

## Gifts in a 24-Hour Period

By Alma Robles

Yesterday, my son received a birthday card from my sister-in-law's mother-in-law. A brand new \$50 bill slipped out as he opened the *Star Wars* comic-strip card. It fell to the freshly vacuumed rug like a leaf on newly mowed grass. My son tossed the card aside to retrieve the bill, "I can buy something!"

I opened the card. Above her signature, my in-law's in-law wrote, "Sorry we can't make your party."

She was not invited.

As I ate dinner, my last meal of solid food before my CT scan the following day, I chewed on the implications of the message, "Sorry we can't make your party." It galled me. Had she meant it as a dig, as in she knew all along that she and her husband hadn't been invited? And, thus, was she trying to make me feel guilty? Perhaps to insure they would not be left out next year? Or, did she believe they were beyond the formality of invitations? If so, didn't they think I had some say in this? The gristle was that they probably wouldn't think I had any say in such a determination. For them, it would be my mother-in-law's determination. Perhaps she had invited them herself.

I like boundaries. Clear, well-defined boundaries. I like white space and margins. Beginnings, middles and ends. I get a thrill when the GPS screen displays the dotted line of a state border. I like kinship charts: circles are for women, squares for men. I like things in containers. I like pulling them out at the appropriate times. I have a large plastic tub full of granola bars, boxes of raisins, pretzel packs. I set it out at 4:15, when my son gets home from school. I like 8:30 pm, 'lights out' for my son and the commencement of a more relaxing part of the day. Tonight being the exception, when memories of cancer are too close and too big. When I brush my teeth, I relive the night I discovered my tumor: I study my neck in the mirror; I turn to the right and the left; I raise my chin. I study the lymph nodes under my jaw. Though tonight there is nothing enlarged or irregular on my throat, the memory of that particular evening looms over me like a specter in the night.

There is a steady push by my in-laws to subsume my sister-in-law's in-laws into the immediate family fold. The two sets of in-laws recently vacationed together. They have begun to celebrate holidays, first at one house, then the following day at the other's house,

despite the 2-hour commute each way. Even though such dual-celebrations of a single holiday run counter to their cultural traditions. Certain holidays require that the daughter-in-law visit her husband's parents' house. Of course, that would mean that my sister-in-law need not return to her parents' home for these cultural celebrations. This is what my in-laws do not want.

This is when a kinship chart would be handy. My sister-in-law is a circle that is supposed to move over to her husband's lineage. Instead, my in-laws want to pull in her husband's lineage and amend it to their own, creating a tangled, mutated diagram. In their kinship chart, the circle that represents me is indistinct.

There seems to be an urgency that my husband, my son, and I also regard my sister-in-law's in-laws as close family. At least, that is how I understand my mother-in-law's exhortations that we join in the dual-holiday-celebrations and the growing anxiety over the number of dinner invitations we have declined. Once, in an effort to attend a proposed get-together, I tried to coordinate our schedule with my sister-in-law's mother-in-law. She responded that first she had to coordinate with her daughter-in-law and my mother—as she refers to my mother-in-law. Then she would get back to me with the date and time. My concerns were ignored.

At breakfast the other morning, a friend explained that it's an insult to decline an invitation in their culture.

I argued, "But my in-law's in-laws don't even seem to like me."

Taking a bite into an oversized bagel, crunchy and topped with cream cheese, he shrugged, "That doesn't matter."

I worry about things that multiply, about things that spread beyond their normal boundaries. Things that grow steadily, stealthily, until one day it's a mass, something out of control. Something that doesn't abide by elegant principles or normal growth. Abnormalities, tumors, dysfunction.

I tell my son I think we should return the money. "Awwwwwww!"

I tell my husband and he stiffens, "We would insult them."

I ask him, "Why does saying, 'no thank you,' mean an insult?"

He answers, "If we send the money back, we will insult them."

"How can we say, 'no, thank you' and keep the money?"

He does not respond.

What do you do when you don't like the way someone gives you a present?

What if you feel that by accepting a present, you're agreeing to something, and you'd really like to know what you've agreed to?

What are the rules? If the rules are different for different cultures, then whose rules do I follow?

One of the only acts of maternal protectiveness I ever experienced occurred when I was 15. I was working as a dishwasher in a Chinese restaurant on weekend nights. I worked in a cramped room off the side of the kitchen that smelled like the bottom of a kitchen garbage can after the bag's been lifted and removed.

In that room of grimy cinder blocks, I washed dishes. Everything—utensils, dishes, pans, etc—got soaked in the left basin of the double sink. The water collected bits and particles, seeds and filmy vegetable fibers, turning thick and brown and cold. I was not to waste water. Dishes and flatware went on to the dishwasher but pots had to be scrubbed and fried bananas pried off the plates. This was harder to do as the water got colder and murkier.

The matriarch of that family-owned business—the sole female in the crew—would invite me to join them as they ate after the restaurant closed. I marveled at the large men sitting above their bellies at the large round table, eating rice with the white bowl at their lips, scraping the bowl with their chopsticks, sweeping rice into their mouths. No one spoke to me but, then again, hardly anyone spoke, and if they did, it was in their language that sounded muttered, guttural to me. Eating, however, was not a quiet affair. They chewed, with cheeks full and backs straight. When they were finished, they thumped their bowls down and wiped their mouths with the white tablecloth.

In my upbringing, to raise a bowl to my lips or to use a tablecloth as a napkin would have triggered a blow hard enough to knock me to the floor. Chewing noisily would have resulted in a slap to the head.

That I was involved, however limited, in a world so unlike my family's, was intensely gratifying to me. It appealed to my sense of adventure. It validated my growing sense that the world was indeed far different than what I experienced in the confines of my family home. It expanded the range of my world.

I lasted at the Chinese restaurant longer than any of the previous dishwashers, all teenage boys who had complained about the amount of work and the lost weekends. I left on account of a present.

A new male relative arrived from China. He had uncharacteristic light hair that, in retrospect, was probably permed. He had small eyes and a face that hung low, as if his skin was too heavy for his skull to hold. He could not speak a word of English, but he smiled often, bowing his head slightly, and I always returned smiles.

One day he motioned to me, beckoning with his hand. I followed him to the back of the kitchen. From behind his apron, he pulled out a small box and held it out to me. "For me?" I asked, pointing to my own chest. He nodded.

The present was a gold-plated necklace of two long leaves, one draping the front of the chain, the other behind. It was very pretty. I was about to thank him when he lunged for me. His open mouth, cold and wet, pressed against my closed lips. I pushed him off and he darted away. Bewildered, I stared at the space he had so quickly exited, the necklace dangling from my hand.

My mother said, "If you keep it, he will think he has a right to you."

I gave it back. The restaurant's matriarch felt I could no longer stay on at my job. I understood.

There's a problem with how people regard the circular shape. Too often it's not a structural form, but a vacancy, a hole. As such, it seems natural to many people to fill that blank area.

In my life, and that of my husband's and my son's, there is an absence. My parents aren't involved in our lives. Since we are not obligated to share certain experiences with another extended family group, my in-laws have become accustomed to holding full court with holidays and other such matters. Alone, I am not enough of a presence to mark a barrier. This lack of a boundary, it seems, has allowed certain encroachments, a certain emboldenment that is now multiplying.

We have a vacancy in our lives, so why not fill it with honorary grandparents? They have just the set.

I would like a greater boundary with my husband's family. I would like to be more visible to them as a tangible, separate human being. Meals with my husband's family are stressful affairs for me, yet every get-together requires a meal. No longer are inter-cultural meals a source of respite and adventure for me, even though I like the cuisine. The meals emphasize the faintness and obscurity of my personal outline. My mother-in-law will, from any vantage point, strain her neck to see my plate. "You're not eating," she will say despite my full plate. She will frown when I decline the same things I have always declined, mutter paneer and dahl. This seems to insult her somehow, and I don't know why it should. If we're eating out, my mother-in-law will consult with my sister-in-law about what my son should eat. They don't see me sharing the menu with him, discussing the options. Sometimes I have already ordered his meal by the time they make their recommendations to him. In these and other such instances, I will look about me, wondering if somehow I'm invisible.

At get-togethers and events, they inquire about my son and about my health. No one ever asks me what I write about. And I don't offer. I write dark stories about dysfunctional families. Dysfunctional families are not recognized in their culture.

My son's birthday party is tomorrow. He's expecting lots of presents. He's hoping for handcuffs, Legos, and superhero figures. If he gets clothes he will open the box, see fabric underneath the tissue and toss it aside in search of something more interesting. I do not admonish him. I will try my best to let him open his presents at home, without the eyes of present-givers upon him.

My mother-in-law will buy him one large, expensive present. It is her custom. She wants to give him the biggest present. My husband and I order it for her. This year it's the *Harry Potter Hogwarts Castle* Lego set. It cost over \$150. At the party she'll pull out a wad of bills from one of her purses that are crammed and bulging. Purses that coordinate with her outfit. Purses bought from Coach and Burberry.

Sometimes she'll supplement the big gift with clothes from K-Mart. I don't know what to think of this. I wonder why a woman driving a new Lexus, with a collection of luxury handbags, would buy her grandson clothes that, after one wash, make a roller coaster out of the zippers and age the fabric into fuzz and pills.

I don't feel grateful. I feel resentful. Then I feel guilty.

My sister-in-law got married two years ago. In the culture of my in-laws, the culmination of the weeklong series of wedding events is the *vidaai/doli*, which marks the bride's severance from her family. It is an affair accompanied by traditional songs and tears as the bride, throwing puffed rice behind her, leaves for her new family's house. The bride then belongs to her husband's family. Of the many weddings I've attended, every one has included this ceremony, except for one.

My sister-in-law chose to forego this particular ceremony. Hers was an elaborate, weeklong affair in which every other conceivable ritual was observed.

My in-laws, traditionalists though they seemed to me, consented.

This morning I took my son to school on a public bus. We sat together on a two-seater bench, the first in the raised section in the back. He ate a chocolate chip bagel uncut.

He said, "The holes are the best part."

I smiled, "Oh?"

"Secret chocolate," he answered, pointing to the chocolate recessed in an air pocket in the bagel.

*Secret chocolate*, I wondered, holding his hand, a privilege that is becoming increasingly less frequent. I watched him eat his bagel, biting into the larger air pockets first, following a pattern of eating completely his own.

I had the argument with my husband after I dropped off our son at school.

I hesitate to use the word argument.

We don't yell. We don't punch the air with our gestures. But we are as tense and alert as territorial tomcats. Even on the phone.

My husband asked me, "Why, with all the stuff we have to deal with, do we have to argue about a \$50 check, for God's sake?"

An hour later I go to have my CT scan, my six-month follow-up after treatment for Hodgkin's Lymphoma. Though I have no tumors and feel fine, I worry. I scan my body for possible symptoms, internally searching for any potential trouble like a lighthouse sweeping its beacon over the dark horizon. I've lost weight. The fact that I *was* trying to lose weight does not assuage my fears.

I manage to drink the large container of barium. It's "Mochacchino" flavor but it's still awful, thick and slimy. It's best done cold, with a straw, as fast as possible. An hour later, I have to drink another large cupful. Then twenty minutes later, another cup, at which point the back of my throat rebels. I manage half. When I'm sure no one is looking, I pour the rest into the trashcan.

Then "66" comes to take me to the CT scan room. Sixty-six wears blue scrubs and each time I see him, his hair is slightly grayer, his face slightly fuller. His blue eyes always search for a joke or a crack, ever on alert for the possibility of alleviating the tension that each patient must bring to the scan table.

"Good morning, 66."

He answers with a quizzical expression, "Good morning."

I throw my purse and laptop bag on a cart. Then my earrings.

I lay down on the table in front of the enormous and white donut-shaped machine. Sixty-six lays a blanket on top of my legs. I pull down my pants under the blanket.

Sixty-six checks my chart. He recognizes my joke, "Ah! '66! You, too! Good year!"

I smile at the ceiling, lying there in the room that is arctic in temperature and color.

Neck, chest and abdomen.

He starts to put a line into my left arm. Before he inserts it, he gives a sincere, "Whoa!"

It's my veins, bulging, blue, highly visible.

“That’s a beautiful sight!”

“Yeah,” I say, looking down at my prominent veins, “too bad I couldn’t be a model for veins or something.”

“Hey, you could make some money off these. Med students would love to stick them.”

I know there’s a joke there, but I can’t think of one.

Sixty-six goes back to the control room. I think about my veins. Blood. Cancer. Chemo.

I can understand my in-laws. They don’t want to deal with this great gaping hole that my sister-in-law’s absence at family events would present. I can understand they don’t want her to choose her in-laws over her parents, even if it is culturally prescribed. By becoming such good friends with my sister-in-law’s in-laws, they can all be one happy family celebrating each and every holiday and event together, even twice. How much they like each other is irrelevant. They’ve expanded their circle, and their daughter stays present in their lives.

Why separate from your child if you don’t have to?

I understand that. I do.

A test pull through the machine.

Lying on the slender table, I am pulled through the hole of the donut-shaped machine. In the inner ring of glass, I notice a red beaming light that orbits me as I pass. Then I am pulled back to my starting position, in front of the machine.

Sixty-six comes back to adjust my arms. “What do you do?”

I stammer, “Well, I’m a writer,” adding, “unpublished.”

He chuckles, “Aren’t 99 percent of writers unpublished?”

I’m surprised by the knowing in his response. I shrug under the large Velcro-based binding that secures me to the table. I don’t think he sees my gesture as he works on the IV apparatus.

“Romance?”

“What?”

“Are you a romance writer?”

For a half-second, I wonder what would have given him that idea. I'm suddenly aware of how unusual it is for me to talk about my writing as I flounder, "No, no, I'm...more into short stories."

"My wife is reading *50 Shades of Gray*. Have you read it?"

"No, but I think I've heard of it . . . isn't it . . .?"

"Yeah, that's the one—"

"Where the writer self-published?"

"Well, I wouldn't know about that," he plugs the IV into the plastic port sticking out of my vein, "It's kind of . . .erotic."

"Oh, yeah, I think I know the one." I venture, "Is it good?"

"My wife likes it," and he looks straight down at my face with a smile, "and it's surprisingly informative." He winks without moving his eyes.

I think I know what he means. I try to offer something witty, but all I say is, "That's good, that it has some fringe benefits for you."

He laughs as he goes back to the control area. "Here we go!"

I taste the dye right at the farthest place in my throat. I think it must be what mercury tastes like. I feel its warmth course down my neck all the way to my crotch.

The little round speaker in the donut hole says, "Hold your breath."

The machine gives a little choke, and then I'm pulled through, holding my breath.

Breathing is normally a natural, unconscious activity for me that I believe I handle competently enough. During a CT scan, however, I'm an oxygen-starved bumbler. I always fear my timing, that I'll get it wrong somehow. I worry that breathing when I'm not supposed to might result in a cloudy image that will disguise a tumor that's hiding, that's waiting, to fill a recess in my body. Perhaps a recess left behind from all the chemotherapy and radiation. Perhaps there are cells that think, "Why not? There is a space I can fill." Panic makes a slow finger-walk up the back of my throat, and I absolutely have to take a breath NOW.

"You may now breathe."



I stare up into the ceiling. Breathing into my belly deliberately, filling myself with as much air as possible as if I could keep some in reserve.

Before I am pulled through again, I'm given a foam breast protector. It looks like one of those kneepads for gardening.

"Hold your breath."

I try to concentrate on my breathing. Recalling a relaxation technique, I label my thoughts: anxiety, anxiety, stop that, focus, breathe—no!, anxiety, anxiety, it's almost over, anxiety, c'mon, you can do it, *anxiety!*

"You may now breathe."

My lips begin to tremble. I stay very still.

Next, an image of my neck. My neck where I found the lump that, by the time of my first CT scan, bulged out from the left side of my neck and dug deep into my upper chest. It had grown exponentially.

"Hold your breath."

I try not to think about recurrence, of what that would mean. I try not to think of all the secondary cancers I'm now at risk for because of my treatment. I try not to think I might not live to see my son grow up because the trembling that's already started is rumbling. I try not to think of my son's birthday tomorrow. His seventh. I try not to wonder how many more of his birthday parties I will get to plan. I don't want to be a hole in his life. I want to be present. Present. Grief threatens to engulf me, foamy fingers of tears already reaching my eyes.

A flash thought reminds me of my in-law's in-laws. Annoyance and confusion rise and swirl about me. Hazy thoughts recalling the scrawled message in the card, the \$50 bill floating to the floor, and the feelings attached to them gain momentum until, like a submerged buoy, I pop out of the deep-water abyss of my grief.

"You may now breathe."

Sixty-six comes out of the control room. Lost in my thoughts, I didn't hear what, from his jaunty gait and cheerful expression, must have been a little quip. I'm pulled forward as I am ejected out from the mechanical orb of the CT scan machine.

Sixty-six takes my left arm and raises it. He tugs at the tape that holds the needle port but my skin resists. Another gentle tug reveals my thin skin clinging to the adhesive. Finally, he pulls the tape in one swift motion. My skin burns.

“Hold this.” With a flourish he places a gauze square over the dot of blood that has appeared at the release of the needle. He keeps his thumb on the gauze until in obedience my own thumb presses it.

Sixty-six retrieves a long bandage that is web-like, brown and sticky. He holds my arm as he secures the gauze square and then begins to wrap the bandage around my elbow.

When he is finished, he presses both palms on either side of my arm, by the elbow. Probably this gesture is meant to secure the bandage but it feels like he is making a wish for me. A little prayer, perhaps.

It is one moment. One in which I am present.

It will be one week before I know the results of my CT scan. A week during which I'll feel pulled off the side of the road, waiting and hoping to resume life with the shadow of cancer set back at 1 pm. Approximately.

I grab coffee and a bagel and walk to the rose garden two blocks away. I sit on a stone bench in the full sun, willing its warmth into my hospital-frozen body.

I close my eyes. I see 66's thumbs and the length of his index fingers on either side of my arm. I feel the slight pressure and warmth of his grasp.

I think of gifts.

I think about generosity.

And the secret chocolate hiding, waiting in the recesses.

Ninety-nine percent of writers are unpublished, are they? This makes me feel as if there is a tiny benevolent beacon orbiting me. I don't know why, but I feel encouraged. I pull out my notebook and a pen. I have to squint at the white paper's glare in the full sun, but I begin to write, “Yesterday my son received a birthday card from my sister-in-law's mother-in-law.”

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**Alma Robles is working on a memoir regarding her experiences with Hodgkins Lymphoma and its aftermath.**

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