

The River's Gift

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1st Place Short Story 7th Grade

Tucked away in a small section of the earth lay a village. This village, like many, was modest in its size and wealth. Many of the village's inhabitants were poor, and those who weren't were far from wealthy. Each day, the adults and the children would go to work in the fields and pick whatever they could find. There was no time for school or for play, for food was scarce and too much of a rarity to be left unpicked. In the village lay a forest. The forest's resemblance to the village was uncanny. The trees did not bear any emerald leaves. Rich soil was replaced with a dry, lifeless floor. There were no crimson berries, or luscious fruit gracing the eyes of those who passed. It was as if the forest had been going hungry with the village. However, there was one exception. At the edge of the forest lay a small river. Remarkably, this river thrived in the forest. Sky blue water danced elegantly with the current, while flowers grew along its banks. But what was special about this river was not its appearance, rather its generosity.

At the end of every month, all of the village's children would run to the river, each child silently entertaining the thought of a full stomach. Once they approached the river's bank, they waded into the water. One by one, they succumbed to the current, and allowed the water to pass over their heads. The river could have carried the children downstream, but instead, it willed them to stay planted perfectly in place. With admirable synchronization, they reappeared for air, and when they looked down, their calloused hands held a gift from the river. Some held food, some held harvesting tools. Others collected nothing.

The river's gift was not something everyone received. Only the virtuous were gifted. Those deemed sinful were given a reminder that necessary survival and pure success was a gift only received by those with virtue.

The day before Gifting Day, each child was given a lecture on the value of virtue. That January, food had been especially scant, and the villagers were depending on their children's gift in order to survive the merciless winter. Thus, the thirty-first of January arrived with much enthusiasm, and parents reinforced the values of virtue to their children. Ten year-old Jacob was no exception to the grand expectations. Not a day passed without his mother reminding him of the significance behind words, or his father imploring him to act with consideration, and so, Jacob spent every day making a special effort to do as his parents told him.

On the eve of Gifting Day, warm colors flooded the sky. The sun dimmed its light on bland colored clouds, transforming them into a canvas of pale pink, velvet, and yellow blends, as it moved peacefully into the distant mountains. As night began its reign, and the picking in the fields ceased, Jacob heard the all too familiar sound of hungry children running eagerly toward the

river, using the stars and the pebbles under their naked feet as their only guide. Their contagious anticipation grew with each stride, capturing the mind of every villager, including Jacob, as he joined them in their run.

When Jacob finally arrived at the banks of the river, he was one of last to do so. Many of the children were already wading into the water, rejoicing at the prospect of being rewarded for their virtue. Jacob quickly joined them, and sprinted into the river. As soon as he entered, he was engulfed immediately by the glacial water, which ebbed resiliently against his sun scarred skin. He allowed the current to pass over him, and then quickly emerged feeling something light reach his hands. Before he could even look down, the sound of laughter rang in his ears. What could be so horrible? He bowed his head in shame when he saw it - an arrangement of thick paper. A book. He ran his fingers across the pages, feeling their unfamiliar texture in horror. He would have rather received nothing. Everyone knew books were unusable in this village. They would not feed a family, or help collect much needed crops. It was a sign from a river. A useless gift, a useless son, and a useless person. Looking at those around him - those who held food, those who held something that honored and assisted their families - tears began to form in the crevices of his small eyes, and as they fell onto his cheeks, he ran home, humiliation filling every corner of his mind, and sadness possessing his heart.

When Jacob arrived at his small cottage, he was sent to his room until the next Gifting Day, where he could not be tempted to be sinful. The anger his parents had expressed was nothing compared to the disappointment he had felt, but it pained him to know that his parents believed him to be a child lacking virtue.

A week had passed since Jacob was deemed unvirtuous by the selective river. Alone in his petite room, he was suffocated by the memory of his friends with food in their arms, while he stood mortified with an object branding him as a person with no purpose. Why would the river withhold something that would help him feed his family? Hadn't he been virtuous? With a sigh, he rested his head on his pillow, and fell into a deep sleep.

When Jacob opened his eyes, the first thing he saw was the book sprawled open on the worn floor of his bedroom. He watched it for a while, wondering if anything would happen. Perhaps its words would turn into grain? The river's magic was an unknown phenomenon. Yet, no transformations occurred. The pages were still paper, and the words were still ink. With the sliver of hope he had remaining, he dragged himself out of bed, lifted the book, and examined each page. Nothing. Yet he did it over and over again, exhausting his emotions to no avail. Defeated, he threw the book across his room, where it hit the wall with a dramatic finality.

Jacob watched it fall, resenting the book more and more with each passing second. Yet, he could not ignore the fact that the river had given him something, and the river's gifts had always been helpful. He lifted the book from the floor and sat down on his bed. Again, he flipped through the pages, but this time, he searched for words he could decipher instead of foods he could eat. After a few minutes he realized that this book was about a schoolhouse. One where children

would come to each day to learn new things. At first, the concept seemed foreign to Jacob. Why were the children learning instead of helping their families survive? However, as he continued to read, he learned that the knowledge the children in the book acquired from the schoolhouse would last forever, and unlike food, it would not disappear after being consumed. Knowledge would always be there to assist your family, to evolve generations, and lead to discoveries beyond the greatest magic.

When his punishment was over, he was let out of his room to run to the river and collect a gift. When the door closed behind him, he ran swiftly to the river, like a cheetah chasing its hopeless prey. Behind him, children followed, mimicking his quick movements. However, upon arrival, Jacob did not join the children in the river. Instead, he waited along its banks, until he found someone who had received nothing. When a boy ascended from the river, his hands bare, Jacob told him of what he learned in the book, how knowledge was the greatest gift of all, how that knowledge could be applied to grow crops. The boy laughed him off, but that did not dissuade Jacob. He tried again, until he found a small girl who was willing to listen to him. She wanted to learn, her hunger for knowledge surpassing her desire for food, and so Jacob came up with an idea.

Years passed since Jacob was given a book as a gift. Many things changed. The river was no longer used. The villagers were no longer hungry, and the concept of virtue, while repeated, was taught out of kindness, not out of necessity for food. The main difference was that the children no longer worked in the fields. They were busy, collecting knowledge from a schoolhouse. Learning how to read, write, and even farm more efficiently to better feed their families. Yet the most important thing they learned was how knowledge was the greatest gift of all, and how it contributed to their survival. Every year, their teacher told them the story of how the schoolhouse came to be. How he, a hungry boy from the village, was given the priceless gift of knowledge, and the even more extraordinary gift to pass it on to others.