

The Gift

As soon as the silver sedan entered Kyle and Brandon's view, breaching out of the black river, the kids hid behind the line of shrubs that bordered the house, separating it from the broad gravel driveway. They watched through the web of greenery as he swung his legs out of the car and without turning, shut the door. Dad passed where they were hunched unseen and then went up the two steps to the mudroom entrance: in his arms he was holding a mysterious package. Kyle and Brandon consulted their notes, but there was nothing there to suggest what it might be. They pushed through the bushes, getting scratched on their bare arms and legs; racing inside, they careened by the guard who was on her way out, her shift over. This was a case for the top two secret agents the world had ever seen.

Kyle led Brandon to his room upstairs, nudging the door behind him so that it remained slightly ajar. They stretched out on the floor, taking turns peeking through the crack. From their vantage point, they could see the top of the stairs and a sliver of the carpeted hallway at the end of which was the other bedroom. Charles, Kyle said to Brandon, you watch first. (On Charles' watch, the target appeared in the distance, his car was alone on the road and driving slowly, and with purpose, toward them; once he had gone by them, he took the next turn, stopping;) Alan, Brandon said to Kyle who has crouched behind him, the box was under his arm.

The door at the end of the hallway shut and, after waiting a sufficient number of seconds, Alan and Charlie crept on their hands and knees out of the room. They crawled on the carpet (after checking where the target had holed up, they left the lookout and got onto their motorcycles, Alan ahead of Charles—), avoiding the squeaky board about a third of the way to their destination (they weaved along the potholed road, carefully evading detection; the target was known to be top-notch at counter-surveillance—), and then stopped when they reached the door (arriving at the dingy, unlit motel where they had seen the target park,). The TV was on (they stood outside the door the target's car was parked

in front of, listening to the noises coming from within, to determine if he had company;). Alan, rotating to his side, noted the time and, at Charles' identification, the show (the sounds were of him getting settled—now that they'd discovered his hideout, they had to get him to leave so that they could go in, and find the package;). Storing the notepad in the rear pocket of his shorts, Alan extended a finger to prod the door inward—it was secure. Charles, after tapping Alan on the shoulder, tried it; they would have to find some other way.

Kyle's father heard them in the hall playing another one of their imaginary games. He turned up the volume on the TV so that they would think he couldn't hear, remembering a boy who had lived two doors down from him back when he was a kid. He couldn't recall the boy's name...They used to get up to such mischief together, playing detectives and mad scientists; the boy had moved across town when they started middle school. He wondered if that boy had kids now. Kyle didn't play like this with other kids: when they'd talked about who he wanted to invite to his birthday party next week, immediately, he'd said Brandon. He remembered being Kyle's age and thinking that that boy and he would never separate, which they did just two years later, and then he hadn't really seen him much after that; kids, unlike adults, were adaptable in that way: something occurred to a person as they aged, they hit a threshold where everything began to calcify, and then sacrifices were made in order to maintain that state of affairs.

They rolled away from the room (walking to a secluded stairwell near the locked door, they conferred about their next move:). Lying on their stomachs, Charles took out his notepad and began to draw; Alan watched. Using initials for their names and then an X for their goal, he laid out a plan that he, holding it for Kyle to see, described: Alan would create a distraction in the bathroom, and then Charles would sneak in to the bedroom (it was agreed upon that Alan would

smash the windows of the target's car, and then dash [as an expert in evasive techniques, Alan was the right man for the job]; once the door was open, Charles would enter the room and secure the package [with his quickness and sharp eye, Charles could get out of a sticky situation in a jiffy]; if things got hairy, Alan would provide support...).

Entering the large room, Alan got on top of the toilet seat to unlatch the mirrored cabinet above the sink. Along the three thin glass shelves were bottles of various sizes and colors. He grabbed as many as he could hold, dropping them on the tile floor. He jumped to the ground and got his toothbrush—ready with the prop. Waiting, he stared at Charles. Charles inched nearer to the door and shook his head. Alan, with the toothbrush in his right hand, stood on the toilet seat again and removed some more bottles.

Standing in front of the mirror, and watching Charles, the corners of Kyle's notepad jabbed him through his shorts. (...once the windows were broken, Alan ducked out of sight behind some cars; the target, however, remained in the room: the blare of the TV continued to pour out and, after a nearly painful amount of time, Charles and Alan reconvened to discuss what to do next;)

He left the bathroom, kicking one of the bottles in front of him as he went. Brandon, from the floor, stared at him approach and then pass without saying anything, continuing in silence down the stairs. He stomped through the kitchen and yanked out a chair from the long rectangular table by the bay window. Collapsing, he cupped his face in his left palm, balancing on an elbow and began to flip through the pages of his notepad, tearing them out as he read. He then took the torn page and, first ensuring it was a well-formed ball, tossed it without looking.

Going in to the bathroom, Kyle's father started collecting the bottles from the floor; though Kyle knew they weren't supposed to be touched, he wouldn't punish him. The kid had been through one big separation already, what with the divorce when he was four, so with Brandon moving, it was understandable that he might be upset; they would always have one another, though, he thought; he'd have to remind Kyle of that. And that it was important to always keep up the forward progress, lingering on the past would only bring confusion and unhappiness.

Brandon sat in the chair beside Kyle and, noticing what Kyle was doing, went to stop him. Kyle swung away. Brandon tapped him on the shoulder to show him a sketch. The drawing was of a cat held in Kyle's arms; it was from the beginning of the summer when right after school got out, his neighbor's cat had disappeared and they found her hiding in some bushes pretty far away—there was still a scab on Kyle's arm where the cat had scratched when he had picked her up. (they decided they would have to tear up the book [with his steady mind, Alan realized that they would have to try something outside the box]: this was no ordinary mission [with his renowned inventiveness, Charles devised a plan B];)

Kyle wasn't looking at the page Brandon wanted him to; instead, he remained facing the other direction as his lips, against his wishes, tightened into a smile. He twisted off the chair to collect the paper balls from the floor, unwrinkling each one, and stacking them together in his right hand. Returning to the table, he put the pile in front of Brandon who spread them out and flattened them. While he did that, Kyle paged through Brandon's notepad, with admiration; many were of events that Kyle only somewhat remembered having happened that summer. (after much discussion, and argumentation, Alan agreed to Charles' plan: they would reveal themselves, and

convince the target to hand over the package...)

That's from grandma and grandpa, Brandon said as he noticed the postcard that Kyle was staring at, it's of the city's harbor. The postcard showed a crescent cove with piers jutting into the dark blue water. Tall glass buildings lined the shore. The angle of the shot was from up above and looking back at the city, as from a bird glancing over its shoulder before making a left turn. The piers were full of boats; Kyle had never seen a sailboat in person. Grandpa is going to teach me to sail, Brandon said. His eyes shimmered like sunlight glinting off rough waters, blinding Kyle. The postcard had come a week before, and he'd put it there for safe-keeping. He was going to have dinner with them the night after arriving. The buildings were unlike any Kyle had seen. He knew that there was a city nearby, each morning Dad went there to work, but never having been, he had imagined the buildings were like large versions of houses, but seeing a postcard that showed how huge they were, Dad was just a speck in comparison.

Brandon replaced the postcard in Kyle's grip with the now flat strips of paper, which Kyle tucked in his notepad; written across the front of it was: Top Secret!!, which was underlined several times; on Brandon's it said: Very Secret!!

Between his house and the city where Brandon was moving there was, Dad had shown him, a vast stretch of land.

(before that, however, before tipping their hand—which was such a dangerous move—first, they would have a celebratory drink, just in case, though neither spoke about that it was, nonetheless, prominent in their thoughts: this mission could, conceivably, be their last; it had been a good ride, it had extended much longer than either had imagined it would when they first met—and it was hoped, of course, that all would end well, but each knew that only within

dreams and drink was perfection attainable—) They left the table without pushing in their chairs and went to the refrigerator; Kyle got out the jar of pickles.

After giving it to Brandon to hold so that he could climb on top of the counter to get two coffee mugs from the cabinet, they sat on the glossy finished wood floor across from each other. Kyle unscrewed the cap and poured enough to fill about half of each mug. Ok Charles, Kyle said, sliding one toward Brandon, no spitting it out; and Brandon said, Alright Alan, you'd better take it all in one gulp. They peered into the blue glazed wells, the vinegar smell plucked their stomachs. Brandon rolled his neck and Kyle shook out his arms, and his shoulders and his wrists. In a coordinated motion, they wrapped their fingers through the ceramic handles, raised them, and then drank.

Kyle went limp and flopped around, making an ugly noise, while Brandon leapt up and kicked out a leg and swung his hips in rapid, jerky, movements, nearly knocked over the open pickle jar. Brandon reached for Kyle's hand to pull him up; Kyle, stumbling against the counter, had to steady himself, but then he too, mimicking Brandon, though wanting to hide that, began a contorted dance. As their stomachs heaved and their throats screamed, they howled; They coughed and squirmed and their eyes grew large. (and so after swigging from Alan's lucky flask, they then set off...)

Finally, exhausted, they slowed, melting to the floor. Kyle screwed the top onto the pickle jar and then lay motionless staring at the ceiling; Brandon was nearby, their heads in opposite directions.

(as they approached the door, Alan's phone rang—he hadn't put it on silent—it was base; they ceased their forward progression and slinked off to a quiet place where Alan could talk:

answering it, he heard only two words, mission aborted, before the call was ended—) From somewhere above them, the phone, like an alarm, rang. The familiar ringtone, which Kyle had, secretly, regularly, chosen—and that was consistently and immediately changed back, but then, finally relenting, he had been allowed to set the ringer for that...one...number—was now so unwelcome. Neither moved. Between the rings, Kyle listened to Brandon breathing, matching his. They waited for the phone to go silent. Once it did, Kyle turned, propping up on an elbow to watch Brandon. Focusing on Brandon, Kyle snuck his left foot toward Brandon's face. When it was close enough, he swerved it to the side so that his toe touched Brandon's lips. Brandon, sputtering, shoved Kyle's foot and then tried to do the same with his feet, but Kyle was waiting for that and blocked with his hands.

The phone rang again.

Kyle, pushing Brandon off him, climbed up to find it. He carried the warm, flashing, phone in his right hand; it swung by his hip as he ascended the stairs. At the shut door, Kyle bent and shoved the phone underneath, sitting just outside. He heard the TV volume lower, and then the soft pressing of bare feet on carpet.

The phone was answered in the open doorway and a hand extended down to him. Kyle glanced up, but then turned away, staring at the wooden railings along the first half of the hallway through which could be seen the downstairs. His father said goodbye into the phone and then sat beside him, telling Kyle that Brandon's mother would be over shortly, Brandon had to leave earlier than usual because they were flying out early tomorrow morning. He wrapped an arm around Kyle's shoulder, holding the kid firm. He kissed the top of his head. Come on, his father said, standing.

Kyle lagged behind, resting all of his weight on the banister as he went; his chin balanced on top of his hands. (they deliberated about whether to follow the orders, they were so close, and it seemed foolhardy to not continue—) When they came into the kitchen, Kyle went to sit at the table next to Brandon; his father sat across from them and began to tell them about the last time he had been there, where Brandon was going to be living, was over twenty years ago. It was long before either of you were born, he said, back then, I had a beard; using his hands Kyle's father showed them just how much bigger this had made his face. And not only that, he continued, I had hair, then, that went all the way to here, he said, putting his hands to his shoulders. They tried to imagine his short, graying hair and shaved face that was shaped, now, solely with a few wrinkles and creases, bulging with hair. It's true, he promised them, as they started to grin. I lived there in a house with four friends, he added, I worked irregularly—sometimes as a waiter, sometimes as a bartender—trying to find that perfect equilibrium of free time and money, free time being much more important: mostly we all spent our days at the beach two blocks from the house where we lived, swimming, playing volleyball, drinking; generally not doing anything important...

The doorbell rang before he could finish the story, though it wasn't really going anywhere or really about one thing; he hadn't thought about that period of his life in a while, it had been a starting point and, as he went to the door, he wasn't sure why he had begun reminiscing like that; he was getting old, he guessed, it was embarrassing.

Kyle and Brandon remained at the table as their parents entered the kitchen; the kids were busy tracing the grains in the table that meandered through the dense, dark wood, leading to a knot, where they swirled for a bit, and then took off on one of the offshoots; their fingers zipped

along the curves, and slowed in the straightaways, though sometimes that was reversed...until Kyle felt a hand on his shoulder and Brandon felt one on his as well. (but orders were orders...) Their fingers stopped and their hands, deflated, fell flat on the table. Dragged, Brandon left the table, nudging his chair in place with the bottom of his foot. Directed to the front door, he offered no assistance.

As they stood in a rough circle on the evenly cut, nail-sized stones of the driveway, the bucket of sun spilled the last of its brilliant contents along the ragged outline of spacious homes and much taller trees spread out to allow for the wide streets and the gaping lawns. Their parents talked while Kyle and Brandon hugged in front of the teal four-door car that Kyle had ridden home in from school so often. The two small bodies met clumsily, their arms brushing uncertainly, unsure that that was acceptable, but wanting to anyway. They held each other with care. It was the end of August and both, still wearing shorts and t-shirts, were warmed by the other's body heat. Their eight-year-old skins were red with mosquito bites and exhaustion.

Brandon gave Kyle's father a high-five and then settled into the passenger's seat; his mother said goodbye to Kyle with a kiss on the cheek. Through the open window, Brandon promised Kyle he would call every day—or, well, at least as much as he could.

The car reversed out of the driveway and then drove off on the leafy, empty, suburban road lined by lit homes as squat as shades over lamps, and out of sight.

It had been a great summer; it had been the best summer, but Brandon was moving to a city that Kyle couldn't even pronounce, which Dad had pointed out on a map, which you had to fly to to get there. They were going to be back for Christmas, Dad had said, whenever that was.

They ate dinner an hour later—picked up from Kyle's favorite restaurant—and Kyle asked about those friends from over twenty years ago, he wondered where they were now. His father finished the food on his fork, shrugging. He said that he wasn't sure, that he had lost touch with them, one by one, over the years. He said he was fortunate, in many ways, especially that the two of them were here now, in this house, together, that as far as he knew for those guys, life hadn't turned out so well. Kyle's father let the words hang, like a blanket for Kyle to grab hold of and wrap himself up in. Kyle watched him eat, and how that bushy beard of his was gone and his long hair was cut and he wore a collared shirt and a tie.

And the paintings on the wall were store bought and the food they were eating was takeout and it was silent outside and on Monday mornings a woman came to clean the house.

He got up from the table, but then his father ushered him to sit, saying that he understood how it was to have a friend leave, that this was part of becoming older and that even if their friendship didn't work out, the memories would always be there—that's just how some relationships are, he said, there's no need to take it personally or to see it as a failure: tomorrow will be day one post-Brandon, think of it as an opportunity, he went on, to do those things you've always wanted to, that he might not have. When he finished the little speech, he looked to see if it had registered. It was always a challenge to tell how much Kyle understood, either way, it was important stuff for the kid to hear, the kind of wisdom no one had imparted on him at that age. He left the table and went to retrieve the birthday present from the upstairs closet where the towels were kept; bringing it downstairs, he gave it to Kyle—it was a week early, but the kid deserved it. Kyle lifted the box and with an eagerness that adorned his face with a tinsel sheen

shook it.

Brandon leaned his head against his window, enjoying the sensation of the rattling.

END