

The Gifting

(A Ten Minute Play)

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CHARACTERS

QUINCE DILLINGHAM, an art patron and dealer; forties

GARLIN MANDRAKE MINTON, a barrister; forties

TIME

the present

PLACE

A parlor on the estate of Fennfield in Hampstead Heath, England.

Positioned around the stage are Grecian goddess statues
composed of artfully draped fabrics.

(In the parlor of an estate in Hampstead Heath, England, a door bell chimes, and QUINCE DILLINGHAM enters to greet GARLIN MINTON, a fastidiously dressed barrister who enters in a fury, drawing forth a pistol.)

GARLIN

You Judas! You bastard! You sodding son of a bitch!

QUINCE

Good to see you too, Garlin. You're not seriously going to shoot...?

GARLIN

If I don't, I'll have you arrested! I'll see your gallery disgraced, your reputation ruined! Now sit down!

QUINCE

I was waiting to hear from you.

GARLIN

It's bad enough you stole Clovis's work, work which rightfully belongs to me, but to display it in your gallery under a false name -- the unmitigated gall! You're shameless! You've no conscience! No scruples!

QUINCE

No need to get hysterical. Now please put down the gun and let me explain...

GARLIN

Oh, you'll explain all right -- to the judge, jury, and the whole bloody world when I expose you as the deceitful, lying rotter that you are!

QUINCE

Give me five minutes, just five minutes.

GARLIN

I've been to the gallery! I've seen them with my own eyes! I studied them; they're hers!

QUINCE

I admit they're similar but they're mine. I made them, and used another name.

GARLIN

You!? You can't sculpt! You can't even draw! (*gesturing to several statues*) What are these doing here?! She willed them to me! They're mine!

QUINCE

You can have them -- every one! I'll give you anything you want if you'll hear me out.

GARLIN

How do you live with yourself?!

QUINCE

Clovis gave me her hands.

GARLIN

What?!

QUINCE

When Clovis spoke her last words, she said, "Will you take my hands?" Naturally, I thought she was asking if I'd take her hands in my own, if I'd hold and caress them, but she was really asking if I'd take what they can do, what they can feel and create. You see, when we touched she truly gave me her hands -- so now I can do what Clovis could do! It's her gift to me, and it's changed my life.

GARLIN

My god...

QUINCE

Oh, I know it sounds preposterous, but remember when Clovis and I gave our first dinner party -- the week after we married?

GARLIN

No!

QUINCE

I was chopping chilies, but was so blotto the knife slipped and slashed the tendons on all four fingers of my left hand -- bloody awful mess. Surely you remember?

GARLIN

Vaguely.

QUINCE

Two doctors spent three hours stitching me up, and after that my chance to experience the world through touch was diminished -- until now. I didn't realize it until hours later when

QUINCE (cont'd)

I felt a strange tingling, and look! (*standing, fluttering his fingers*) A concert pianist couldn't ask for better mobility!

GARLIN

Stand back, damnit!

QUINCE

Naturally, it struck me as portentous to suddenly -- on the very night Clovis passed away -- to have my touch back, so the next day I went straight to Doctor Curry who called it a minor miracle, a gift of spontaneous healing. That's when it occurred to me -- when he said "gift" -- that's when I remembered Clovis saying, "take my hands," and that's when she gave me her gift.

GARLIN

My god, I've never heard such rubbish! And don't tell me you're so grief stricken you've lost your mind!

QUINCE

Ha! Very nearly, because you see, after this resurgence of feeling, the hands became restless, the digits wanted to dance -- tippity tap tap! Skimming surfaces, stroking textures -- they possessed a will of their own, a will to create!

GARLIN

I hope this isn't the story you're going to tell the police.

QUINCE

Why not? It's true! I suppose you think it's ironic that Clovis gave her gift to me.

GARLIN

What I think is that the trauma of losing her has affected your mind, and this is your perverse way of bringing her back.

QUINCE

Look at me, Garlin: a man my age doesn't suddenly find himself in the thrall of a talent he's never even aspired to. When I wanted to be an artist, it was a painter, then a composer, and briefly even a poet, but *never* a sculptor. This is from Clovis; Clovis had powers -- incredible, unspeakable powers. How can I make you believe me?

GARLIN

You can't!

QUINCE

But look at my draped damsels, my swagged hags, ha! I can weld, mix and mold; I brandish chisels, files and rasps; and slowly, very slowly, I'm introducing my work into various nooks in the gallery. I'm calling myself Francis King in honor of Clovis. You see, Clovis was the first king of the Franks. Rather clever, don't you think?

GARLIN

It's a despicable, flagrant lie! Clovis was born on Good Friday, and was named for the cloves in the Easter ham.

QUINCE

Really? Ha!

GARLIN

Quince, you need help, immediate psychiatric help. Everything you've said strikes me as dead wrong, unscrupulous, and unjust to Clovis.

QUINCE

What about me? It's exhausting being enslaved to her hands, all her frills and flounces looping this way and that. Of course, it's marvelous just to be able to do it, but I haven't slept more than three hours a night. The trouble is I'm mostly on my feet...

GARLIN

And off your trolley! Listen, Quince: people can't pass talent like a tray of hors d'ouvres. Talent stems from heredity, craftsmanship, years of arduous labor. What you've done is hoard her sculptures -- sculptures that should have been loaded on my lorry six months ago! But you won't get away with it! I won't let you steal the glory which by rights belongs to Clovis. She never even had her bloody fifteen minutes.

QUINCE

She didn't miss much.

GARLIN

I've met with my solicitor and assuming I don't shoot you, you can expect to be arrested by the end of the week.

QUINCE

Arrested?!

GARLIN

Then you'll be arraigned, prosecuted, and confined at Sudbury Prison.

Prison?!

QUINCE

I'll also filing a civil suit.

GARLIN

You're what?!

QUINCE

By April the gallery will be closed;...

GARLIN

No!

QUINCE

...your property confiscated;...

GARLIN

Oh, Garlin...

QUINCE

...you'll be bankrupt!

GARLIN

I never knew you could be so vengeful. You really want to ruin me?

QUINCE

You'll manage. Parolees are placed in various trades.

GARLIN

Trades?!

QUINCE

Laying bricks, tarring roads,...

GARLIN

Oh, Garlin...

QUINCE

...stuffing sausages.

GARLIN

QUINCE

How can I make you see?

GARLIN

You can't!

QUINCE

Ah! I know, I'll prove it! I'll demonstrate; I'll sketch your portrait!

(QUINCE snatches a sketch pad and pencil.)

QUINCE

The least you can do before wrecking my life is give me three more minutes, just three. Now sit! Sit in that chair.

GARLIN

I will not!

QUINCE

Then stand! (*sketching at a manic pace.*) Look how deftly I'm drawing! Clovis said a good sculptor must above all be a good draftsman, capable of generating lines, and not just any old lines, but lines that lead towards depth. Think of it: without depth we'd all be exposed, our features flattened like platters. Let's take your nose for instance: the flawless Minton nose! It's juxtaposition to the lacrymal fossa at the corner of the eyes is purest poetry. And now I'm drawing your ear! More than any feature, it varies infinitely, and as a rule the measurement from ear to ear equals the measurement from chin to brow. Don't move! I keep wondering: if I have Clovis's hands, do I also have her brain? I mean, our tactile feelings are mapped onto our minds from infancy, so really, I'm a child again. I even removed the signs in the gallery that said "don't touch" because they might as well be saying, don't feel, don't breathe, drop dead!

GARLIN

That's it! Enough!

QUINCE

Wait!

(QUINCE whips his sketch off the pad and waves it.)

QUINCE

Voila!

(Pause as GARLIN snatches the portrait and stares.)

QUINCE

Well...? Now do you believe me? It's *your* face -- the way Clovis would have drawn it!

GARLIN

(pause, collecting himself) Yes,...yes it is. Apparently, losing Clovis has caused more than a breakdown; it's caused a breakthrough -- to your own talent. You've repressed it all these years, now it's finally emerged, but don't deceive yourself -- it's a rip off, and you're nothing but a degenerate thief!

QUINCE

But at least you believe these sculptures are mine!

GARLIN

It's...possible.

QUINCE

Let me take you to the studio; let me show you how I work!

GARLIN

Even if you convince me, you're still just a copyist, a trifling forger who's appropriated the style of a woman you lived with for twenty years and never thought worthy of a single solitary exhibit!

QUINCE

That's not true; it's not that simple. The trouble with you Garlin is you've never appreciated my position.

GARLIN

I most certainly have: you're a demigod! You proclaim "The Chosen," then they're instantly exalted, make heaps of money, while Clovis languished in utter obscurity.

QUINCE

Dealers who exhibit the work of their wives are perceived as nepotistic, and the wives are invariably subjected to ridicule. It's a conflict of interest, a question of honor.

GARLIN

It's not honor; it's fear -- of the petty prejudices of petty people, all of whom you value more than you ever valued Clovis, which is why she left all her sculptures to me!

QUINCE

You're her brother!

GARLIN

And I'll do all I can to make the whole world see how splendid they are.

QUINCE

Believe me, Garlin, the world sees what it's told to see and *how*, and it won't give a damn about Clovis and her sculptures.

GARLIN

Then I'll tell them; I'll show them.

QUINCE

Where and with whom? Besides, most dealers can't tell a work of art from a butchered cow. Truth be told, the art world's a swamp of faddist toads who can't see beyond what's hyped or most likely to induce vomiting.

GARLIN

You're the toad, Quince; you're the king of toads!

QUINCE

Look, Garlin, can't we be more civil? This isn't easy on either of us, and you're wrong about Clovis: She preferred obscurity. Recognition only matters if you question your worth, and Clovis never did.

GARLIN

You supercilious ass! What do you think destroyed and devoured her? Doubt, the pain and poison of doubt!

QUINCE

What melodramatic drive! What Clovis had was cancer -- very simple. The cancer won and that's that. If she had doubts, she never stopped working long enough to indulge them. And stop looking so bloody sanctimonious. What did you ever do for her career?

GARLIN

I praised her, encouraged her, took a genuine interest.

QUINCE

And how many sculptures did that sell? I once told Clovis the art world would need a seismic leap of taste for her work to be accepted much less esteemed. Now I'm learning it first hand since I haven't sold a single piece.

GARLIN

Good! Because I won't stand idly by while you profit from her work.

QUINCE

I never expected you to. I was hoping we'd share the profits.

GARLIN

What?!

QUINCE

Well, why not? I know you need the money. Clovis told me about your investments -- Sussex poultry, wasn't it?

GARLIN

None of your damn business!

QUINCE

The point is, once I convince the public to appreciate the statues, we could make a tidy fortune.

GARLIN

(pause) God, you never cease to amaze me -- to think I once admired you. You're the vainest, most repulsive man I've ever met!

QUINCE

Look, Garlin, I don't expect you to like me, but perhaps you might learn to tolerate me, or at least tolerate my creations. Look, here, my very own Pandora. From a distance, she's light as pastry, and yet when you touch... Please, Garlin, touch her. Clovis said her sculptures could be used as a kind of meditation. She wanted people to touch them, to lose themselves in the hills and hollows.

(A haunting melody fades in as GARLIN succumbs to the sensuous forms, stroking Pandora's curves.)

QUINCE

You'll find they're very...consoling. Every fold has a life of its own, especially when it loses its moorings, casting wayward shadows -- like that playful one on her thigh.

GARLIN

The fabric seems as alive as the flesh. Oh, lord, my...my knees have gone wobbly.

QUINCE

Sit down; I'll fix some drinks.

(QUINCE opens a cabinet and pours two brandies.)

GARLIN

I can see why you cling to your delusion, but even if Clovis did have the power to pass on her talent, she'd never have passed it to you.

QUINCE

I can't explain that. All I know is we've suffered a tragic loss, but believe me, Garlin, the gift of Clovis redeems the loss.

GARLIN

No, no, it doesn't, nothing redeems the loss.

QUINCE

True, I...I only meant it makes it...bearable.

GARLIN

Does it really?

(GARLIN grasps QUINCE'S hands.)

GARLIN

Then give me the hands!

QUINCE

Ouch!

GARLIN

Go on! Say what Clovis said to you! I'm serious; now speak up, damnit, or I'll kill you! Now say the words!

QUINCE

(pause) Won't you...won't you take my hands?

GARLIN

Yes! Yes, I'll take your hands! Ha, ha!

(Pause as GARLIN releases QUINCE and stares, fluttering his fingers, as QUINCE weeps with remorse.)

QUINCE

Nooooooooo, noooooooooo...

End of Play

