

Diana and the Lamp

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AS A CHILD growing up in a rural area of northern Florida, I was always playing catch-up with my older sister and her friends. They would effortlessly glide away on their big bicycles, leaving me to pedal furiously behind them on my little bike with training wheels. More often than not, I would get stuck in the ruts of the dirt road and end up running after them, pumping my stubby little legs as fast as they could go.

One of my sister's friends in our neighborhood was a girl named Diana. She was three years older than me and exceptionally tall for her age. She was a gentle, kind girl who was nicer to me than any of the other big kids.

I still remember how proud I was when Diana's class of highly esteemed fourth-graders would pass by us lowly first-graders as we lined up to go into the school cafeteria. Diana would smile at me, honoring me in front of my friends by saying hello. She was my hero.

The only thing I didn't like about Diana was her father. Mr. Reed was well over six feet tall,

a giant in my estimation. He had a big, deep voice and a stern face from years of military training. He was very strict and often barked orders to Diana and her little brothers, who knew to obey immediately. All of the neighborhood kids were scared of him.

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One warm spring day, when I was six and Diana was nine, a group of us kids were playing in Diana's room. When the gravel crunching in the driveway announced the arrival of Mr. Reed's car, everyone suddenly remembered a reason why they needed to go home. I noticed the sad look on Diana's face as all the kids quickly departed, and with a sudden burst of compassion that inexplicably overrode my fear of Mr. Reed, I volunteered to stay and keep playing. A smile of gratitude flickered across her face as we hunkered down to a rousing game of Parcheesi.

After tiring of board games, Diana suggested that we go twirl our batons outside. (A hard and fast rule allowed no batons or balls inside the Reed house.) As she picked up her long, slender "big girl" baton, and I grabbed my short, fat beginner model, I couldn't resist trying to impress Diana and show off my superior skills by whirling it around my neck.

Suddenly, the sound of shattering glass filled the air as Diana's bedside lamp crashed

to the floor. Horrified at what I had done, I stood speechless as the huge shadow of Mr. Reed filled the doorway.

Immobilized by fear, I blanched as Diana moved between her father and me, his face turning crimson and the large vein on his forehead beginning to pulsate. "Who is responsible for this?" Mr. Reed's booming voice echoed through the house.

Without a moment's hesitation, Diana held up her baton and said, "I am, Daddy...it's my fault." She then turned to me and pushed me out the door, stating firmly, "Debbie, I think you should go home now."

She closed the bedroom door behind me, but I couldn't move, or even breathe. I just stood there in the hallway, clenching my hands together as Mr. Reed shouted at Diana about rules, learning lessons, and becoming responsible by paying for a new lamp with her own money.

Then I heard him spank her, and I couldn't take it anymore. I found myself running hard, so hard I thought my lungs would burst from the pain. I didn't stop until I was in my own room, lying prone on my bed, sobbing and gasping for air.

The magnitude of the situation hit me like a ton of bricks. The person I most admired and looked up to was at that very moment receiving the worst kind of punishment in my place. I deserved to be the one getting the spanking, but she willingly took the pain for me.

I knew that nothing I could do would make up for the misery Diana had gone through, but I had to do *something*. I shook the coins out of my piggy bank and was dismayed to find only three quarters, a dime, and two pennies. I stuffed the money into my pocket and retraced my steps to Diana's house.

I didn't even knock, but walked right in and went straight to her room, where I knew she would be. Diana's eyes were red and puffy, and I noticed that she avoided sitting down. She smiled into my tear-streaked face and said that she was glad to see me. I held out my pitiful offering, knowing it wouldn't be nearly enough to pay for the lamp, but she simply shook her head.

"I'm not going to take your money," she said softly. "It was an accident, and it's all over now, so let's not talk about it any more." And we didn't. Not that day, not ever.

A few months later, during the lazy days of summer, a group of us kids decided to sleep overnight in the neighborhood tree house. By midnight, everyone had gone home, one by one, except Diana and me. We lay there looking up at the stars and whispering our dreams for the future. We were like equals, drawn together by a bond neither one of us really understood at the time.

Although Diana moved away the next year, memories of her dignity, bravery, and self-sacrifice have stayed with me to this day. She truly taught me what friendship is all about. 🍷