything that would get me fired.”

Marvin smiled and said, “Fine. Let’s do it.” And his hand swept up the keyboard. I began to sing *Stormy Weather*. Whoever wrote that song knew how a storm on the inside and a storm on the outside are alike.

When the song ended, the patients broke out clapping, like I was doing a concert at Carnegie Hall. I felt proud and embarrassed at the same time.

At home that evening I told my family about singing and the patients clapping. “Sure they clapped. They were glad you stopped,” said my brother.

My sister reminded me that old people don’t hear well. “They like anything that moves.”

“Baby, you might not be as smart as your brother, or as pretty as your sister,” and I thought, *Here comes a*

backhanded compliment. “You work hard. You know all those old people by name. You style your hair nicely. You know how to dress. You have a sweet smile and your teeth are the whitest in the family.”

“But what about my voice, Mama? Do I sing as bad as my brother and sister say? You’re a good singer. What do you think?”

“It don’t hurt to try, Baby, but you gotta remember we need all three checks from you kids to keep this house going.” Mama’s eyes were pleading. “Just don’t do anything to get fired.” Medicare only paid for part of Mama’s medicine. Her high blood pressure was hard to control. We couldn’t scrimp on medicine.

During lunch the next day, I asked Marvin, still seated at the piano, if I could talk to him after the tables were cleared. I asked him, “How would you describe my style?”

He didn’t hesitate. “Your style is gospel.”

“Gospel? What do you mean?” I asked.

“Traditional singers sing the notes on the page. Gospel singers add notes that come from their hearts. They sing all over the page. But the good ones also respect the music. They know what they’re doing when they add extra notes,” he explained. “Your style is definitely gospel.”

“‘Stormy Weather’ isn’t gospel.”

“It doesn’t have to be religious. Everything a gospel singer feels emotionally can show up. You could use a little rehearsal,” he added, “and some exposure. I can help you if you want to give it a go.”

We began that evening after work. He taught me how to sing “Amazing Grace,” what he called “straight.” He said, “Tell your heart to take five. Let your mind get a grip on the song as it was written 250 years ago. When you get the bones of the song in place, then you can improvise to your heart’s content.” That’s putting “meat” on the bones, as Marvin put it. “People can still hear the tune within the notes you sing.”

He was right. It took a couple of weeks of an hour a day, but it worked. I could go wherever my voice and heart led me and still hold onto the melody. Marvin said, “I think it’s time we take this on the road. You think you’re ready?”

I felt more confident. Perhaps he knew of a small church where I could sing. “If you think so, I’ll try.”

“I’ll ask my pastor if I can bring in a soloist. I’ll let you know the date.”

The next day, he told me, “In two and a half weeks, it’s on if you’re free.”

I wasn’t sure if I should invite my family. They didn’t know I had been rehearsing. They might refuse to come, for fear they’d be embarrassed. When the day came, I told them I was going to church, but not which church I was going to.

I had driven by the First Presbyterian Church but never gone inside. Its size scared me. It was eight or ten times bigger than my church. Their parking lot was filled with row after row of cars, and Marvin walked me in the back door. In royal blue robes with white stoles, a huge choir filed past us into the sanctuary. I waited behind the stage with Marvin until it was time for me to sing.

“Butterflies in the stomach” didn’t come close to what I was feeling.

Marvin walked out and sat at the Steinway grand piano. He nodded, and I walked out on the stage and stood at the microphone. The room got deathly quiet. When I looked up, I saw nothing but vanilla, a couple of Orientals perhaps, nothing that looked Hispanic. Not a black face anywhere, and not a single smile. *Had I accidentally come to a funeral?*

Marvin’s long intro gave me time to get a grip and time for the audience to get ready for some music with a beat. I sang only three notes when faces began to turn to me like searchlights. Eyes zeroed in on me like I was either a stack of gold or the bubonic plague—which, I couldn’t guess. I sang “Amazing Grace” the way they probably never heard it. To me, it was like a rich cake with great globs of frosting. I only hoped they were eating it up.

When I came to the end, Marvin lifted his fingers from the keyboard. I couldn’t read the faces. I held my breath for a short lifetime, refusing to let them stare me down. Then two hands came together, then four, then 40, then 400. I could hardly breathe. The air sparkled with excitement. I had done it.

After the closing prayer, their choir director said, “You have a wonderful gift. Thanks for coming.” A lot of their members came and shook my hand. Marvin walked me to my car and pressed an envelope into my hand.

The road home had the same chuckholes, and I hit a lot of them, but I felt like I was riding on air. Wait till my brother and sister hear. Mama will be proud of me.

“I sang a solo in church this morning,” I announced before settling into my chair.

“Oh, Baby. I told your sister we should’ve gone with you.”

My little brother said, “Count me out. I’ve got enough problems without that.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?” my sister asked. “Maybe we could’ve talked you out of it. How do you feel?”

I laid the envelope on the table.

“What’s this?” she said, opening the envelope. “This check is from a Presbyterian church.”

Mama took the check. It was for as much as I earned in a full day at the nursing home.

“The church where I sang this morning pays people who sing there. Marvin from the nursing home took me to his church, a big one. When I finished, they clapped for me like it was halftime at the Super Bowl.”

My little brother came over and picked up the check. He stared at it and shook his head. “There’s gotta be an explanation. You sang—and they paid you—money? It must be a fluke.”

Momma got a determined look on her face. “A fluke? A fluke! We’ll just see. You ask your friend Marvin if he’ll come to our church and play for you. We’ll just see.”

Mama’s been a deaconess at our church forever, and when she asks, you can be sure the pastor listens.

“Let me talk to our choir director,” said the pastor. Later that evening, he called. “I have to tell you, Sister, it took some convincing, but we’re willing to trust your judgment. Should we have Shayla sing at the evening service? We have a much smaller attendance in the evening, you know what I’m saying? What do you think?”

Mama said, “Considering the size of the check Shayla brought home from that church uptown, I think Sunday morning.”

I waited in our parking lot for Marvin, just as he had waited for me at his church. I thought he would come early as I had done, but when the service began, he was still not present. I could hear the hymns and the prayers. I heard the children’s choir sing. They were very animated. Maybe I wasn’t as good as I thought I was. Maybe he chickened out. When the gospel chorus began singing I knew the offering was being taken. My solo was up next. *Where was Marvin?*

The Gospel Chorus reached the climax of their number as Marvin pulled into the parking lot. “Sorry. I’ve never been in this part of town before. The streets are all unfamiliar to me and I couldn’t find a soul to ask for help. I wasn’t too good at following your directions. But I made it!” he said while we rushed toward the door.

There’s no back door to get into our church auditorium, no secret alcove behind the stage. You have to come in the front and walk down one of the aisles. Everybody can watch your forward progress. When I walked in nobody stirred. When Marvin came following behind me, heads turned. A stranger was in our midst.

Before we could sit down, the choir director announced my solo, sounding like he was apologizing for

an approaching train wreck. Marvin went straight to the piano. He gave me his prize-winning smile and nodded before beginning his introduction. As soon as the congregation recognized what he was playing, a soft humming began to fill the room. *Amazing Grace* was familiar ground.

He paused and I began. As I continued, faces began to light up like Christmas lights coming on around the room. Hands began to move in rhythm to the music. Eyes turned skyward. Deacons chimed in with warm “Amen’s.” And when I finished, hands clapped and Mama glowed. My sister sat stunned. My little brother looked around not believing what he had heard and seen.

Walking Marvin out to our parking lot, I regretted that I couldn’t put a check in his hands as he had done for me. Our church pays our pastor, but not for much else.

Before I could apologize, he said, “I have a bit of news for you. When you sang for my church, we had a visitor from Los Angeles. He’s in the music business. He said he’d like to hear more from you. It might be nothing, but who knows? I think you have a gift.”

And I thought, *Maybe I have two gifts.*

