

The Gift

Jack

“Jack! Come help me make some Christmas cookies!” Mama yells. I throw my choo-choo train down. I run down the hallway.

Annabelle

I’m trying; I’m trying just for Jack. He is keeping me alive. Every waking moment I wonder if what I am doing is enough for him.

Jack

“There’s my Jack and the Beanstalk,” she says. I jump into her arms. “That’s right Mama. Soon I will be tall as you. Maybe taller! Taller than a tree!” I laugh excitedly.

Annabelle

All I want is for Jack to have the best childhood a kid could have. Life hasn’t always been this hard. Since Jack’s father began drinking and left, all I can think about is that it was my fault that I became pregnant.

Jack

Mama has blue eyes. She has brown hair that tickles her shoulders. Mama has lines on her face too. She told me she scrunched her face too much when she was little and now she has lines on her face. The story scares me so I don’t scrunch my face. I don’t want lines on my face.

Annabelle

I look at Jack now, and know that getting pregnant when I did was not a mistake. I wouldn't change having Jack for anything.

Jack

Mama puts a giant cloth around her waist. "Mama, what's that?" I ask.

"Oh, it's an apron, so my clothes don't get dirty with cookie mess." I laugh because she says it funny. "Don't laugh Jack, you have to wear one too," she giggles.

"No!" I shriek and run away from her. Mama chases me, but she catches me. I am super Jack. I am super-fast and have super speed.

Annabelle

Looking at him now, as we make Christmas cookies together, I know that these are memories that Jack will always have. His eyes are so bright with childhood innocence. I wish it would always stay like this but that would be naïve.

Jack

Mama puts the apron on me. I look like her. "Mama, we look the same," I giggle.

"Yes we do Jack. Now let's make some cookies for Santa."

"Santa!" I shriek.

“Jack! No! You can’t yell. You have to be quiet,” Mama scolds me.

“Ok, Mama. I’m sorry.” I give her a big hug and kiss her cheek.

First we have to put this white powdery stuff into a bowl. It gets everywhere. Mama says it is flour. Then we put eggs from chickens. I’m not allowed to do that because the shells could get in and that would be yucky. Mama wipes her face. She gets flour on her nose. I laugh at her. I put some on my nose too so we are matching. We put more things into the bowl, like sugar. Mama says, when I was a baby, she sprinkled sugar on me. That’s why I’m so sweet.

We stir and stir and stir until the cookies are one doughy mess. Then we roll them into balls and put them on a sheet. Mama puts them into the hot box. Mama says it’s an oven.

“In fifteen minutes we can decorate them,” Mama says.

"When is Santa coming Mama?" I wonder.

"Tonight Jack. Tomorrow we can open presents," She tells me.

"I can't wait for Santa to come and to open presents!" I say excitedly.

Annabelle

There is a knock on the door and I wonder who it could be. Jack and I never have visitors. I look out the window before opening the door, and my entire body goes numb. I turn to Jack, “I need you to go to your room and be very quiet,” I instruct.

“Why, Mama? What’s wrong? Is Santa here?” he asks.

“No questions. Just do as I say,” I demand. He then rushes to his room and closes the door.

I wipe away any trace of flour off my face with shaking hands, and sweaty palms. Slowly I reach for the door knob knowing that the inevitable cannot be put off any longer.

Hank

The door opens slowly with a creak. A smile plays on the edge of my lips. She is standing there with her head down in a faded t-shirt and old jeans.

“Ahh, my lovely Annabelle. How I miss you so much,” I slur. I push the door open more and step over the threshold and into the house.

Annabelle

My heart is beating so fast that I can't hear myself think. He steps into the house, and without thinking I stammer, “You can't come in here. You don't live here anymore Hank.” As soon as I say this I wish I hadn't. His hand flies across my cheek making it stink. “Oh yes I can love. This house is as much mine as it is yours,” he comes back with. His big hand is now on my throat and all I can do is nod. “That's what I thought,” he sneered.

Hank

Her porcelain face is already starting to bruise, and I almost feel bad...almost. “Where's the boy?” I ask. She just stares back at me. I remember when I used to love those eyes. “Don't you dare give me that look! Tell me where the boy is!” I scream. My hand impulsively hits her face again harder this time. “Tell me where the boy is and I will stop.”

Jack

I am hiding in my room. I am under the bed. It is dark. I am scared. I hear a man yelling at Mama. He keeps asking where the boy is. I keep hearing a smacking sound. I don't hear Mama's voice. I hear yelling. I think the boy he is asking for is me. I know Mama told me to stay in my room. I don't hear Mama's voice. I grab teddy off the floor. I open the door. I walk out into the hallway.

Annabelle

I hear Jack's door open and fear flows through my veins. "Mama?" his voice is trembling as he asks for me and I start to cry.

Hank

"Well, Well. What do we have here?" I ask but I already know that answer by the look on Annabelle's face. The boy slowly shuffles towards his mother.

"Jack, no. Go back into your room," Annabelle demands. I smack her again to keep her quiet. The boy shrieks.

Jack

The man hits Mama. I cry harder. "Stop!" I shout.

"Or what? What are you going to do about it?" the man asks.

"Santa won't bring you any presents," I tell him sternly. Tears stain my face. The man kneels in front of me. I hug teddy closer.

"There's no such thing as Santa. Santa isn't real." His voice smells stale. I don't like it.

"Yes he is. He brings presents on Christmas." I say to him.

"Your Mom is a liar. Santa isn't real!" he yells. I cry harder.

Annabelle

Seeing Jack crying gives me strength to get up.

"You need to leave now. Get away from my son. Don't ever come back here again or I will call the cops." Hank walks over to me, puts his hands on my cheeks and kisses my forehead.

“No need to yell,” he says calmly.

“Out now,” I demand. With that he walks out the door and slams it shut. I run over to Jack and put my arms around him. I hold him tight and wipe away his tears.

Jack

Mama wipes away my tears. I wipe away her tears.

“Jack, I’m so sorry,” she apologizes.

“It’s ok Mama,” I tell her. I run into the kitchen. I get a rag and get it wet. I run back to Mama and wipe away all of the red stuff on her face.

“Jack, Santa is real you know?”

“I know and he is coming tonight!” I smile at her.

Annabelle

With the smile on Jack’s face right now, somehow I know that we are both going to be ok. Jack will be strong. That makes me stronger. If he only knew the gift he gives me every day.

“Come on Jack. Let’s go finish those Christmas cookies.”