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Velvet Ribbon or Violet Handkerchief

Whenever I see an old fashioned handkerchief, I remember my grandmother at Christmas. It's the kind of hanky you can't find any more: a small square of tightly knit cotton, with possibly a bit of lace in the corner, but certainly a bit of colorful embroidery. The one I recall most vividly was stitched with purple violets.

When I was five, roses and violets were the only flowers I could identify, so since Woolworth's had no rose hankies, I focused on the one with violets, cuddled by heart-shaped green leaves. Just at eyelevel, the crisp white hankies were carefully arranged in overlapping rows to reveal each embroidered corner. After a while, I wandered off, and then returned, just to stare, a bit timid about their getting "soiled" if I touched them.

Truthfully, I was more attracted to the narrow spools of ribbon in another area of the store, called "Notions" as I learned sometime later. The ribbons' tails dangled near the edge where I could stretch on tiptoes to feel the soft velvet. I was fascinated by the widest ribbon that darkened into a deep red when smoothed one way, but turned pink when pressed another. I couldn't understand how the same thing could have two very different colors.

Deciding between a beautiful hankie and velvet ribbon was my second new experience that day. This visit to the "Five-and-Dime" had been my first time in a store alone, so I'd been exhilarated and fearful. My mother had allowed me to roam the aisles to find a gift for my grandmother Dodie. At first, I'd been surprised. "You mean I have to stay here?"

My mother had walked me up and down the wooden aisles to show me the boundaries.

"Yes, I want you to pick out a gift for your grandmother. I'll be in the Underwear section."

"Me? I can't do that." Truly, this was a new task. In my long experience of Christmases, I'd always received presents, never given one. Well, at least not from a store. This was much more serious than bringing home some Kindergarten art project.

"Mommy, I can't. I don't know how."

"Just pick out a few things and wait until I get back. I'll help you. And then we'll have a soda over at the counter, over there. See?"

I was still petting the velvet ribbon when my mother returned. "So what have you found?"

"I think Dodie would like this."

"Velvet ribbon?" My mother stooped down and looked me in the eyes. "Are you very sure?"

I nodded.

"What would she do with it?"

I shook my head sideways, not knowing. Suddenly, I felt a tremble inside. I knew then that my mother was making me decide: *Who was this gift for really? Me--or my grandmother? What would she do with a piece of ribbon?*

"I know, mommy. I have a better idea. Come see the hanky I picked out." I took her hand and led her to the tray. "The one with violets."

"I think that's a better choice. Come now, we'll pay and then have the soda."

Naturally, my grandmother loved the hanky. I felt some pride, giving it to her. However, thinking back, the real present that Christmas was not the hanky, not even the experience of giving to another, but the larger gift: the gift of allowing a child to decide between being selfish or being able to think about another person's wants or needs.