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THE GIFT



*God, who foresaw your tribulation,
has specially armed you to go through it,
not without pain but without stain.*

C. S. LEWIS

DECEMBER 6, 2011

Out of the corner of his eye, Giuseppe Bellisario saw the gleaming white Toyota van roll up into the handicap spot in front of his modest storefront restaurant tucked in the far right corner of the Agoura Hills Town Center. And smiled.

The bold-white, edged-in-scarlet letters over the entrance shone out in the California twilight: **GRISSINI RISTORANTE.**

Grissini.

Italian for "breadsticks."

But not just any generic, garden-variety breadsticks. His restaurants had always been known for their signature long, thin, artistically shaped grissini. And for warm greetings and assiduous service. He had always seen to that.

Impeccably dressed as always, he straightened his jacket and collar and glanced into the dining area, feeling a small surge of pride. No, little Grissini's didn't compare to his legendary establishments of years gone by, at least not in fame, size, location, or celebrity clientele. Back in the 1970s, his first place, Giuseppe's, had been the talk of the town, gracing the corner of Beverly and

Sweetzer, just off Wilshire between Hollywood and Beverly Hills. Those were the days! Giuseppe's had been the "it" place to go. Frank Sinatra would show up for lunch sometimes. Laurence Olivier would slip in for an early dinner.

Other celebrated restaurants followed, but none had been as exciting as Giuseppe's, with actors, writers, and directors popping in for those fabled Hollywood power lunches. He had a special table for them, tucked back in the kitchen where they could have privacy, dine quietly, sip a glass of Chianti, and savor all the simmering fragrances.

Then the years slipped away — so quickly! — and the time came when he told himself he was getting too old and ought to sell. And just like that, he cashed it all in and found himself retired. A nondescript Chinese restaurant now stood where Giuseppe's had once sent out its Italian fragrances and romantic aura into the night. Bellisario had stepped back from the whole business, intending to travel with his wife, Barbara, intending to "do other things." Funny thing about all those intentions. Somehow none of those "other things" seemed half as fun or satisfying as what he had done throughout his long career. So, perhaps surprising no one (and certainly not Barbara), he opened yet another restaurant, this time in a sleepy, out-of-the-way shopping center. In Agoura Hills of all places.

No, there weren't many celebrities dropping by these days, but the cuisine was as heavenly as ever, and besides that ... just look who was about to wheel through his doorway.

A sturdy Japanese man in his early sixties, clad in a brown jacket and a tan "Wild Adventures" baseball cap, emerged from the driver's side, stepped around to the back passenger-side door, pushed a button, and watched as the door slid open and a ramp descended.

Giuseppe waited for a moment as the man backed the power wheelchair down the ramp onto the pavement. Then, with consummate timing, Giuseppe stepped through the door into an

THE GIFT

abnormally chilly Southern California evening. Greeting the man with a handshake, and then a hug, he bent down to kiss the cheek of the pretty blonde woman in the power chair. Then, with a flourish that seemed second nature, he swung the glass door of his restaurant wide open to his friends.

"Buonasera."

A gust of warm air, scented with oregano, fresh bread, and Christmas candles, enveloped them.

"Merry Christmas, Giuseppe," the woman said.

"And Merry Christmas to you, *caro*. Your table is waiting. Always."

Inside, Giuseppe's little "retirement project restaurant" was a vision of white tablecloths, linen napkins, spotless silverware, glittering Christmas lights, and candles glowing in red glass containers. The voice of Dean Martin crooning in the speakers wrapped around them like an old favorite bathrobe.

*Volare, oh oh,
E cantare, oh oh oh oh,
No wonder my happy heart sings.
Your love has given me wings ...³*

With no hesitation, the woman in the wheelchair, wrapped in winter coat and scarf, powered up to a table along the wall. Her table. A small brass marker on the wall read "JONI EARECKSON TADA."

Ken Tada, taking his seat, was already thinking of the menu.

"Giuseppe, do you have the veal tonight — on the bone — the one with the mushroom sauce?"

"Vitello marsala?"

"I think so."

Joni just smiled, drinking it all in.

*We can sing in the glow of a star that I know of,
Where lovers enjoy peace of mind.
Let us leave the confusion and all disillusion behind ...*

Dear old Dean Martin. She truly *did* feel that glow tonight. In some strange, inexplicable providence of God, she felt happier than she had for years.

Cancer, she told herself, not without a note of wonder, *was a gift.*

“WITH GREAT PURPOSE”



*This is God's universal purpose for all Christian suffering:
more contentment in God and less satisfaction in the world.*

JOHN PIPER

JUNE 20, 2010

Cancer hadn't felt like a gift in the beginning.

No, not at all.

Joni had been noticing the odd deformity in her right breast for over a month, a slight indentation, as though the skin were tacked to something inside. Strange. Maybe even troubling. But she had ignored it — or tried to. As the days went by, however, the indentation seemed deeper. On a Sunday afternoon in June 2010, she couldn't ignore it any longer, and she called Judy Butler, her longtime friend and assistant, into the bathroom to check out the irregularity.

“Do you feel a lump, Judy?”

Judy felt, looked away, felt again. “Yes.” She looked into Joni's eyes. “Yes ... there's definitely something there.” A pause. “Shall I call Ken?”

Joni nodded. “Please.”

Stepping inside the bathroom, Ken took in the scene at a glance. Joni's and Judy's expressions in the vanity mirror told him more than he wanted to know. *What now?* At Joni's instruction, he too felt for an irregularity and found one. A definite

lump. Something foreign. Something hard where nothing hard should be.

He looked up, making eye contact with both of them in the mirror.

Looking across at her misshapen breast in the glass, Joni said, "I really don't have time for this!" For just a moment, it struck everyone as funny, and they all laughed.

"I'll call Dr. Drew," Ken said. Scrolling through his contacts, he punched the cell number of Joni's personal physician, who immediately picked up. On a Sunday! And no, he didn't need to see them. They needed to get themselves over to Thousand Oaks Radiology first thing the next morning. He would call ahead and make arrangements.

So ... now they had an appointment. How quickly events seemed to move! On the short, thirteen-mile drive to the radiology center, Joni prayed, eyes open, watching the successive exits roll by. *Kanan Road. Reyes Adobe Road. Lindero Canyon Road. North Westlake Boulevard. The 23 Freeway.*

Uninitiated drivers in Southern California, flying along faster than they really want to go in the farthest right-hand lane, can suddenly look up in dismay to see the freeway dividing into two. And if the left four lanes are heading where you want to go, but you find yourself in the farthest right of four lanes bound in another direction, there's precious little opportunity to cross multiple lanes of racing, bumper-to-bumper traffic. In just a blink or two, you're swept along in another direction, toward another destination. Somewhere you couldn't have foreseen. Somewhere you never intended to go.

That's what this day was. This Monday like no other.

The freeway had divided, and Joni was being whisked away in a new direction. Fast. Toward ... what? Where? This much she knew. Her life would change that day. For better or worse, nothing would be the same after this.

A new thought intruded as Ken flipped the turn signal at Janss Road. So, life was about to change for her? *Maybe that*

God's Immeasurable *Grace*.

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"The story of Joni and Ken falling in love is a beautiful story. But it's a story that is anything but saccharine and sentimental. When you read their story, you will have a new perspective about yours."

—MIKE HUCKABEE

"The words 'for better, for worse, in sickness and in health' don't begin to capture the challenges that Ken and Joni have encountered in their marriage."

—JIM DALY, president of Focus on the Family

"My goodness—and the rest of us think we have problems! Their hard-won fidelity stands as an inspiring and redemptive example. Thank you, Joni and Ken, for baring your lives in this most vulnerable way."

—PHILIP YANCEY


"What I love about this story is that it includes the greatest story ever told—that Jesus Christ set the example of endurance in the face of human and spiritual trials."

—FRANKLIN GRAHAM, president & CEO of Samaritan's Purse and the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association

"I can't think of a more selfless couple to learn from. I pray that many will read this book and benefit from their example as much as I have."

—FRANCIS CHAN, author and speaker

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