

Gerard's Gift

It was almost two hours now, waiting for this woman to arrive. I stood under the porch of Mother's old Victorian as I tried my best to avoid the now-diagonal rain, and kicked myself for not moving my bicycle to somewhere out of the storm's rage.

The only thing passing the time was the sound of Edwin's jazz which slipped out the slightly ajar window of his '71 Coupe Deville. The olive-green antique beast was near invisible behind the blinding glow of his headlights on the front porch.

This meeting between us began the same as our previous, without so much as a "hello". We, instead, found ourselves in two separate spaces, no greetings necessary.

Edwin turned the volume of the jazz up from his seat, the sound now competing with the rain.

I scoffed at this as I looked out into the glowing white light that consumed the front yard of the house.

It was typical of Edwin, to watch me just-nearly avoid the rain as he sat in the dry warmth of his vintage jewel without the decency to even ask if his little brother cared to stay dry. I was at least sure now he was alone, not having invited his wife, Martia.

Martia was the kind balance to Edwin's rude impulses. Martia, knowing the great strain on the relationship between my brother and I would politely gesture the common courtesies that Edwin casually forgot in my presence. If she were with him, I surely would not be left in the rain.

My eyes were strained as they turned their attention to another set of blinding lights pulling into the yard.

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I stood up from where I leaned against the wall as I covered my eyes with my right hand. I watched the shimmering-silver Lexus cease movement as the lights disappeared, Edwin's lights died out a moment later.

I dusted myself off and straightened out my wrinkled, semi-wet clothing.

I watched a well-dressed woman slam the door of the silver Lexus, her high heels wobbling over the muddy, eroding land. She held her briefcase over her head as a shield.

Her struggle to reach the porch safely was almost comical as she danced between the rain drops, and verbally expressed her discomfort with each movement, her volume well-over that of the rain.

Edwin trudged behind her solemnly in complete disregard of the rain.

"Whoo, that is one hell of a storm," she said with a thick, southern accent. She dusted the beaded rain off her white peacoat. "I'm guessing the day took a turn for the worst huh? Didn't expect this weather or I would've dressed a little more aptly," she said.

I smiled at her politely. "I understand, completely," I said.

"Well shoot, where are my manners? I'm Cheryl Phoenix, real estate broker," she said with her hand outstretched.

"Pleasure to meet you, Gerard Hampton," I said. I tore my left hand from the pocket of my tattered coat to shake her hand.

Edwin had made his way up to the porch, he wiped the rain off the padded shoulders of his blazer.

"Well you must be Edwin," Cheryl said warmly. "We spoke over the phone."

Edwin nodded eagerly. "Yes, nice to meet you."

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“Gerard,” he said, with a nod in my direction.

“Hello, Edwin,” I answered.

Cheryl set her briefcase on the porch and opened it carefully. She sifted through a large pile of papers before she pulled out a big ring of keys.

“Ahh, here we are,” she said. She turned the key in the lock and ushered us inside.

Mother's house was warm inside. Edwin and I walked in blindly into the slowly dissipating darkness. We both froze as Cheryl shut the door hard behind her, consuming the room in a pool of black once again.

“Oh shoot, Cheryl. You're sure a smart thinker,” she spewed in a stream of consciousness. “Give me a second boys, let me get things all set up.”

Edwin heard a small rustling before we saw a tiny light flicker from the palm of Cheryl's hand. She pointed a tiny flashlight right in our faces, we shielded quickly.

“You boys stay here and I'll get these lights on, just wait a few minutes,” she said. Cheryl pushed past us following the tiny stream of light she provided before she was gone.

Edwin and I stood in silence. The only sound in the room was that of the rain dripping from Edwin's hair and clothes onto the tile.

The light snapped on through the hundreds of crystals in the hanging chandelier above us. Edwin and I examined the inside of the house which had looked so untouched since Mother's stroke two months earlier.

I looked into the big living room which sat between four champagne colored walls. The paint looked faded and peeling though the color was so lively. Time always had a way of aging the beautiful things in Mother's home.

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I stepped in the living room, standing behind Mother's large recliner and ran my hand over the fluffy strands that had unwound from the fabric. I looked onto the small end-table at the small stack of hardcover novels and the small layer of dust that had collected on top.

One novel sat open on the carpet where she had fallen that day. My lower lip quivered at the sight of this, at the thought of being back in her home. It was as though I was watching her last actions, sharing with her the final moments of her life.

"We should talk about the details of your mother's assets," Cheryl said. I was startled despite the fact that her voice was low and hushed.

I turned to look at her, her head lowered in sorrow. She had detected my misery.

"This must be very hard for you," she said.

I nodded at her. "It's surreal: being here," I said.

Cheryl looked at me with a kind face. "I don't want to sound like a greeting card, but it gets easier," she said. "I lost my father last year and, I don't know, every day without him just felt different."

"How did things get better?" I asked.

Cheryl shrugged. "I guess that after a while I realized that he would never really be gone. No one ever is."

I inhaled deeply as I took in her words. I nodded at her

She smiled awkwardly in an attempt to break the moment of its tension. "We really should talk about your mother's assets," she said.

I chuckled nervously. "Yes, let's."

"What is there to talk about?" Edwin's voice chimed.

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Cheryl and I turned our attention to Edwin who leaned against the arched doorway to the living room.

“Pardon?” Cheryl asked.

“Well, I mean we’re just going to sell everything, right, Ger?” he asked.

My face hardened with anger. I could see my own reflection in the shit-eating grin that rested so spitefully on Edwin’s face.

“Sell everything? You’re just going to sell everything?” Cheryl asked. She turned her head heatedly between the two of us. “You’re going to just hock her possessions like she was some stranger?” Cheryl’s voice had grown annoyed.

“No, we’re not,” I said through my anger.

Edwin’s face hardened. “Cheryl, may I have a moment alone with my dear younger brother?”

Cheryl looked at me before she exited the room.

Edwin walked himself over to me. “What the fuck are you talking about, ‘no, we’re not’? You’re calling all the shots now?”

“This isn’t your house, Edwin,” I said sternly.

“Oh Gerry thinks he owns the world because Mother left the house to him, huh?” Edwin teased. “We agreed that we kept our possessions and sold anything valuable. You remember that?”

I looked off into the house.

“Hey, you look at *me*, Gerry. Is that *not* what we agreed?” He asked.

I glared at him. “We didn’t agree on anything, Ed,” I said.

Edwin scoffed, “When did you become such a momma’s boy, huh Ger?” He mocked.

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I glared at him. "Have a heart, Ed. She's your mother," I said.

"*Was*, you mean she *was* my mother, and that is a rather generous term for her, don't you think?" he said.

"Lay off," I growled.

Edwin stopped and looked at me, concerned. "Do you not remember the way things were? Do you not remember how she treated us after Dad left?" he asked.

"She was a busy woman, she was an artist. Artists work hard," I said.

"Oh sure, all those trips to New York City and Paris without the children must have been such a hassle for her," he said, annoyed. "Where was she on your eighth birthday, Gerry?" he asked.

"Just drop it, Ed," I said.

"No, tell me. Where was she?"

"She had a gallery show in Fresno, so what?" I said. I turned away and walked over to the bookshelf on the wall, hiding my reddening face from Edwin's view.

"What'd she leave you for your birthday?" He asked.

"Forget about it, sell her things," I said in an attempt to end the conversation.

"She left you a photograph, remember? She left you a black and white Polaroid of her piece for her gallery show with the words 'happy birthday' written on the back. Do you remember that?" He taunted.

I felt the tears welling up in anger. I wasn't mad at Edwin anymore, I wasn't mad at Mother, but mad at myself for allowing the memory of that day to return.

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I remember running my fingers along the distorted black and white image of her painting where the camera left a glare on the glossed surface of Mother's work. The photograph was of such poor quality that the subject of the painting wasn't even recognizable.

Edwin noticed that I was upset, even though my back had been turned to him.

"I'm gonna go sort through some of her stuff in the basement. You take upstairs," he said.

I didn't turn around to even acknowledge him.

"Did you hear me?" he asked. I ignored him. "Look, just tell me if you find anything that's worth something, okay?"

I heard Edwin exit. I waited before turning around, and wiped the tears that sat at the corners of my eyes.

I walked out of the living room and slowly climbed the stairs. I examined the framed artwork Mother had hung along the wall. Mother's artist signature caught my attention each time, lingering in the bottom right-hand corner of each sloppy charcoal sketch.

I swung the door to Mother's bedroom slowly and looked inside. The room, like the rest of the house was untouched. The bed was a mess and looked as though she had just stepped out of it and started a new day.

I walked inside and my nose was met by the familiar aroma of Mother's perfume which somehow still hung in the air. I stood in front of her bureau and examined the last items she used. Her silver earrings still sat on the now-dusty teakwood bureau, their gems reflected from the light of the moon into the mirror.

Her garnet-red lipstick lied on the edge of the bureau, its rounded tube somehow unmoving.

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I picked up the earrings and examined them closely in an attempt to tell their value. My lips moved as I read the inscription on the back: zirconia. I dropped them on the bureau and listened to them bounce before falling still.

I opened the closet next to the bureau and began to thumb through the long gowns from Bloomingdales she had stored up from her gallery showings, the colors ran almost all the way to the ground, leaving a tiny shadow beneath them.

My eyes closed between each colorful gown as I examined it briefly until they became a changing blur of lace and chiffon.

Then, suddenly, I saw the face. It flashed between the gowns and startled me as I stumbled backward.

I was afraid to approach the gown again and waited a moment to see what would happen before I stepped forward again. I slid my hand between the gowns slowly and parted them to reveal the face of a young boy: it was my face.

My jaw dropped. It was one of Mothers paintings. It sat, leaned against the wall of the closet encompassed in a gold frame, intricately engraved with a lavish design of blooming flowers on a vine.

It was a painting of me, a portrait of one of my old school photos that Mother had tucked in her wallet next to the family photo from when she and my father had been together.

My oil-painted portrait shimmered under the dim light of Mothers closet. The colors glowed in such rich vibrancy, they hit the eye as a spectacle of golds and beiges masked by the wrinkled, royal-purple fabric backdrop that they used for my class photos. Each curve looked so effortlessly stroked onto the canvas.



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My memory shot back to the unrecognizable photograph that was handed to me by our nanny on my eighth birthday. I reached forward and grasped the painting by the corner of the frame and began to drag it across the fawn-colored carpet. Each long gown wrapped around the image as it slowly emerged from the jungle of fabrics.

I turned the painting over and dropped it, face down on the carpet as I mentally devised a simple way to carry my new masterpiece down the long staircase. My eyes were drawn to a small black smudge on the back of the canvas.

I dropped to my knees to examine this smudge on the canvas. I ripped my jacket off and threw it onto the carpet as I got closer to the smudge. It was tiny note written neatly in cursive on the back that read: "To Gerard, with all my love, Mother."

I smiled wide, a tear rolling from both eyes. I had found something valuable in Mothers house. I had found my gift.

I heard footsteps approaching.

"Hey Gerry, what do you think this is worth?" Edwin asked as he turned into Mothers bedroom, Cheryl followed behind him with a stack of documents in hand. "What are you doing?" he asked.

I laughed warmly. "I found it, Ed." I said.

Edwin's face writhed in confusion. "What are you talking about?" he asked.

Cheryl pushed her way into the room, curiously, and lowered herself to the painting. She lifted up the front end with a struggle and looked at the image that was facing the carpet. "It's one of your mother's paintings," she said with excitement.

Edwin's eyes widened in disbelief. "What? That's impossible," he said. "All of her paintings were sold off before she died," he added.

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"I found it, Edwin! It's hers," I said. "I found my gift."

Edwin smiled at me. "That's incredible! Do you know how much one of her originals would go for now that she's passed?" he asked.

Cheryl shot Edwin a disgusted look which he ignored.

"What should we do, should we call a private buyer?" he asked with excitement.

Cheryl looked at me for a response.

"We're not going to do anything," I said.

Edwin's face dropped. "What the hell are you talking about? Do you know what this is worth? Each of her pieces sold for at least ten-grand." he said.

I shot Edwin an angry look. "No, Edwin. I don't think you know what this is worth," I said. "We're not selling any of Mom's stuff."

"Of course the *momma's boy* doesn't want to sell anything from his fancy new house," Edwin said.

"It's not my house," I said. "This will always be her home," I said.

Edwin turned out of the bedroom angrily, and the sound of his footsteps blended into the hum of the storm outside.

Cheryl helped me to carry the painting down the stairs, but by the time we reached landing at the front door, the storm was over.