

Assignment: Write an epiphany, a brief intense experience that leads to an important insight.

### **The Imperfect Gift**

by Justin Clack

Instructor: Joseph Sternberg

The sun fires its rays deep into the winter's midmorning, and the light filters through a window and onto the floor. After having just talked for an hour to my Sunday school class about Jonah and the whale, my throat is raw. The effort of answering the children's barrage of questions has left me exhausted and dejected.

The lesson went well. The eight-and nine-year-olds understood the plot, and more importantly, they understood what Jonah must have felt, entombed in the belly of a whale, surrounded on all sides by wet, fetid fish flesh.

Today, that is how I think I feel, cut off from the world by this disgusting layer of flesh I call my body. I am seventeen years old, and I have a face covered with bright red pimples. When I look at my body, all I can see is a pair of long gangly arms, placed on a stunningly white torso, which is balanced precariously on twig-thin legs. My face looks far worse; my nose, chin and Adam's apple jut out in three hideous explosions of flesh, causing me to resemble a troll. I feel hopelessly cut off from all that is human and beautiful; I am an island in a sea of imperfection, with no isthmus to the mainland of humanity.

I walk out of my classroom and down a dank passage that leads to the courtyard. Before entering the courtyard, I stop and lean against the smooth, machine-crafted doorpost of the building's exit. A pool of light has formed on the cold linoleum floor that surrounds the door. My bag of worn Sunday school props slung loosely over my shoulder is getting heavy. I let the bag slide off; it then hits the ground with a muffled thump and splashes in the pool of sunlight. Directly in front of me stands an iron table with a dimpled and worn surface. On top of the table are opaque teacups and saucers ready to be used by the congregation after the service.

The Church service has just ended, and people are beginning to congregate in the courtyard. Helpers scurry between the table and the kitchen, carrying scalding pots of coffee and tea. As the helpers complete their preparations, the crowd of people slowly migrates toward the table.

I notice a young boy, four years of age, approaching. I know him from the class I taught last year. He stops in front of the table, then pans his eyes over the cups and saucers, finally stopping at a beaten up old teapot. He lifts his eyes from the teapot to me and slowly, his tight, fresh face lights with a smile.

"Hi Justin," he bleats.

"Good morning," I reply.

He walks around the table and stands in front of me. I am two and a half feet taller than he is, and looking down on him makes me feel like a giraffe. So I lower myself onto my haunches to make our conversation easier. I am curious why he has approached me, but before I have a chance to ask, he hugs me. I squeeze back and smell the pungent mix of soap and play on his shirt.

"How are you?" I ask.

"Good," he replies.

I can't help but smile at how confident he is.

"What is that?" I ask, pointing to a miniature blue van with oversized tires and tinted windows.

"It's my car," he replies and hands it to me.

I take the car from him and begin a mock appraisal. First, I hold it up to the sunlight and rotate it. Then, I turn to him and nod; next, I flick its wheels and watch them spin.

“Niiiiice,” I comment enthusiastically.

His shoulders arch back; he presses his chest forward in pride.

“I noticed it was your birthday today. Have you enjoyed it so far?” I ask him.

“Yes, my teacher gave me chocolate,” he replies.

“What kind?” I ask.

“Um . . . chocolate,” he replies again and opens his hand to reveal his treasured last piece.

“Kom bokkie,”<sup>1</sup> his mother’s voice calls out in our general direction. He snaps to attention and walks towards here.

“Bye,” he shouts over his shoulder as an afterthought.

“Cheers,” I reply and reach for my bag.

I stand up and begin to leave.

“Wait!” I hear his little voice call out from behind me.

I turn around to see him looking up and smiling at me. He raises his short, plump little arm with his hand tightly balled into a fist. Slowly, one-by-one, he peels his sticky fingers back to reveal his last piece of chocolate.

He wants me to take the melted blob from his grubby hand and eat it. My stomach convulses at the thought. I also feel uncomfortable accepting the chocolate because it is his last piece.

He raises his arm higher with a slightly distressed expression and motions for me to accept. Not wanting to offend him, I ignore the violent internal protests, reach down, take the deformed rectangle, and eat it. It tastes salty from the sweat of his hand; I fight an impulse to screw my lips. Eventually, the taste of chocolate comes and I can smile.

“Ummmm, that’s good; thank you,” I lie.

His face lights with pride and joy; he smiles, showing all his teeth.

Then it hits me! It comes crashing through like a freight train—I realize what it is I am looking at. I fight back tears. This small child with his small gift has opened the big gates of Heaven. Here beaming back at me is everything human and beautiful. It is not his appearance or his imperfect gift that strike me but his heart and action of giving. It is not my appearance or performance but the spirit of my undertakings that counts.

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<sup>1</sup> Kom Bokkie is an Afrikaans term of endearment. Roughly translated, it means “come here my young antelope.” In Afrikaans, the expression conjures images of a wholesome and natural being given by the creator and for whom the speaker has intense affection. It has a very guttural/Dutch pronunciation.