

The Gift

by
AJ King

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AJ King
#1011 - 1331 Alberni St. Vancouver BC V6E 4S1
aj@trialislandfilms.com

FADE IN

EXT: CAR - DAY

A small car moves slowly down the street.

INT. CAR - DAY

A father, GREG DONOVAN (32) slows the vehicle to a stop as he reaches the corner.

GREG

(to self)

How about this one tonight?

He peers into the alley, cautious. His daughter, EMILY (6) sits in the passenger seat beside him. She looks out her window, noticing the street sign -

SIGN: JULIA ST.

EMILY

(pensive)

Julia St. I think this is a good one.

(beat)

Do you think they named it after mama?

He gives her a smile, trying to hide his sadness.

GREG

Maybe so, kiddo.

Greg cranks the wheel and navigates into the alley. Slowly he slides the gear selector into 'park' and turns off the ignition.

The car has a 'lived in' feeling to it. The rear seats, folded down, have a blanket and pillow waiting for use as a makeshift bed.

Despite this, there is an obvious 'girls' touch to the interior of the vehicle. CHRISTMAS LIGHTS hang, strung from the ceiling of the car. An EVERGREEN TREE AIR FRESHENER, nail polish dots form small painted ornaments on its limbs.

He nods his head, and his daughter shimmies herself between the seats to the 'bed' in the back, TEDDY BEAR in tow. The man rotates in place, adjusting the blanket over top of her tenderly. She reaches out past him between the seats.

He follows her stare and picks up the small framed image from the dashboard.

IMAGE: Father, Daughter and Mother in a family photo. All are smiling.

He hands it to her. She places it on the pillow next to her as she curls up, trying to fit her body into the cramped space. As if to remind him -

EMILY
Papa... the lights.

He nods, plugging the cord for the hanging Christmas lights into the lighter socket. The string illuminates red, green and white.

She smiles.

The man strokes her hair and she closes her eyes, her head on the pillow.

Unseen by her, he turns to face forward again. He grips the wheel in frustration, wringing his hands. He begins to SOB quietly.

He leans his head back; his anguish clearly visible.

The man grits his teeth, rubs his eyes, subduing his emotions.

Reaching between the seats to the rear floor, he drags a pillow and small blanket forward, propping himself against the driver's door to try and get some sleep.

He closes his eyes.

FADE TO BLACK

SMASH:

INT. CAR - NIGHT

A TAPPING on the window wakes the man. Outside, a POLICEMAN stands with his FLASHLIGHT blinding the Father. RED AND BLUE LIGHTS pulse and reflect off of the interior of the car.

The man rolls down the window.

POLICEMAN
Are you alright sir?

The man nods, groggily. He puts his finger to his mouth gesturing for the Officer to be quieter, squinting the beam of the flashlight. The effect of his actions make it look like he is inebriated. Speaks quietly.

GREG

Yes.

The Officer shines his flashlight into the back seat and DOES NOT see the girl as she sleeps under the pile of blankets.

POLICEMAN

You are aware that you cannot park her over night.

GREG

Yes... I mean, no. I just... needed a few minutes to rest.

POLICEMAN

Have you had anything to drink tonight sir?

GREG

What? No... nothing.

The Officer takes a step back.

POLICEMAN

Would you mind stepping out of the car please?

Begrudgingly, Greg complies.

POLICEMAN (CONT'D)

Have you got any I.D. On you?

The man slowly reaches for his back pocket as the Officer subtly slides his hand to his sidearm, just to be ready.

The Father produces his wallet, fishes out his driver's license and hands it to the Officer. A flashlight in the face, then on the card, confirms that the image matches the man.

POLICEMAN (CONT'D)

Alright MR. DONOVAN, why don't you go ahead and stand with your feet together for me.

The man looks annoyed.

GREG

Why?

POLICEMAN

We're going to do a roadside
sobriety test.

GREG

I told you, I haven't had anything
to drink.

POLICEMAN

Alright... how about you humor me
anyway? Just to make sure.

Greg overexaggerates his movements as he places his feet
together.

POLICEMAN (CONT'D)

Now, I want you to close your
eyes...

The man does.

POLICEMAN (CONT'D)

And extend your arms all the way to
your sides.

Again, the man does as he's told.

POLICEMAN (CONT'D)

Now, go ahead and touch your nose.

The man tries, but misses his nose. He's frustrated, tries
again, while the Policeman assumes the worst, thinking he's
caught another drunk passed out behind the wheel of a car.

GREG

I can't... I was injured.
(beat)
I can't.

The words, the memories, cause him pain.

POLICEMAN

Okay. Com'on over here to my car
for a minute.

He takes the man's elbow firmly and guides him toward his
squad car parked a short distance away.

The man shrugs his arm, dislodging the Officer's grip.

POLICEMAN (CONT'D)

Woah, easy now...

Greg is becoming increasingly agitated. His voice is becoming louder.

INT. CAR - DAY

Emily sleeping in the car.

GREG (O.C.)

Listen to me... I'm not a child.

Emily's eyes pop open. She leans up to see her father being paced away by the Officer.

GREG (CONT'D)

I just needed a place to rest for a bit.

(to self)

It's not a crime to sleep, last time I checked.

With a worried look, she collects her small family photo, clutching it and her teddy bear tightly. She scans outside the windows of the car, flips the passenger seat forward and heads for the door.

EXT. CAR - DAY

Walking toward the police car, Greg protests.

POLICEMAN

Well sir, you can plainly see the no parking sign there.

GREG

So I'm gonna be in the way if I sit here on this 'high traffic' street!

POLICEMAN

It's a safety issue sir. We don't allow it for your safety and the safety of others.

GREG

My safety? What's safer than being asleep!

He gestures down the dead ended street (BUT DOES NOT LOOK).

At the police car -

POLICEMAN

Go ahead and place your hands on
the hood for me. You don't mind if
I search your pockets do you?

GREG

I have nothing to hide.

The Policeman tries to keep the man's mind occupied as he
searches jacket and jean pockets.

POLICEMAN

Why don't you try sleeping at home?

He lifts the man's shirt to see BANDAGES WRAPPED AROUND HIS
TORSO. The Policeman pauses for a moment, looks the man in
the face and lowers his shirt. Greg grits the answer through
clenched teeth.

GREG

(sullen)

The last time we slept in a home
was eight weeks ago... it burned to
the ground.

(beat)

My daughter and I made it out
alive. She... we, lost her mother
that night.

(beat)

It was an accident.

Greg's eyes well up, he hangs his head in shame. The Officer
returns the man's DRIVER'S LICENSE and turns him around to
face him. He is sincere -

POLICEMAN

I'm sorry.

(beat)

Where is your daughter now?

GREG

She's asleep in the...

He glances toward the car to see the passenger side door
open. Alarm washes over him.

GREG (CONT'D)

Emily?

He breaks from the Officer and makes it to the side window of
his car.

POLICEMAN

Hey!

Off the empty bedding inside -

GREG

(to self)
No... NO!
(to Officer)
My daughter! You have to help me
find her!

The Policeman stares at the man for a moment. He's beginning to believe.

GREG (CONT'D)

(earnest)
Please!
(to surroundings)
Emily!... EM!

The Officer's demeanor changes from powerful to sincere. He points ahead.

POLICEMAN

You go that way, I'll head this
way. She can't have gone far.

Greg nods, the men split up.

EXT. ALLEY 1 - NIGHT

Emily runs. There is fear in her body as she stops in the shadows, pulling her teddy bear to her chest.

The off-tone PLINK... PLINK... PLINK of glass being struck gets her attention. Cautiously, inquisitively, she peers around the next corner to see -

EXT. ALLEY 2 - NIGHT

Under the security light of a building, the Angel GABRIEL, in the form of a HOMELESS MUTE WOMAN (32) wears tattered clothing; sports a dirty face as she fidgets with a series of 7 CLEAR GLASS BOTTLES full of water. She STRIKES a bottle with a CHOPSTICK and it PLINKS. She pours a small amount of water out of the bottle, places it onto an overturned WOODEN CRATE and strikes it again. This time the tone of the PLINK IS HIGHER.

Emily slips around the corner, moving closer.

The Woman pauses as she HEARS her coming, but does NOT TURN AROUND. Her eyes dart to the side but she DOES NOT move her head as she TAPS the next bottle with the small wooden drum stick. It PLINKS a different tone than the first. Again, she picks it up and dumps some of the water out of the bottle.

Emily takes a step closer.

The Woman taps a corresponding PLINK.

Again, Emily takes another step, toward the Woman.

The Woman responds with another two TAPS ON THE THIRD BOTTLE, echoed by the little girl's FOOTSTEPS. Both individuals pause for a moment... Until finally, the Woman takes the initiative, TAPPING the next bottle ONE TIME.

Emily takes a step toward the Woman.

The Woman smiles; contains the sound of a chuckle to herself.

Again she TAPS THE BOTTLE and Emily responds, taking a step toward the Woman with every tap. The RHYTHM OF THE TAPPING IS CONSTANT, EVEN, but when the Woman stops, Emily mistakenly takes a step without hearing a tap.

The Woman turns around to face Emily for the first time, playfully pointing at the little girl with a 'busted!' look on her face. The Woman silently laughs it off, and Emily's innocent eyes see that she is not a threat. Emily giggles at the game, and the outcome. The Woman drops her dark hood to her shoulders, revealing a second, gray hood beneath it.

EMILY

Who are you?

The Woman reaches into a SATCHEL around her waste and pulls out a DECK OF CARDS. We see that they are ALL BLANK as she shuffles the deck. Placing one, face down in the palm of her hand, she quickly taps the back of the card TWO TIMES and motions for Emily to do the same. The young one does as requested. The Woman puts the card between both of her palms, rubbing it between her hands as if to warm it up. She stops, presenting the card to Emily, who turns it over. The BLANK FACE IS NOW A PICTURE OF AN ANGEL.

Emily scrunches her face. She doesn't understand, but moves onto -

EMILY (CONT'D)

What are you doing here?

The Woman puts the cards on the makeshift tabletop and holds up a finger 'wait, watch this'.

The Woman waves her hands around, getting Emily's undivided attention.

Sleight of hand has Emily impressed as it appears that she has pulled a completely new chopstick out of her hidden palm.

Emily looks on wide-eyed.

The Woman hands the small stick to her. Emily places her teddy bear on a nearby cardboard box, making sure that the stuffed animal can 'watch'. She stands the small picture frame on the wooden crate so that her Mother and Father can 'watch'.

Unseen by Emily, the Woman's face registers sadness at the sight of the small photo.

Emily excitedly takes the little stick from the Woman.

The Woman MIMES for her to hit a bottle with the stick. Emily hesitates, then does as implied. The glass replies with a PLINK.

The little girl smiles.

The Woman motions for her to continue. Again, Emily TAPS a bottle, then a SECOND TIME, and a THIRD. The Woman raises her hand, giving her a good-natured 'pause for a moment'. The Woman picks up the last bottle that Emily tapped and dumps out a smidgen of water onto the ground.

She places it back with the others, and motions for Emily to strike again. She does and a now TUNED PLINK rings out. Emily smiles proudly. The Woman gives her a 'thumbs up' and gently, slowly, TAPS EACH ONE IN ORDER, producing an AUDIBLE SCALE OF 7 PLINKS.

Emily's mouth drops open. This has done it. She is supremely impressed at the combined rubbish capable of providing such sweet sounds.

EMILY (CONT'D)

Woooow! That's so COOL!

The Woman nods, agreeing. Again, she holds up her finger for Emily to 'wait', then she points to her ear for Emily to 'listen closely'.

The Woman TAPS specific bottles, in specific order, with specific timing - 7 STRIKES as Emily eye's are locked onto the small stick.

EMILY (CONT'D)
 (excitedly)
 I know this one!

The Woman teases her with a look. 'Okay little one, go on then'. She stands back and folds her arms, making room for Emily in front of the apparatus.

Emily takes a deep breath and begins. She PLINKS out the tune to the Christmas carol, 'AWAY IN A MANGER', slowly and methodically, desperately trying to avoid making any mistakes.

She manages to pull off A FEW BARS and spins on her heels to face the Woman, who smiles impressed, MIMING a haughty clap, then a 'happy dance'.

Emily turns to the small photograph, beaming.

EMILY (CONT'D)
 Mama! I did it! I did it!

The Woman's face goes somber. She kneels to Emily's height and points to the image. Emily becomes shy. She stares at her feet, looking like a child being scolded.

EMILY (CONT'D)
 My Mama is gone.

The Woman tenderly puts a hand on the young girl's shoulder. Emily looks her in the face. With her other hand, the Woman points to her own chest, then to her head 'I know'. She smiles her condolence.

EMILY (CONT'D)
 Our house caught fire and she had to leave. Papa tried to keep her, but it was too hot. In the hospital, he told me...
 (beat)
 He said God needed another angel, so he came to get her.

The Woman picks up the deck of cards. She fans them out, motioning for Emily to select one from the bunch. Emily doesn't really want to play, but she pulls a card anyway.

The Woman again places the stack of cards on the crate. She motions for Emily to flip the card over. It is blank.

She motions for the girl to hold it in her open palm, face side down, and tap it TWO TIMES with her finger. Emily does. The Woman taps it TWICE with her finger. She motions for Emily to put the card between her hands and rub her palms together over the card. Emily is loosening up, the distraction shaking off the memories of moments ago.

The Woman gestures for her to stop.

In the distance, we HEAR -

GREG (O.S.)
EMILY!

EXT. ALLEY 1 - NIGHT

Greg jogs down the alley.

GREG (O.S.)
(frantic)
EM!

EXT. ALLEY 2 - NIGHT

Emily slowly looks at the card in her hand. The girl turns it over to see that the face now bears the image of her deceased MOTHER. Emily smiles a broad grin.

EXT. ALLEY 1 - NIGHT

Greg reaches the end of Alley 1, bends over PANTING. He HEARS the PLINK, PLINK, PLINK of 'AWAY IN A MANGER' being tapped out on the bottles in opposing scale by both Emily and The Woman. Emily is softly SINGING ALONG with the RINGING BOTTLES.

Greg takes a few more steps, rounding the corner into -

EXT. ALLEY 2 - NIGHT

the second alley to see his daughter and the Woman. Concern in his face as he rushes toward Emily, sliding to a knee as he reaches her.

GREG
Emily! Oh thank God!

He spins her around, wrapping his arms around her in a enveloping embrace. She hugs him back.

His hands go to her head as he pulls back to face his daughter. Tears begin to form in his eyes. He speaks like a broken man, shaky.

GREG (CONT'D)
 (loving, firm)
 Sweetie... you mustn't run off like that.

His arms envelop her again.

GREG (CONT'D)
 (sincerely)
 I thought I lost you.

Emily doesn't understand his alarm. She points to the Woman.

EMILY
 This is one of Mama's friends.
 (to Woman)
 Go ahead. Show him.

Instinctively, he positions himself between Emily and the Woman. The Woman removes her gray hood to reveal her golden blonde hair.

Spotting them, the Policeman runs up.

The Woman slowly picks up the deck of cards, fanning them out with their blank face sides up, for him to choose one.

EMILY (CONT'D)
 You have to pick a card Papa.

He is unnerved, unsure of the unknown. She shows no hostility, but gestures again for him to pick one. Slowly, he does.

The Woman gently gestures for him to hold it in his open palm, face down.

He's not interested in games or card tricks and is about to simply leave -

EMILY (CONT'D)
 Now you gotta tap it two times with your finger, like this.

His daughter MIMES the motion in her bare hands. He hesitates, the Woman smiles a 'give me a chance' smile.

He taps the card TWICE with his finger.

EMILY (CONT'D)
There? Now, she does it.

Greg holds his hand out, and slowly the Woman taps the card TWO TIMES. She is content.

Emily is again, beaming.

EMILY (CONT'D)
Whadya get!

The man stands there, confused by the question. Emily drags his forearm down to her height. She does NOT TOUCH the card, but stares at it intently.

EMILY (CONT'D)
Com'on Papa, you gotta flip it over to see!

The image on the face card is that of a CANDLE JUST AFTER ITS FLAME HAS BEEN BLOWN OUT BY JULIA.

EMILY (CONT'D)
What is Papa?

Greg can't stop them as his tears roll down his face. He clears his throat of the frog firmly embedded. The Officer leans in for a look at the card. He shows the Officer the image on its face.

GREG
The Truth.
(beat)
(to self)
She blew it out... The fire wasn't my fault.

The man looks as though the weight of the world has been lifted from his shoulders. He smiles a genuine smile of relief, the first in a very long time.

The Woman chuckles WITH NO SOUND, pleased to be able to absolve him of unwarranted guilt.

Emily tugs at his arm.

EMILY
Look! Mine's a picture of Mama!
Isn't she pretty?

She holds the card out for him. He stares at the woman he loves, amazed.

GREG

Yes she is baby. Beautiful, just like you.

He leans and kisses his daughter on the forehead.

Emily notices the Policeman behind them. As she looks at him as a sadness washes over her.

EMILY

Papa... does God need you now too?

GREG

Why would you ask that honey?

EMILY

Because when the man in blue came last time, God took Mama away.

Greg looks to the Policeman. The Officer realizes that his uniform scares Emily. He immediately removes his hat and kneels to her level.

POLICEMAN

No, little one. God thinks you should stick together for a little while longer.

He looks to her Father, while speaking to Emily.

POLICEMAN (CONT'D)

Maybe, you and your dad can come stay with me for a while? How would you like your own room?

GREG

I wouldn't want to impose.

POLICEMAN

We have a basement suite. Two bedrooms, currently unoccupied... They're yours if you want them.

She turns to her Father.

EMILY

Can we Papa?

Greg stands humbled for a moment.

GREG

Sure sweetie.
(beat)
(to Policeman)
Thank you.

Father and daughter hug each other tight. The Woman watches on, pleased with the connections made.

Satisfied, Emily pulls back, innocent and excited.

EMILY

And Papa! Look what we can do!

He smiles at his daughter, thrilled to see her so happy. She hands a chopstick to the Woman and counts them down.

Behind Emily, Greg mouths the words 'Thank you' to the Woman. She places a hand over her heart and nods 'you are welcome'.

EMILY (CONT'D)

One, two, three, four...

She and the Woman start TAPPING BOTTLES as Emily starts singing 'AWAY IN A MANGER' again.

FADE OUT