

THE GIFTS

1

I thought I knew him; but I have to admit I was terribly mistaken. That man, that kind person I considered as my friend, after all those years, turned out to be a stranger. My recalls and memories of that time are blurry, but I can say for certain he was the best friend ever. And now, what's left? Merely a remembrance; images vanishing in the thin air as soon as I try to keep them strongly.

Before he died, he made me swear I would take care of her. We were out for a walk; it was a bright warm day, indeed. There was no one to be seen; at first I thought we were the only ones wandering around immersed in such memoirs. At that precise moment he said to me: *The day I die, you have to look after her.* I was truly mystified about those words he had spoken. I didn't know her, not to mention the fact she didn't know me. Not being aware of each other, how in the world was I supposed to take care of her? I asked him, but he shrugged and continued walking, as if he was absolutely certain I would find the way.

That day I felt odd. I went home pretty tired; there was no one waiting for me, so I decided to watch a movie and then go have a good rest. I tried not to think about what he just said to me, but it turned out quite difficult to accomplish. I suppose I knew something weird was going to happen, but I could barely figure it out. When I was falling asleep, the phone rang. It was him. *What's wrong?* I asked him; during what looked like the best part of a minute, there was only silence. Then, all of a sudden I could hear his voice, merely being a whisper: *Don't forget about the gifts.*

The day after I went to pay him a visit. I was worried, and I came to realize he could be down in the mouth, thus I woke up early in the morning and, just before going to work, I set foot in his building. I rang the bell, but it seemed he was out. Mystified, I tried to call him using my cell; no answer. It was pointless to be standing there, awaiting him, so I decided to go to work and try him later.

While being at work, I received a phone call. It was him. *Where have you been?* I think I asked him. He didn't even try to excuse himself; again I heard his sick voice, *They are all priceless, you know that.* I was shocked. What was he talking about? By *they* I could fathom he was referring to those gifts, but it was so weird. After another pause, he said to me: *You've got the key.* Right after saying that, he hang up. I called him back, but I got no answer. That evening, I left my job really concerned, so I walked all the way down to his flat. It was then I saw the police and one huge ambulance standing in front of the building. I knew almost immediately he was dead. The lights of that ambulance illuminated the surroundings, which in turn were getting dark because of the nightfall. The dusk, I think I thought, the dusk. The perfect moment to find out my friend had killed himself.

I was dead right. While watching what was happening around me, some girl approached me and, staring at my sad face, she realized I was some sort of a friend of his. She took one of my hands and whispered: *He shot himself.* It was all over. I didn't know that girl, but I came to know she belonged to the ambulance personnel because of how she dressed. She tried to make me get calm, and I don't know for sure, but I think I cried silently. I noticed a sweet and warm finger drying my tears, which were running down my cheeks. I didn't look at her, or at least I can't recall doing that, but surely I was more or less grateful and I do know I tried to say something to her, to utter some sort of pleasantries, but nothing came out in the end. Then, she disappeared and I stayed there completely alone and lonely, despite the fact there was a crowd in a hell of a situation, doing this and doing that, while another kind of enormous crowd was standing beside and behind me, looking at all that mess truly interested, as if they were watching a film, one of those ones which seem real, thinking probably it was all too far from their own lives.

I came back home feeling shit. *Shit happens.* It was true. I started going upstairs so as to reach my flat but first I checked my mailbox out. In there there was an envelope with my name

impressed on it. I grabbed it and opened it. Inside, just a short hand-written letter and a key. I could recognize that key; it was *his* key, the key to open *his* door. I read the letter quickly, right there, standing in front of my opened mailbox.

*Now, you have the key as I promised.
Don't forget about the gifts.
Find her, and take her to them.
It's important, do me that favour.
My time has come, but hers is yet to come.*

*So long,
your friend.*

I read that letter two or three times, trying to determine the real meaning of that nonsense. I could not. I put it inside my pocket and went upstairs. It was a calm night, and I could even hear the silence. I shut my door and went to bed almost immediately, letting my heavy body fall down tiredly. At that time I thought I was going to be extremely depressed, devastated. I knew it for sure. Slowly, amidst the darkest hours of my entire life, surrounded by memoirs and feeling for the first time what sadness really meant, I let my body drown in the dream, in one of those ones anyone wishes to be, because they are all sweet and make you feel you are, once and for all, *yourself*.

2

I met her some rainy day of October. Oh, she was pretty: she still is. I could find out where she lived at the time because of some notes my friend left me in his laptop. At first I was not sure how I could conduct such a meeting. Bear in mind I didn't know what she knew about my friend, those gifts, these odd events implying suicide. I thought it could be better to spend some time gathering information about her, in order to be prepared to face such a moment. There were abundant clues about how she could be and what she could look like. My friend had pictures of her in his laptop, and an impressive huge collection of email messages. I read them all, and I came to realize she was not only pretty, she was an angel. Then I understood why he loved her intensively, and I felt sad. I tried to make up my mind, find some useful information and go find her. When I phoned her, she was shocked. I tried to explain myself clearly, and she got it in the right way. We decided to meet each other one October morning, in a *café* not too far from her neighbourhood.

I spent an hour wandering around that very morning. I was in no hurry, trying to think hard about what could end up happening. When I arrived at the *café*, I could see her inside. She was seated, with a cup of coffee between her hands, gazing at some point I could hardly identify. Apart from her, there were no more customers. I decided not to enter immediately, thus I stayed out there surveying her passionately. She was black-haired and every now and again she was lifting her cup up so as to sip some coffee. Despite the fact it was a downpour, I had no problems at all being there, outside the *café*, getting piss wet as long as I could be analysing her, watching her movements, feeling terribly sad because of my friend's death, hoping she could even know me deeply, now that my friend was dead. I knew it was awful. But I couldn't help it. She was pretty, indeed. And all I knew at that very moment was I would like to meet her *right away* but, obviously, to keep meeting her for years, no matter what.

Finally, I set foot on the *café*. I reached her. *Hello, it's me*. She looked up: *Nice to meet you*. I sat down and started to talk to her. She stared at me inquisitively, listening to me carefully, trying not to miss a word. I told her all I knew about my friend, his letter, those gifts of his. I told her I got the key to his flat, so I could give it to her if she wanted to, or I could accompany her to his flat and figure all of this out together. In fact, I hoped she would decide to come along, but I could not tell her that. *It's okay, I'm coming with you*, she said to me finally. Glad as I was, I smiled and went to pay for the coffees, then we both got out of the *café* and in no time we were headed to my dead

friend's flat.

After his death, that flat was empty. His parents decided neither sell it nor let it, so I did not expect to be in trouble going there on our own. At first I reckoned maybe it would be a good idea to contact them before going to his flat, but I knew it was all too weird and I was not in the mood so as to be telling his parents about her, those gifts, the letter. I thought better of it, and came to realize the best I could do would be, well, taking her to there and find out what all of that was about.

Are you sure you wanna enter? I asked her right in front of that door. She did not respond, just nodded. *Okay then, let's go inside.* Saying this, I used the key and the door opened. Letting it ajar, we came in. A nasty odour welcomed us. An odour of something rotting. It is funny, at the time I got such a feeling: my soul was the culprit, my soul *was* that thing rotting, and thus I feared something wrong was about to happen to me. *You OKAY?* I heard her asking me. *Sure,* I responded, and so we both started looking around trying to discover where those gifts were.

3

As far as I can recall, the first time he told me about her was ten years ago. Back then, he was eager and excited each time he was talking to me about how they had met, when, where and what had happened at that very instant. It was the first time I saw him smiling openly, that's for sure. So, at his flat, while looking for those gifts, I paid much attention to her; how she leaned over to check some place out; what she wore; what she smelled of; how her large black hair felt down over her shoulders after each jerk. I was truly mystified about the sort of relationship they had had. It seemed unthinkable to me imaging these two having sex; or being at a gig, or whatever plans normally involved a couple of lovers. No; I knew then, and I think I know now, that my friend never touched her. According to that thought, I watched her moving around the flat, looking here and there, as if that one was the first time she was right there. She was a stranger. So was I.

Over here, she screamed, waving at me. I reached her and I saw an opened drawer, quite huge, containing some boxes. They looked like gifts, indeed. We picked them up, and put them on the dining room table. There were a total amount of four boxes, more or less looking the same. *Well, that's it. There, open them,* I said to her. She looked at me horrified, and I could understand why. Until then, we were more or less merely spectators, some sort of audience attending some bizarre event, but then, inside that flat with all those boxes around, we knew we were about to take part in it.

I love her, I recalled he told me some years ago, while having dinner I can barely remember where. *I really do.* That had to be true, I think. Yes; she froze in front of those boxes, trying to make such a decision. I stared at her, trying to make a move but not being capable of. *What do I do now?,* she asked. *I dunno,* I think I answered, mumbling. It was obvious: she had to open all those boxes. But there was something impeding her from doing that, and whatever it was that thing, it was impeding me from making her to do that, indeed.

He travelled a lot while being alive. The first place he went was London; then he decided to pay Prague a visit. Each time he came back, he brought some kind of gift for all of us. Something for his mama, something for his papa, something for me, and, of course, something for *her*. What I had never come to realize was that all of those gifts were hidden in his flat, inside a drawer, well-preserved, but untouched. And not to mention the mere idea of knowing that, as a matter of fact, what he felt inside was quite different from what she felt inside, so I could at that very moment understand why he killed himself, after all. It was a matter of not being loved, I was positive about that theory. *I love her too much. I mean it. I really do.* Yeah, he did. Those four boxes were placed on that table, awaiting us to do something. She picked one and studied it intensively. It was a common box. *Go ahead, open it,* I encouraged her. She looked at me as if she realized I was there for the first time, and then her gaze went back to that box she was holding. *Okay, I will.*

It was a gift from London. A red telephone booth.

I'm not sure at all, but maybe we both were waiting for something really special to happen, I

don't know what, and seeing that so-common red telephone booth, that friend of mine, somehow, had let us down.

The rest of those gifts turned out to be more or less the same, just some kinda sort of foolish things coming from different foreign countries. She looked tired and disappointed. *And is that all?*, she said to no one in particular. *I fear it is so, yes.*

4

I told you all; he was a stranger. She left the gifts where they were, and got out without looking back. I let her go. I stared for a while at those foolish things he bought somewhere, sometime, and I tried to think what they had meant to him, how he had chosen them all, and why. For he had decided to buy them for some reason, some reason I didn't even understand. I could even imagine him buying them in some kind of shop, smiling while doing so, thinking about the day he would be able to give them to her. I could see that anxiety of his, that odd feeling of being in love, and that made me sick.

I tossed all those gifts back inside that drawer. I got out of the flat, shutting the door behind me. Then, I locked it using the key I still had. I went downstairs, until I could reach the street. It was still raining, and it was cold and windy. I walked for a while, thinking, getting wet. I didn't care. After a couple of minutes, I picked that key up from my pocket and gazed at it intensely. Finally, I threw it out, not even worrying where it landed, in case it did.