

THE GIFT

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The old professor emptied his overcoat pockets, placing keys, wallet and a roll of Tums on the bedside table. Without glancing at the girl, he walked to the far end of the room, took off his coat and folded it over a chair before turning to see if she had followed him.

Cathy, a nineteen year old virgin who suffered from a lifelong ambition to remain blameless in all things, had indeed, for reasons she never questioned, followed the old man into his hotel room. Hearing the door close behind her, she tightened her pony-tail, tucking renegade wisps behind her ears with anxious fingers, one forefinger pressing her glasses up against their highest point so the little landing pads settled into their old indentations on either side of her nose. Confidence secured, she stood watching as her host drew up a side chair close to the bed and sat to remove his shoes. Seeming to ignore her, he stood then and folded down the covers, then climbed into bed, trousers and all, stuffing his feet under the blanket and wriggling down until fully reclined. A gratified sigh. His portly stomach gave him a pregnant profile, and his toes made a comical tent at the end of the bed. Cathy watched him breathe, wondering if he was all right.

Now what? She hated not knowing what was expected of her.

The professor reached out to pat the seat of the near chair.

“Sit,” he commanded.

“Sorry.” Her preemptive apology for failure to obey. Hoping not to offend, she stepped forward, took the back of the chair in both hands, and returned it to its original position. A rather pointed correction, she feared. To compensate, she unbuttoned and shrugged off her blazer, hung it on the back of the chair with her purse and scarf. Then she sat, confident in her clear signals. All was well. She smoothed imaginary wisps of hair up off the back of her neck and wondered how long she would have to stay before it was okay to leave. How does one end such a visit? Elbows braced on armrests, Cathy pondered her options. Professor Bergman—Herb, to her—lay on his side, hands under his cheek, gazing at her with a quizzical frown.

“Why so far away?” he asked, plaintively. She answered with her own frown and a shrug, mildly offended by his question. Why did he want her closer? She didn’t ask; she would sound querulous, suspicious. But while politeness held, wariness increased. If she had made a mistake coming up with him, she would unmake it when means appeared. Meantime, she should guard against unfair distrust.

Cathy had readily agreed to dine with Professor Herb Bergman in the city this Sunday evening, after his second address to the Bryn Mawr College interfaith meeting, delivered at her invitation. Last fall, in charge of finding monthly interfaith speakers, she’d procured Herb at the suggestion of her true love Josh, a student in the professor’s comparative religion class at Temple U. She and Josh had joined the professor for dinner at the College Inn after his talk. This spring, again short on speakers, Cathy had invited the professor to return. He had agreed by return mail.

Professor Bergman’s book, *The Gift of Giving*, explored the call to altruism found in every major religion, which he set against the problem of natural human selfishness. He examined the means employed by different faiths to promote unselfish behavior. Cathy had challenged him at that first dinner, last fall.

“I thought from your title you were going to show how giving is its own reward, blessing the giver as well as the receiver. But instead, you seemed to say religious training was required. One must implant a desire to please some divine being before anyone is likely to be selfless or generous or even kind. I beg to differ.” She loved speaking this way, from the authority that dwelled in her. She was sometimes chastised for sounding so sure of herself, but not tonight. Herb answered her seriously, resting the roll he was buttering.

“How do you think a child learns to share if he isn’t taught? When does he begin to find it rewarding to give?”

“The first time you discover you have the power to please or help someone, isn’t there a natural delight? I think we’re born with a hunger to give, so we find it intrinsically rewarding. Also, doesn’t impulsive generosity arise from natural empathy? Normal children are spontaneously generous all the time. They love helping, beg to be allowed. They rush to the aid of a younger child who cries.” Cathy ran out of breath in her urgency to convey a truth she believed no one could gainsay.

Raised in a family of six children, she had often seen the most selfish child prompted to spontaneous generosity, but why? She hazarded a guess. “Perhaps giving confers a sense of power on the otherwise powerless.” A new idea; she wanted to run away to think it over.

“Interesting theory. Could be true for children, and women, but men may be another matter. They are handed power from the start. Don’t they need religious training to curb their selfishness?” Herb quirked his eyebrows, like a player who’d scored. Cathy couldn’t disagree with Herb’s assessment of men in general, and took pleasure in hearing their most glaring fault named so baldly. Even so, she rallied.

“But Herb, not all men lose their natural empathy as they grow into power. Surely we know of men who act altruistically beyond the coercion of religious training.” Together the professor and the girl delved on, seeking the provenance of altruism, arriving finally at the question of altruistic acts in Hitler’s Germany.

“So, the people who defied the laws and sheltered the Jews, were they doing it for religious reasons or common humanity?” Cathy took a bit of poached salmon, when Josh, who had been silent, chimed in with, “Didn’t the Catholic Church’s response to the Nazis leave something to be desired?” Cathy smiled at him.

“True,” Herb laughed, and addressed his dinner. “You’re too many for this old man,” he said, looking pleased. Cathy was thrilled to think she and Josh had triumphed over Herb’s cynicism. She enjoyed her salmon immensely.

Tonight over dinner alone with Herb (Josh had begged off), she’d talked about her family, her upbringing in the South, the hypocrisy in certain kinds of typically Southern giving, which so often seemed based on a subtle barter not true generosity. “People keep track,” she said.

Herb asked, “Can any gift be totally free of anticipated payback?” Cathy answered at length in the affirmative and felt happy and filled with wisdom, as she had last year. Walking to her tram stop after dinner, as they passed Herb’s hotel, he invited her to stop by his room. She was surprised to find him staying in the city rather than going home to his wife in the suburbs as he had before, but she didn’t inquire.

“I have a little gift for you,” he said, “in celebration of our friendship.” Cathy hesitated not at all, laughing off a warning joke she’d once heard about girls who fell for ploys to get them into a man’s room. “Let me show you my etchings,” elicited roars of laughter. The implication couldn’t possibly apply tonight. A

professor of religion, for heaven's sake, she told the warning voice. He'd called it "friendship," and she was flattered. To refuse would be prudish, ungrateful. She would accept a copy of his book or whatever made him happy. Besides, they were having such a captivating conversation.

And now here she was, and he was curled in bed, gazing at her, and she couldn't think of a thing to say. She should be on her train back to college.

"What time is it?" she asked. "I need to get back before eleven, or I'll miss the Lantern Man."

"What's the Lantern Man?" Herb looked amused.

"He lights our way back to the dorm. If you miss the last lantern, you get locked out and you're in real trouble."

"That sounds serious." Herb's grin annoyed her. But he checked his watch. "It's only 9:45. When's the last train you should be on?"

"It's the 10:23. I should go soon."

"Then I better get with it!" Herb slid his feet toward the floor and sat up. He reached for a small velvet box on his nightstand, and patted the bed beside him.

"Come see what I have for you."

Curiosity trumped caution. Cathy crossed to sit where he wanted her. He passed her the box and leaned close. She leaned away, feeling for a catch, which the box didn't have.

"Open it." His smile was soft and happy. She lifted the hinged lid on its taut spring.

The golden ornament was not trapped in a satin slot like a conventional ring. There was no cushioning because of its odd shape: not a ring at all, but an elegant conjoining of golden swoops, with a dark ruby set on prongs at the vertex of one swoop. She held her right hand steady as he slipped it on. Perfect. The gold felt alive where its curves embraced her finger.

"How did you guess the fit?" Cathy looked at him, troubled.

"Your hands are much like my wife's." Herb looked at the ring. "I know her ring size."

"So, this should have been hers." A feeble attempt to extract herself from a situation she suddenly found compromising. Cathy was confused by how much she liked the ring.

“No. I had it made for you.”

Worse and worse. Cathy started up and returned to her chair, abandoning the velvet box on the bed. She sat staring at Herb, carressing the bauble on her finger. Horrifying to know this about herself, how utterly she wanted this ring. Made for her. It did seem so.

Now what? Say “Thank you” and go? How could she?

But he wasn’t done.

“I wanted to ask you,” Herb began, and when he continued, his voice was strained, his words broken. “I wonder—is there any way—do you think you ever could...” He stopped again. The next was barely a whisper. She heard, in disbelief,

“...love me, a little?”

Cathy’s mind skittered, wild for an exit. What was he asking? What did that mean, “love me a little?” As in, *touching*? Every cell shrank from the idea.

Trapped, she blurted, “But I love Josh!”

“I understand Josh is young and attractive,” the tone was condescending.

He certainly is, she wanted to shout, regarding the old man in horror. Tufts of dark hair grew out of his ears, a globular growth nestled in the crease of one nostril. Sticky white saliva at the corners of his mouth threaded his thick lips together when he spoke.

None of which mattered in a friendship. But love? Cathy knew that love didn’t absolutely depend on looks. Ugly men often had devoted wives, and plain women got loving husbands. But romantic love required what she had with Josh, who was beyond beautiful in her eyes. Their love had bloomed out of friendship, although Josh’s beauty was a good starter, she admitted. Herb was no starter and she’d had no chance to find love sneaking up on her, since she’d only met him twice. He had no right to ask it!

Perhaps she didn’t have to be *in love* to be a “little loving.” But she suspected the liberties he might want to take. He wasn’t asking for a lullaby. Well, he wouldn’t get loving of any kind from her with a bribe, even that marvel of a ruby ring. Her fingers tightened on it.

“Still, I thought maybe you—I’ve felt we had a . . . spiritual connection, perhaps... a friendship of the soul...”

Exactly that! She wanted to scream. How stupid to imagine anything more. Worse than stupid, disillusioning. He was like any man—there was nothing spiritual about it! She had been idiotic to think so. Anger at her own stupidity was overwhelmed by rage. Her disappointment in him was crushing, her anger without compassion. He had forced from her the very rejection she had meant to avoid by coming up here in the first place, *trying to be nice*. If she was unable to—what? It could not be imagined. She would have to be unkind.

Horrible that Herb turned out to be like the teenage boys she dated at Mama’s insistence, who asserted their right to maul her after taking her to a movie or out to eat. “Don’t take the goods if you don’t like the bargain,” one miffed boy had told her. Fair enough. She hadn’t gone out with him again. But how could she have known Herb thought tonight was that kind of date!

What was Herb bargaining for after all, with this incredible ring? Cathy held the old man in a burning stare, but he’d closed his eyes, his right hand fumbling at his chest, scrabbling toward his left armpit. His eyes opened into her accusing stare, and he looked away, gasping.

“In my coat,” he said. “On the chair – upper left inside pocket. My nitro pills. Quickly.”

She did not move quickly, but she went. Got the pills, set them on the night-stand beside the ring box. Returned to her chair, picked up her coat and donned it.

“Please,” he said. “Water.” A glass on the nightstand. She took it to the bathroom, filled it, and returned to set it beside him. He reached out and seized her wrist. She jerked out of his grip.

“I need you to open the pill bottle. Please,” he begged.

This she did, and waited as he swallowed a sip of water, leaning up on his elbow. He reached to set the water down, and spilled a little with his shaky hand. Then he shook out a tiny pill, pushed it under his tongue and lay back, closing his eyes. This performance turned her to stone. Responsibility fell over her like a net. Unfair! Anger slashed her free and kept on slashing—at his imagined desires, his will to entrap. Friendship, indeed! She picked up her scarf and purse and left him without a backward look.

In the hallway, she fled to the exit stairs and ran down one floor before summoning the elevator. If he came after her, she would appear to be gone. In the lobby, she stopped to instruct the receptionist, a dim-looking young man with sleepy eyes.

“There’s an elderly gentleman in Room 406 who may be having a heart attack. Unless you want to find him dead in the morning, you should call 911. They’ll know what to do.” The kid looked at her stupidly. “911! Do it now! Room 406! Write it down. Bergman, 406!” she commanded, then spun on her heel and flew to the door.

In the street a light rain was falling. She raised her heated face to the welcome mist. Three blocks along, she raced for a trolley just pulling to a stop. At 30th Street Station, she bounded up the stairs to Track 4 and stood, breathing hard. Within seconds, the Paoli Local pulled in—the universe smiling on her escape.

Surveying the worn, dirty seats, she chose one with an unusually fresh white napkin pinned to the headrest. Settling, she turned her thoughts inward, her left hand fingering the curvatures of the ring, the protruding ruby in its delicate prongs. She stared out the dusty window at scattered lights passing in the darkness. Nothing else was visible past her own reflection, as the car was well lit within. Seeing herself reflected here, free and clear and headed back to college, didn’t prevent her also seeing a girl who had walked away from an old man likely having a heart attack. That looked bad. She met the accusation with a deep, convulsive shudder; she could not have stayed another moment. Nor could she now summon remorse or imagine from whom she needed to ask forgiveness. Surely the desk clerk would make the call. She could forgive herself.

For a moment, she mastered her revulsion at Herb’s proposal and made an effort to examine her own conduct, not from the outside as she might be judged in a court, but from inside, thinking of the kind of person she wanted to see herself as. Faced with frequent self-accusations of wrong-doing, Cathy was well practiced in self-justification. But, before God, her parents and her inner judge, where was she at fault in this?

Why had she gone so blithely to his room? Easy. To refuse him had seemed ungenerous, ungrateful. Was this too much for him to ask—another few minutes of her company, a willingness to accept his token of friendship? But a ring? Big mistake. Bartering for love.

With Josh, things were totally different. He'd never come at her with gifts, but had shared his life, his family, his sweet, funny self, letting her come to him if she wanted. And she did want—everything about him. His humor; his parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, exotic in their Jewishness; his music—Yiddish and Russian gypsy folk songs that aroused a passionate ache in body and soul; his socialist politics, perfect antidote to her parents' defense of capitalism.

Cathy had met Josh when she visited the college her senior year of high school, staying in the City with a friend she'd met at summer camp. Karla threw a party to introduce Cathy to her friends, Josh a magnet from the moment he entered. The following year's correspondence evoked ecstatic joy at the sight of his handwriting on an envelope. When he met her at the train station on her arrival for freshman year at Bryn Mawr, they'd bumped heads reaching for her suitcase, and it was done. Never a moment's barter.

She couldn't have known Herb would be bartering—he *shouldn't* have been. A man who wrote about giving as its own reward! Only he hadn't really said that; she had only wanted him to. She had expected to find in Herb a more fully realized version of the ideal self she aspired to and sometimes actually manifested, or so she believed. An altruist by nature.

And she had wanted to make him happy—by going to dinner with him in the first place. By going up to his room. By accepting his gift. These, her gifts to him. Unexpectedly, not enough.

“Narberth. Narberth.” The conductor took her ticket, punched it, stuck it in the bracket on the back of her seat. They'd passed Overbrook and Merion already. She hadn't been counting. “**Old Maids Never... WED.**” Wynnewood was next. “**And Have Babies**”—Ardmore, Haverford, Bryn Mawr. Almost home. She wrapped herself in the thought of Bryn Mawr's independent women, their untrammelled intellects and self-respect, never surrendering the right to say no.

He had meant to buy her! Cathy's body gave a convulsive shudder. And his seeming illness at the end. Had her rejection brought on a real heart attack? In that case, he had brought it on himself. She refused the coercion in it, either way. Daddy sometimes needed nitro when he got riled at one of his children, and Mama had put the fear of god into them. “You'll be the death of him,” she warned, when Cathy challenged his politics.

But it was sex not politics that made them dangerous to one another. Once, at a picnic for friends in her family's backyard, she had reclined in the grass, propped on her elbows, privately enjoying a deep shadow cast across her torso by her new breasts as late sunshine spilled over her shoulders. A second-storey window of the house banged open and Daddy shouted from it, summoning her indoors, his voice strangled with outrage. She left the group, stormed upstairs to confront him, and came away shaken and furious, forbidden to "recline in public" because it would give boys and men "the wrong idea." Later that summer, Daddy had treated her to the very kind of look he had been warning her not to provoke. At her homecoming from workcamp, where she had acquired some curves, filling out the stick figure she'd been since birth, he gave her the once-over, something like a leer.

"You've become a fine-looking young woman," he said, meaning to praise, but turning her stomach with his sensually laden look of appreciation, as he might size up a succulent Christmas turkey before carving. Clearly harboring the "wrong idea." But whose fault was that? Shocked to the core, revolted, Cathy refused to be held responsible for this evidence of lust in her own father, who should know better. Or for the lust of men in general.

But she would not walk away if Daddy needed her to call a doctor. Of course not.

Leaving Wynnewood, she replayed her scene with Herb, seeking a tiny opening for compassion that might have let her "love him a little." In a saintly sort of way, perhaps—like Florence N. or Mother T. Her neck stiffened in revolt.

She studied the ring. She was glad to have it, its beauty oddly unsullied by blame or shame, mysteriously blessing its owner. Beyond price. Okay, she saw the right things she failed to do: leave it on the nightstand or toss it on the bed. Even now, she could mail it back. The ruby alone was a financial investment. He should give it to his wife.

The blameless course was still possible—she'd get the address of Temple University from Josh. Send it there to spare Mrs. Bergman. But the thought elicited no surge of elevated virtue, only a physical refusal, her left hand closing over the right until the ruby cut into her flesh. Where was the noble feeling that could vanquish this unworthy grasping?

Nowhere. The ring was the price of his foolishness. Herb had tried to coerce love. *Non-negotiable*, she swore, still angry at the thought. But thanks for the beautiful gift. I will keep it. Serves you right!

Relief. A fresh breath. Somehow, she wouldn't have to give it back. How had she done that? Was it good or bad? A bit worrying, maybe. A tritiation of self-doubt clouded her crystalline incorruptibility.

“Haverford. Haverford.” Poor Herb, maybe he couldn't help himself. It was the inappropriate gift that gave him away, his *wrong idea* about her. But was he entirely wrong? She lusted after this ring. A girl so judging of women seduced by jewels! Although she had refused the bargain in the end, she was no better than they. Actually worse, since she'd kept the goods. She could admit this, now, and was rewarded by a blaze of pride in her self-knowing. Maybe her soul was safe.

The curves of the ring clung to her finger like tiny, gentle hands, saying, “I am yours.” She knew it to be true. Could not rise above it.

She would have to walk away. Just walk away. This she could do.

Whatever that made her.

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In Room 406, Herb Bergman lay still, waiting for the pressure in his chest to subside. He managed a wheezing exhale and inhaled again, urging the nitro to work its magic. He could hardly believe the child had walked out on him, but things had already gone so wrong, what did he expect? As breath came easier, the humiliation of her rejection began to melt into annealing compassion for his aging heart. He surrendered for a moment to pure longing, sinking into the fantasy that had gripped him since that first evening, last spring. He imagined her lying in his arms on the bed while she talked, spinning her eager word clouds. Trusting him.

Dozing lightly, he felt his heart calming, his breath easing. His head swam, from the fantasy or the nitro, hard to tell, but he rode the high fearlessly, reliving those weeks last Spring when he never stopped thinking of her. How her eyes had held him during his talk; he had locked in on her, her gaze so strangely open to him he could only sink into it. And then at dinner, her sweet little ideas, her innocent faith in natural goodness. How her incandescent pursuit of her own thoughts lit her face. What could he do but love her?

During those months when he could think of nothing else but how brightly she burned, the ring had found him, sung to him of her.

Loving someone unattainable did not cast Herb down, remind him of his age. (Josh did that, but never mind.) The negatives of being in love could not outweigh the positives. Nellie noted the spring in his step, his cheer at breakfast, the affectionate pats on her shoulder as if some need for reassurance had arisen, though it wasn't clear whose. Herb blessed his wife for her incuriosity about the source of these symptoms.

Cathy was quite the little Puritan about the ring. He had begun to lose her when he mentioned Nell. A wife. But the child didn't leave his gift behind when she bounded away from him. So, he hadn't quite lost her until—what had he done wrong?

Herb's heart gave a thud. He calmed it with the image of lying beside the girl. He could breathe if he stayed inside that soft longing. His simple plea.

“Love me a little?” Was that so terrible to say? He'd only meant to ask for a little—tenderness. *Think of me fondly. Remember me with affection.* What did she think?

But of course, what could she think in this world where predatory old men pursued young women with the single goal of obtaining sex. The ancient barter had worked for millennia. Nothing to do with love. Nu. The ring was the mistake, perhaps, alarming to this idealistic girl. Especially with strings attached.

He was not a predator. Why had he let it seem so? Asking for “a little love,” he had become absurd. How would Durer portray it? He could imagine an engraving: *Foolish Age woos Heartless Youth.* What had possessed him? He was—what? Besotted. Ridiculous. And not pure. No. Not at all. He wanted his hands on her, his mouth on hers. Herb shifted in bed, stretched in delicious agony, clutched his thickened rod, zipper and all, then froze at a knock on the door.

Not the knock of a young woman. Herb shrank down in bed, refusing to wrest himself from the cocoon he'd been weaving. But the knock turned into pounding, joined by voices. “Herb Bergman!”

Gestapo! Flaccid instantly, Herb struggled past panic, trying to make sense of the threat at his door. A key moved in the slot and white-suited men burst in with a gurney bearing a blue case with medical logo. The kid from downstairs—the desk clerk—edged past the gurney to address him.

“Mr. Bergman? A young lady said you might be in need of help.”

“Herb Bergman? Are you Herb Bergman?” The leading invader wore a doctor’s coat and carried clipboard and pen. He waited for an answer before handing the clipboard to his associate.

“Yes. I am Professor Herbert Bergman. And you are—what?” The pounding was in Herb’s neck now and in the top of his head, as outrage drove out fear.

“How are you feeling, sir?” The head medic reached to drag back a blanket to which the old man fiercely clung. A tussle. But the medic saw he was fully dressed under the blanket. Something obviously not right, whatever the old guy said.

“How should I be feeling with strangers pounding on my door? Breaking and entering! You could have killed me with the shock!” The old hands were clutched now, trembling, over his crotch.

“We had a call that you might be having some heart trouble,” said the medic. “Do you have a history of heart condition, sir?”

“I have, but I also have nitroglycerine which I just took for a mild case of angina. And though my heart is racing now at this intrusion, I have no need of emergency services.”

“Perhaps you’ll let us be the judge of that.” And before Herb could protest, a monitor had appeared with its Medusa head of cables, and the third man had him uncovered, his shirt opened, his pants legs pushed up, and sticky nodes slapped into place, their nipples clipped by pincers at the ends of the cables. The second man meantime continued to extract and record Herb’s personal information: social security, insurance, emergency contact. He didn’t give them Nell.

It was an hour before Herb persuaded the men to leave him in peace, promising he would see his own doctor on Monday, and be taken by his wife to his own hospital if the angina recurred. He put the \$50 ambulance charge on his credit card.

When they were gone, Herb finally exchanged his street clothes for a night shirt, brushed his teeth and returned to bed. The fantasy was gone, but he relaxed into an amber warmth, the tail end of the nitro. He was breathing easily, now, oddly elated. Cathy was not heartless, after all. She had called for help. Good girl. He

laughed out loud. And she probably made her train as well. He was glad. So. No harm done. He smiled, recalling her righteous attempt to redirect her gift to his wife. But she had kept it when she ran away. Ha!

Herb's eyes flew open. Would she think she had to send it back to him? Oy veh. Dear Nell might try to understand, though she would be hurt. But he wanted Cathy to keep it, to think of him. How perfectly it suited her. Instantly, he saw she would not be able to return it. She was human, after all. A woman. He smiled.

But.

He would never see her again.

THE END