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JANE'S SECRET

There wasn't much to tell once the diary had been discovered and read aloud. I was only ten at the time, and it's been 16 years; but the memory hasn't faded.

They questioned us in the pastor's study. I was more afraid for Jane that day than for myself. The brooch had been stolen, and Jane stood before the pastor, holding it in her hand...

Jane Rupert was an orphan, my tutor, and my best friend. Being paraplegic, I took my studies at home. Wheelchairs seemed to make others uncomfortable, rather like I may have been contagious or some such silly thing.

Unlike me, Jane was lovely, with her long, flowing, dark hair and straight, very white teeth. And she had the bluest eyes I had yet to see on anyone. They were bluer still than the sky blue eyes of our baby kitten. She was lovely, and kind, and sad because she had no family. I loved Jane.

For one thing, she refused to allow me to feel sorry for myself.

"You just have different shoes than people who walk on their feet, Miss Dorothy Amelia Southward," she would say. "Why, you have round, rolling, shiny, glorious shoes that will take you almost anywhere you want to go. People get out of the way for you, and build ramps to make it easy for you. And bridges so you never get stuck in the mud. You must feel mighty special, to have folks go to so much trouble, just for you."

She was right about that. Daddy had wheel-chair equipped our entire two-story house, our attic, and even the two beautiful green, manicured lots it sat on. There wasn't a corner I couldn't get to, a building I couldn't easily roll into. Ramps were everywhere.

The gardener kept the outdoor walks free of leaves in the fall, shoveled snow off them in winter, and made certain loose rocks were swept out of the way year round.

We live in a grand house, full of antiques left by my grandparents. Jane and I explored every square inch of it. Every time I think of those years with Jane, I remember first, the brooch.

We had been working with water colors all morning. I became so engrossed in my very special creation that I didn't realize Jane was no longer in the room. I called her name, but she didn't answer.

Maybe she went to the outhouse, I thought. I rolled over to the window and looked, waiting, but no one came out of the little slanted two-holer with the sliver of a moon cut out of the door.

I wheeled into the hallway, calling her name. I wheeled down the ramp to the kitchen and called her name; but there was no Jane to be found.

"Have you seen Jane?" I asked Mother.

"Not since morning tea, dear."

"I can't find her anywhere."

"Perhaps she remembered an errand she needed to run in town. Don't worry. I'm sure she'll turn up."

I sighed with disgust and worry, and went back to my room. Another hour passed.

"And just where have you been?" I asked, when Jane finally returned.

"It's too close to Christmas for you to get nosy, Dorothy. Don't ask."

“Christmas?” I exclaimed. “This is only September, so that won’t fool me. Now, are you going to tell me what you’re up to or not?”

“No, young lady, I most decidedly am not. Not yet anyway.”

Well, that would never do. I had to find out what Jane was keeping from me. It was three weeks later before I finally got my chance. I spied her coming down the ladder from the attic, and rolled quietly back into my room before she saw me.

I wondered and imagined and dreamed all afternoon of what treasure she might have hidden in the attic. The attic was a little scary, and we never went up there; so I knew it had to be something really special for her to brave the critters and cobwebs that hung out up there.

I waited until the middle of the night when the house was quiet. The moon was full and bright, and lit up the attic through the vented openings on three sides.

I shivered from the cold and tucked the warm woolen blanket in tighter around my thighs. Then suddenly there I was in the attic, alone and frightened. It was the perfect opportunity. I could search for Jane’s precious secret.

But I couldn’t bring myself to do it. Torn between loyalty and curiosity, the battle raged within me.

“She shouldn’t keep secrets from me anyway,” my head declared.

“Listen to yourself. Jane’s secret is none of your business,” whispered my heart.

“But I’m her best friend. We tell each other everything.”

“Then it must be pretty important to her that you don’t find out.”

“What could be such a big deal anyway?”

“Would you want Jane poking through your special memories box without permission?”

I had no argument for that one, so I wheeled out of the attic and down to my room, still curious, still angry, but almost glad I hadn't found whatever it was Jane had hidden in the attic.

October came and went, and I'd forgotten all about Jane's secret, until I overheard Pastor Smythe and Daddy talking in the study.

"Well, thank you for your time, Bill. I'd appreciate anything you might be able to do. That brooch has been in Mrs. Smythe's family for three generations. I wouldn't say anything except this is the last place she can remember having worn it. The catch is loose, and well, if it fell off while we were here for lunch in September, maybe, uh..."

He interrupted himself, then continued, "I'll be going now. Thanks for your time. I would have asked about it sooner, but Mrs. Smythe doesn't wear it often, and just missed it this morning. She had planned to wear it to a ladies' luncheon of some sort. You understand."

Gee, no wonder his sermons are so long. He can't even close a regular conversation.

The latch turned on the door and I wheeled back into the shadow of the stairwell. Pastor Smythe apologized and explained all the way to the door. I thought he would never actually leave, and I let out a breath of relief when the door closed against the frame with finality.

Daddy returned to the study, and suspicion sent me in search of Jane. I found her on the back steps, huddled in a shawl against the biting wind.

"Jane," I asked quietly, "can we talk?"

"Oh, Dorothy. Yes, of course."

"Upstairs, please? The wind is so cold, I'm afraid we'll both be sick, and I hate when Mother gives me her grandmother's cold remedy. Yuck!"

"I know what you mean," said Jane with a frown. "It reeks of dirty socks and tastes about the same, I expect. All right. You sound so serious. Is something bothering you?"

“I don’t know yet.”

Jane walked up the ramp behind Dorothy, humming the familiar tune she hummed almost daily, that Dorothy didn’t know the words to.

I must remember to ask her about that song. I keep forgetting to do that.

The sun fell warm and inviting across the window seat. Dorothy rolled toward it and Jane sat next to her on the end of the cushioned bench.

“What’s on your mind, sweetie?” asked Jane.

“I need to know what you have hidden in the attic.”

The light went out of Jane’s eyes. He turned away, and stared out the window. A deafening silence filled the room. When she did speak, it was in a hushed whisper. I had to lean way over in my chair to make out the words.

She spoke to the window pane, really, as if I weren’t even in the room. A tear slid down her cheek and dropped onto her folded hands.

“When I was a very small child, my mother was killed by a team of runaway horses. Gran told me then that Mother had a twin sister, Julie, somewhere out here, but she didn’t know her last name. I came to find her.”

She turned then and looked me in the eye.

“She said that Aunt Julie would have a brooch exactly like the one Mother had left me. You see, they were separated at birth when their father took Julie and ran away.

“Boston was the last place Gran had been able to trace her to. So here I am.

“It was a miracle when I found the identical brooch in the downstairs parlor,” Jane continued, breathless. “Gran had etched a star on the back of the casing. That same star was on the brooch I found.

“Dorothy. Has someone come looking for it? Is that why you are asking me these questions?”

“I think so. Pastor Smythe’s wife lost a brooch her grandmother had given her as a child. This was the last place she remembered wearing it.”

“The pastor’s wife?”

“Yes. You know. Julie Smythe from the church. I heard Daddy talking to Pastor Smythe in the study. We have to give it back, Jane. We have to. What if Mrs. Smythe is not your aunt? We could be in real trouble.”

Jane looked down at her hands.

“I wasn’t planning to keep it, Dorothy. I just thought I’d hold on to it until someone came and asked about it. You see, the owner just might be my aunt, and maybe I could be part of a real family again. Now that Gran is gone too, I long to share memories and pictures with Aunt Julie, and fill in the gaps.”

I hugged her, relief and joy and sympathy filling my heart, and spilling over through tears.

“It’ll be all right, Jane dear. You’ll see. Let’s tell Daddy. He’ll help you.”

The memory of that reunion still hugs me. Hugs were all over us that day.

“Aunt Julie?” asked Jane, standing near the pastor’s desk, clutching the brooch tightly in her hand.

Jane was met with a blank look.

“I’m not an aunt, honey. I have no family.”

Julie's father had kept Jane's mother a secret. In silent explanation, Jane took the chain from around her neck that held a family heirloom—every detail matched the brooch she clutched in her hand.

Julie Smythe stared at the twin ivory Cameos. I quietly rolled up beside her, Jane's family album across my lap. Their embrace was long and teary.

Jane came alive that day, and Julie became an aunt. The room was filled with sunshine, as though Gran and their mother smiled down at them from heaven.

“When there is love in the home, there is joy in the heart.” (Author unknown)

THE END