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# HEAVENLY GIFTS

BY AARON L. KOLOM

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**Heartfelt prayers deserve  
an answer—but it may be  
in a peculiar way!**

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A blur of silent motion tugged suddenly at the corner of Mrs. Frisbee's eye. She looked up from her knitting. An electric blanket, deep blue with satiny edges, was materializing, neatly folded, in the center of her tiny kitchen table.

She closed her eyes briefly for a silent prayer of thanks. At midnight she would send out those thanks, followed by a request for a bicycle for the paper boy.

Contentedly she raised herself from her chair. She weighed mentally whether there was time to wrap the blanket as a gift before she had to leave for work. She decided against it. It wasn't as if it were an anniversary or birthday present. It was just something she knew her nice landlady, Mrs. Upjohn, needed but couldn't afford.

Mrs. Upjohn was in her room. With an embarrassed dismissal of thanks Mrs. Frisbee presented the blanket to her, then hurried to catch the bus at the corner.

The corridor clock showed a few minutes to midnight as Mrs. Frisbee, carrying her mop and pail, entered the control room. At the slight noise Dr. Morrow looked up from his paper-littered desk. A vague smile and wave were directed generally in her direction. With a glance at his watch he sighed and returned to his work. Mrs. Frisbee waited patiently and quietly. A few minutes later Dr. Morrow looked up again, then yawned and stretched luxuriously.

"Time for lunch, I guess." He stood up, setting a few dials on the glistening control panel before him. "See you in forty-five minutes," he called cheerily.

With the sound of his heels echoing down the hall, Mrs. Frisbee gingerly sat down in his chair. Taking a sheet of paper from her apron, she meticulously marked down the dial settings, exactly as he had left them.

Except for the diminishing sound of footsteps, the laboratory building was silent, with the unique quiet of a deserted structure. Through the window she could see the gigantic antenna aiming toward the stars. As always she experienced a momentary thrill of combined excitement and reverential awe.

She waited till she heard the closing of the front door of the building. Then with practiced fingers she flicked some switches. The equipment hummed quietly. She swung toward the keyboard and began picking out letters with her forefingers. Finally she took a page from a mail-order catalogue from her purse and slowly typed out the catalogue numbers. She didn't hurry. Dr. Morrow would now be finishing his lunch in his car. Afterwards he would take a stroll around the laboratory grounds. He was a man of regular, dependable habit.

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It had all begun one evening about five months before, when Mrs. Frisbee had attended a revivalist meeting. Simple soul that she was, with her increasing years and the passing of many of her friends, Mrs. Frisbee had begun to experience a desire to make peace with her maker.

"You are all sinners," the preacher had thundered, "and you need the most powerful voice in the world to speak for you!"

It made quite an impression!

It seemed the hand of providence when Mrs. Frisbee learned that a newly completed astronomical-radio station was seeking janitorial personnel. She quickly applied and was hired.

It was at first only a vague germ of an idea. Slowly the idea crystallized as she inquired of the technicians just how it was operated.

It wasn't really difficult, she learned. An electronic typewriter was used, converting letters and words into mathematical language, then automatically beaming the data out into the vastness of space. It took time, but she even learned what dials and switches to operate so there would be no record of her messages.

The station had been established to try to contact intelligences on other planets or star systems. An idiotic waste, the critics complained. Mrs. Frisbee agreed. Except for occasional space static nothing had ever been received. Mrs. Frisbee knew this from hearing the men talk. Still they kept trying, constantly listening, and at regular intervals transmitting basic mathematics, recognizable by any civilization.

She had arranged her work so that her midnight break came when she was cleaning the control room. There was only a single scientist on night duty, currently Dr. Morrow, who left the equipment on automatic reception while on his lunch break. Mrs. Frisbee never needed but half the time he was gone.

Her first prayer had been a brief one. Gripped with religious fervor Mrs. Frisbee had typed awkwardly, one finger at a time. The whirring of the equipment as it transmitted her words of devotion out to the farthest reaches of space was as balm to her soul.

It was a month later that she decided to test her contact with the divine with a simple request, an apron she had seen in a catalogue. It would be an ideal birthday present for Mrs. Upjohn, she thought. Days and weeks passed and Mrs. Frisbee had almost lost faith, when suddenly one evening, as she was quietly sewing, the apron appeared, bright and gay on her small table. She rubbed her eyes. It was truly wondrous. The thanks she gave in that evening's message were profuse.

As time passed she asked for other items from the catalogue for gifts for other friends. All were delivered miraculously after a few days.

Mrs. Frisbee was at peace—with the world, with herself, and with her maker. Her simple life was full. She had a proven faith, with miracles occurring as she desired them. There was no end to the people she met who needed things, and seemingly no difficulty in having her requests fulfilled. Quite often she was tempted to explain it all to her good friend, Mrs. Upjohn. But something always kept her from telling, a feeling that it might be sacrilegious somehow to discuss it.

Only one thing occasionally puzzled Mrs. Frisbee. Though she always ordered the presents from the mail-order catalogue, they seemed superior in quality and workmanship to any purchased articles....

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The barracks-room language coming from General Collin's office caused his aide to raise his eyebrows. He hadn't heard the General use such terms since Korea.

General Collin was even more incredulous than the colonel, the major and the captain had been before him, as each was told.

"It's impossible," he exploded into the telephone. "When did you blankety idiots first discover it?" After a brief pause he barked, "Double the guard!" A moment later he barked again, "Damn it, then triple it!"

He sat back stunned. What would the chief say? He shuddered at the thought.

His eyes narrowed reflectively, and after a moment he reached again for the phone.

"Have you contacted any other bases?" His voice was now quiet and low. After a brief pause he added, "Come to my office as soon as possible with everything you have on the situation."

He steeled himself for the next call, reluctantly reaching for the special red telephone. His orderly mind presented the facts he had learned as clearly as possible.

"I don't know," he answered a question. "No sir, I haven't contacted AEC or State yet. I'd like to check on it further." Then finally, "Complete secrecy, yes, sir. I'm making a thorough security check."

An undercurrent of frantic excitement quickly engulfed Washington's top councils, involving even the President. The National Security Council and Chiefs of Staff were called into emergency session. Grim-visaged star-shouldered officers hurried through Pentagon corridors. Newsmen knew only that something quite serious was taking place, something that vitally affected the national security. Whispers of a "secret Russian weapon" began to be heard. From the Pentagon, orders went out to every military base. CIA agents and military scientists were hurriedly called, were asked enigmatic questions and were given grim instructions.

A few days later, a call came again to General Collin. He had half-expected it. He reached again for the red phone.

"It's happened again!" He bit off his words in his exasperation. "Yes! Right in front of a television monitor. The film is being rushed to Washington." He listened a moment, then nodded. "That's right, just disappeared! Completely dematerialized!"

He received a bit of a shock in turn. "Two other bases also? Good God!" Then, "Yes, sir, I'll fly in to-night."

At the top level meeting the next morning the Under-Secretary of State interrupted the discussion. "We have just received a peculiar message from the British Embassy," he said. "They are asking about the security of—" He lowered his voice even though the room was sound-proof.

Everyone about the table looked soberly at each other.

Security Council meetings became continuous around-the-clock sessions. The top civilian scientists of the country were brought in and the situation explained to them. As one they shook their heads.

A Nobel prize winner in Physics put it flatly. "It is beyond our comprehension, far beyond the state of our knowledge!"

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Central intelligence reported daily on the political and scientific activities in key spots of the world. A spurt of high-level meetings in Moscow was noticed and duly reported.

This ominous news was received with a depression bordering on hysteria.

"We have underestimated their technological advancement again," said the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "We must increase our production efforts. We must solve this puzzle—" he spoke slowly, in measured tones of the utmost gravity—"even at the expense of all other research efforts! This must have the highest possible priority!"

Orders to this effect were quickly issued.

"I don't understand the Soviet mind," puzzled the Secretary of State. "At the diplomatic level they are seemingly going farther than ever before in making concessions and overtures toward peace!"

"And while they try to lull us politically," fumed the Secretary of Defense, "they are leaving us practically defenseless with their scientific thievery!"

He slammed the table with his fist. "We must be on our guard! We must increase our research efforts! And SAC must be placed on an emergency alert, ready for instant retaliation!"

And each day, despite the frenzied increase in mining and refining activity, a report on the dwindling military capabilities of the United States was given the President. The day finally arrived when he gravely addressed the Security Council.

"As of today," the President said, "we are unable adequately to defend our country! Our production capabilities cannot keep up with what we are losing. We are left only with our conventional weapons." He paused. "God help us, we are at their mercy!"

A worried-looking Under-Secretary rushed into the Council chamber and whispered something into the President's ear. The President's face grew white. He rose slowly.

"Gentlemen." His quiet voice reflected a rigid control. "Mr. Khrushchev is placing a personal call to me on a matter, which he says, is of the utmost urgency." He paused. "Please wait until I return."

The group of men, carrying on their shoulders the responsibility of the defense of the United States of America and all the free world, sat in quiet dejection, heads bowed. Long minutes passed. No one felt up to meeting the eyes of anyone else about the table.

As the President re-entered the chamber, the members of the Security Council rose. The atmosphere was heavy with foreboding.

He spoke slowly and clearly, his face expressionless. "Mr. Khrushchev says he desires to establish a true peace with us. He will agree to all our terms: complete inspection, atomic test ban, disarmament, anything of a reasonable nature!"

He looked around the shocked room. Relief, puzzlement, suspicion, were mirrored on various faces.

"I'm sure I don't understand all this," the President continued. "I doubt if any of you do. But if the Soviet Union is sincere in desiring a true peace—!" His voice became very quiet. "We shall certainly meet them halfway!"

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Veux looked up from the account book with a grunt of approval, then reached for the drink his partner held out.

"Well," Tai said. "Didn't I tell you business would be good this period?"

Veux nodded and downed his drink. "Excellent, but I see that most of our profit came from native trade!" His eyes narrowed. "It looks illegal! Are you supplying arms for a revolution somewhere?"

Tai's smile became contemptuous. "No, it's just local products, native trivia. We drop-chuted survey robots, then called them back and installed a delivery system. The robot picks up samples by dematerialization and I synthesize them."

"But so much profit! Aren't there any complaints?"

Tai laughed. "On the contrary, I get thanked after each delivery, plus a request for something else. Natives are the same everywhere. Just suckers, waiting to be trimmed!"

"I don't want to get into any trouble over this!" Veux looked dubious.

Tai refilled the glasses. "Well, our business charter says we must fill and deliver any legitimate order we get!"

"If it's legitimate!" Veux studied the deep ruby of his drink. "Which of our colonies is it?"

Tai hesitated slightly. "It's not one of our colonies. The orders are from subsystem CQ!"

"What!" Veux's eyes flashed. "You know we're not supposed to have any contact at all with them! They're under official observation!"

"Don't worry, don't worry." Tai's voice exuded confidence. "No one can prove we've broken a single law."

"I don't understand."

Tai's expression was one of exaggerated innocence. "Everything is automatic. Radio orders for goods are received, translated and filled, with robot delivery." He winked at his partner. "How can anyone prove I ever bothered to check the source?"

"But the profit? What do you trade?"

"Aha! I was waiting for you to ask that. I set the robot to detect and take a unit of energy metal each trip!"

"Energy metal?" Veux jerked upright.

"Yes, but they're running out." Tai sighed. "The robot reports he has had to go clear to the other side of the planet to fill his quota. There's only enough scattered around for a few more trips!"

"I guess we can't complain," Veux said.

They clinked their glasses.

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