

The Gift

by Ann Bogle

That's it. The rest is history. And history is never as interesting as what your imagination can give you. History is what you get when the projector gets stuck.

It turns out that art, like everything else, is what some people do for a living. Art, what passes for it, is a commodity. It is just one more thing to pay for, lug home with you, borrow, or steal—*hurtar para dar por Dios*, as it says in the dictionary.

If I could rouse any interest, I would start a support group for people committed to art. I would circulate a petition, start an internal movement to bust people out of the art hospital. I would get a witness to say that I were healthy enough to live on my own, to make a decent living. What is stopping me is thinking that I am bound to the commitment I made to art as a child.

One way to make something real is in solitary confinement. Some people walk with God and honor their commitments. Those people may live anywhere on Earth except in the limelight.

Lock-up, I queried. Where is lock-up?

I would not have asked where lock-up is had I known it would seem forensic.

The first thing you find out in lock-up is that God exists. In other situations you could just dismiss this information. In lock-up that is impossible. The second thing you find out is that God is everywhere, even in you. Your job as an artist is to come up with a reasonable gift to present to God.

Most people who go into the art hospital never get out. They just get moved to more comfortable quarters. Some of them, the invalids and life-long convalescents, live on the deluxe wing. The worst thing is knowing that deep down I want to stay. I would show no sign of resistance if they offered me a room with a view. "Put the trophies over there," I would tell my students from my comfortable bed.

For about one month out of solitary I would have appreciators. There would be no question about it—I had served both God and man. After that, if I managed to do anything more, they would give me students. It is very strange, these students. They come from miles around to be put in the hospital with you. Most of them are starving and craven. Usually it is because they had a parent or step-parent who belonged in one hospital or another themselves but who managed to hold on by sheer will power to the world outside. Then values changed, and these offspring lost the wherewithal to define their own existence. There are millions and millions of them, and their numbers are growing. There never will be enough beds.

The easiest wholesale solution is for everyone to drink their gift to death. That way is the most popular, but it is not the only possibility.

If people were willing to open their minds a bit, they could find constructive uses for creative energy. They could leave the hospital, even for day trips, and no one would blame them for changing their minds. They could write to their congressmen. They could volunteer at shelters for the homeless; better yet, they could go on the road with Jimmy Carter and build habitats for humanity. They could sing in the church choir. They could grow a garden. They could raise their own children. We do not need as much art as we are making. There are many other things we need more.

Some people, women especially, go the sex route. They devote their ingenuity to making themselves as sexy as movie stars. Artists can never be worshipped as mindlessly as movie stars, but some of them come pretty close. Other artists, the men especially, sleep around or mulch up their brains on fame.

The very lucky few get shipped back to solitary confinement. Most of these do not know they are lucky, chosen. They think they are being punished for bad reviews. They think bad reviews cheat. They think good reviews tell the truth.

There is no need to worry about art. Art in its ideal forms stays safe. Real art resists being the object of attention. It directs your gaze, and it swings in you forever.

Of the inmates with windows, every year, one or two of them, the purest at heart, beg to be let back into the cell. They are afraid they will jump. That would be going beyond the call of duty, something no one might say. They say that they have learned their lesson, and they promise all the real powers-that-be that they will work harder this time. They sign statements to that effect and they apologize to their loved ones for the emotional and financial turmoil they have caused and will continue to cause until death. (In some of them, the very exemplary, this bad behavior will be held up as customary, even as tax-exempt.) They say goodbye to them and vow never to look outside themselves for companionship or diversion again. Of course, it does not last. Pretty soon someone or something better comes along.

They all have one thing in common. They discovered their gift in the first place because they needed a friend, so they made one up. They kept on making things up until they had a world. Now that they have real friends, and sex, you would think they could just let it rest, but they can't. They still have something to prove, so they put their name on the waiting list to perform their very own, original talent shows in the seasick cafeteria.

Most of the shows are the same, except in detail. It is rare indeed when someone gets the wind whipping through your grapevine. These days most anything is acceptable as an offering—a stick of wood, a drum roll, a shitty conversation ya had with a friend. The ones who feel ashamed of their limitations almost quit.

It was better in the days before promotion, when having a gift meant something in Latin. In God, a token to His allness in your smallness. A simple nest egg.

