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THE GIFT

By Joseph Bruchac

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THE LAND WENT BACKWARDS past her as Emma watched through the window. The spring was further along here. There were leaves the size of a squirrel's ear on the oak trees and people were already planting their crops in the fields. As she watched, the fields and the telephone poles close to the tracks seemed to be going backwards rather than the train going forward. She wished once again that she was going backwards herself, back towards the station at Syracuse where she had boarded this train which was taking her far away from home.

"You are going for the good of your people," the minister's wife had said, as she turned to look back at Emma sitting quietly in the back seat of the Model A Ford with her hands folded over her single black bag. The minister's wife had to shout to be heard over the sound of the engine. She held her broad-brimmed hat tightly on her head with one hand, gripping the seat with her other, as her husband drove them to the train station in his new automobile.

That had been a whole day ago. They had traveled a long way since then. Emma looked over at Mrs. Smith, sitting on the seat across from her, eyes seemingly closed in sleep.

But Mrs. Smith was not sleeping. She watched Emma through lidded eyes. She felt proud that she was accompanying Emma to the school, delivering her to her destiny. Emma was a fine young woman and Mrs. Smith had always enjoyed having Emma visit her home. Though the Indian girl seldom said anything, her manners were perfect and she had a bright, quick way about her. When she played her violin her fingers were like small birds fluttering across the strings. Mrs. Smith had never learned to play any instrument—she just didn't have the talent or patience. But she could triumph in the achievements of a girl like Emma, a girl she believed she was influencing towards a better way. It was her duty, Mrs. Smith thought, to help a young child find

her way, especially one from Onondaga where it seemed that the old-fashioned Indian ways were growing strong again. Those ways might have been good for the past, but not for this modern world of 1930. A young woman just entering the 6th grade couldn't travel alone all that distance so she had volunteered to be the one to escort the child to school. It was fortunate that Mrs. Smith had relatives to visit in Virginia.

Emma closed her own eyes, remembering the words others had spoken to her.

"You have a special gift, young woman," the principal of the school on the reservation had said when he called her into his office to introduce her to the two serious people sitting there. There was a very pale white man in a stiff black suit and a white woman whose face was almost olive colored. She wore the shiniest button shoes Emma had ever seen. They had come with the information that Emma Johnson had indeed been chosen because of her outstanding musical ability and her potential for leadership. She had been chosen from all the other young women in her school to go to the Hampton Institute, a special Indian School in Virginia.

"There you will learn the skills needed to be a leader among your people," said the woman with the olive-colored face. Emma noticed how strangely she spoke English, though the woman's voice had a kindness to it that made Emma feel as if she was really speaking to her and not speaking at her. She looked up into the woman's eyes. They were as dark as her own and Emma found herself wondering if this woman really was white.

"Maybe she is Indian, too," Emma thought. "Maybe she understands."

"There is a new world of opportunity for gifted people of color," the woman said. "In this new world women will not have to be second-class citizens anymore. A woman with an education can be a leader, even if she does have to make sacrifices. She may have to leave her people behind for a time, until she has learned enough to help bring them up to her own level."

Emma nodded, but she felt sad in her heart. This woman, whose face was as dark as her own, didn't really understand. Emma knew that education was a good thing. She loved the violin she was learning to play. The music of Mozart and Bach was as special and moving to her as the sounds of the birds singing their chorus at dawn. But she would not give up her love for those bird songs because she had learned this newer music. And she saw that this woman, with her belief in education, did not believe that

the old Indian ways were also a form of education. When she spoke about women becoming leaders, she spoke as if it were a new thing for Indians. But Emma knew that Iroquois women always were leaders. She remembered how her grandmother had spoken to her only a few days before. They were working in the sap house, boiling down the sweet gift from the maple trees to make syrup. Nothing had yet been said about Emma being chosen to go to the government boarding school, but for some reason that was what her grandmother had chosen to talk about.

"Most people don't understand. When you travel you'll find this. But remember that we women are the ones who take care of the families, take care of the land," Grama Phoebe had said to her. Emma's grandmother was one of the Clan Mothers. Her full name, as it appeared in the birth records, was Phoebe Big Knife.

"We women are always at the center of things," Grama Phoebe continued. "That is why everyone inherits their clan from their mother. That is why we are the ones who choose the chiefs and can take them out of office if they don't behave. That is why we women got together a long time ago and decided that it was important for some of our young people to go outside of our communities and learn in the schools of the whites. We Iroquois would have to learn about the ways of these new people for our people to survive. In those first days we only sent our young men. Sometimes that was a mistake because the white ways were hard for them. Some of them never came back to us. Some came back and were confused. For a time they even changed the way we did things around here and we lost our traditional government. They brought in something they called Rules of Order." Grandma Phoebe had laughed. "But it took more than white people's orders to rule us Onondaga women. It took us a while, but we put things back the way they should be. We got our traditional government back. Some of our young people who we sent out, they came back and helped us to survive. You speak to He Who Makes Everyone Angry. He was one of them. Take him this tobacco and sit a while and he will tell you stories about the schools."

Emma did not go that day to see He Who Makes Everyone Angry. But after meeting the two Indian Education people in the Principal's office, she walked across the valley towards the old chief's house. It was a warm March day and the snow was all gone from the field behind the school. Other boys and girls were getting ready to play Long Ball. They called to Emma to join them, but she continued on, crossing the road.

She went past the longhouse and walked until she came to the stream and crossed the bridge. The old man's house was up in one of those folds in their valley. There the earth was still bent from that time long ago when the Holder Up of the Heavens shook the land to wipe out the evil stone giants who wanted to destroy all the human beings.

He Who Makes Everyone Angry was sitting on his front steps, a cane in his left hand.

"My Grama sent you some tobacco," Emma said, after greeting him in Onondaga. The old man took the bundle of leaves in his right hand. "Ah," he said, in Onondaga, "this is good tobacco. See how green it is?" Then they sat for a while in silence. A red-capped woodpecker was working its way along the trunk of a dying elm tree near the old man's house.

"All those trees," He Who Makes Everyone Angry said, "they are dying from a disease that is carried by a beetle. That beetle was brought here from Europe. Now all our elm trees are being killed. No one will ever see a lodge like the ones our people used to make, all covered with the bark of our elm trees." He paused and tapped his cane on the steps. "When you go to that school, be sure to eat well and get rest. Keep your heart strong. You must do this because there is always sickness at those schools. Those white people do not know enough about medicine to cure our people when they get sick. I remember the big graveyard out behind the school buildings at Carlisle. Every year that graveyard got bigger.

The old man tapped his cane gently on the steps, its rhythm exactly that of the red-capped woodpecker in the tree above him.

The clacking of the train's wheels was like the rhythm of that woodpecker and the tapping of He Who Makes Everyone Angry's cane. Emma tapped her fingers on the black bag which she held in her lap. There was not much in that bag, for her parents and the elders knew how little she would be able to keep at the school. Her father and then her mother had each held her for a long time before she left their house. No one had said good-bye. There was no word for good-bye in Onondaga, and no one wanted to say anything in English. There would be plenty of English spoken where Emma was going.

At the school, they would want to separate her from her old ways of doing things. It was common practice for them to cut the long hair of the boys and place them in

military uniforms so that they would look alike and think alike and be disconnected from their old customs. They would not be allowed to speak their own languages. He Who Makes Everyone Angry had told her about the time he and a Seneca boy were whipped until they bled because they were caught speaking to each other in Iroquois. Then they were locked in a special dark room in the basement for further punishment. Four other boys were locked in there with them. After the teachers left them there, the boys had begun to tell each other traditional stories.

"I spent a lot of time in that room," He Who Makes Everyone Angry had said. "Those stories we learned from each other were so good that it made the beatings seem worth it. They just didn't understand that there was plenty of room in our heads for more than one kind of thinking. Maybe it was because their own heads were too narrow." Emma had laughed at that. The way he said it in the Onondaga language was so clear that it made her see the meanings even better than she would have in English.

"They do not understand the way we Iroquois do," he had said, "that we human beings always have a lot to teach each other. We have been learning things form their schools for more than one hundred years now. They have lots of good things to teach. But we have much still to give to them. This is what I think."

The train was pulling into a station. Mrs. Smith, the minister's wife, touched Emma's arm.

"Stay close to me, dear," Mrs. Smith said. "Hold tight to your bag. We are in the South, you know." She gestured and an elderly man in a uniform came over and picked up her own three heavy bags. His dark face and hands were as wrinkled as the bark of an elm tree. "Follow the porter, Emma."

The porter had a red cap on his head and Emma watched it bobbing through the crowded station. He was wearing steel taps on his shoes. Emma heard his feet clicking as he walked, the rhythm almost that of a song. Mrs. Smith didn't seem to notice, though. They walked for what seemed a long time. Then Mrs. Smith called to the porter to stop. "Wait here for us, boy," she said.

Emma wondered for a moment to whom Mrs. Smith was talking. There was no one but this elderly man and he was not a boy. In Onondaga Emma would have called him grandfather, but she knew he wouldn't be able to speak Iroquois.

Mrs. Smith handed the porter some change. "This is for you to take especially good care of our bags," she said. "Now wait here. We will be right back."

The elderly man in the gray uniform and the red cap nodded and smiled, but Emma could not see anything like a smile in his eyes.

"Come, dear," Mrs. Smith said, tugging at the sleeve of Emma's dress. Emma, still holding her black bag, followed her around the corner. Just past the large sign with the word "WOMEN" on it and a red arrow were two doors. One door said WHITE. The door itself was white and newly painted and the word was printed in neat black letters. The other said COLORED and that door looked worn, the letters as gray as the old porter's uniform.

Mrs. Smith looked pointedly at the two doors and nodded. "Yes," she said, "this certainly is the South! Now stay close to me, dear."

They went through the door marked WHITE. No one bothered them and no one seemed to pay any attention when they came out, but as they walked back towards the porter Emma wondered which door she would have gone through had she been alone in this Virginia train station.

The old man picked up the bags as if he hardly noticed their weight. Mrs. Smith led the way, the porter and Emma a few steps behind. The porter looked into Emma's eyes and it was as if, for just a brief moment, he was listening to her thoughts.

"Long way from your people, child?"

Emma nodded.

"You just got to carry your home with you wherever you go," he said.

"I'll remember," Emma said.

"I bet you will." The old man laughed, and it was a deep laugh that made her think of the sound of the spring flood waters in the stream at Onondaga. They were outside the station now and Mrs. Smith was gesturing to a cab. It stopped and she supervised the loading of her luggage before handing the porter a one-dollar bill.

"Come along, dear," she said, already halfway into the cab.

But Emma stood there by the curb, looking up at the porter. She opened the black bag and took out the corn husk doll which she had brought with her from Onondaga. It wore a calico dress and had been made as corn husk dolls had always been made—made to remind the people of all the great gifts given to them. Those great

gifts were the ones which can never be purchased, but only given free—air and the water and the earth which nurtured the corn and the beans and the squash. But the gifts were also the gifts of faithfulness, friendship and understanding.

“Grandfather,” she said, “thank you for what you’ve given me.” Then she handed the old man her gift.