[story] Gift | le don (abridged)

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Diane was just finishing off an online conference for an upcoming symposium curating a group of Chinese artists in exile, when the doorbell rang. She went downstair to pick him up, in calm steps gentle as the pulse of her mind, about to see him for the first time after who knows how many years. When she opened the gate to the apartment building, she saw him dragging on two luggages, both cheap-looking, undecorated. Since he was dragging the luggages, she couldn't give him a hug, but offered to help him with one of the bigger luggage, as they climbed up the steep winding stairs to her apartment on the seventh floor, the highest. They climbed in travail, heavy steps and no words. The first thing he did after they both got in the single studio room, he sat on the floor, laying down the luggage she just carried up, and zipped it open in excitement. "I've got a gift for you" But when the upper half of the luggage case was turned over, she didn't see anything particular inside, among men's shoes, slippers, hoodies, trousers, underwear n socks, a wash bag and other random items. Not a piece ready to stand out and amaze, like he told her to expect. The only remarkable thing were a few books, whose pages must have already been flipped so much they look fluffy. She saw him hanging there, knitting his brows, rummaging through the stuff there as if they were not his, and turned the case over again to check its exterior and the tag. "I must have taken a wrong one."

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Belleville rained. Diane woke up early. The light passing through the edge of the curtain had just barely revealed the signature on the corner of the room's centrepiece over the furnace, a painting of torrents of dark colors. It was an obscure name, anyway. Diane drew the curtain and cracked the window open. She boiled water on the stove, had two snow flake biscuits and figs, brewed tea, and started reading at the table. She had only one seminar today and it was in the evening. The page she just turned printed at its header DU MODE D'EXISTENCE DES OBJETS TECHNIQUES and at its corner 166. Her eyes set on the following passage,

> Gravir une pente pour aller vers le sommet, c'est s'acheminer vers le lieu privilégié qui commande tout le massif montagneux, non pour le dominer ou le posséder, mais pour échanger avec lui une relation d'amitié.

She pondered over the use of "d'amitié" ("friendship") in this unlikely context. Simondon, the author, would not intend to personify the nature. Diane thought, trying out ideas in her head. So it's more like an analogy for the individuality arising from the part of the object, like the individuality one would confer on a human friend, in the process of knowing, so to form a relation and this relation conversely individuate both friends, giving each other new identities…

She quit this digressive thought, emptied the first cup, and poured more water from the kettle into the teapot. The rain had stopped, and only a string of rain drops kept falling from the corner of the ledge above, right onto the railing outside her window, creating an andante of *don don don*. Tuning in the sound, Diane remembered of a joke someone once made to her, when they spoke of animals in philosophy, hence speaking of Simondon, how it was a cute name, like some rounded pieces of snacks. She was amused. So like dumplings? Yes, like dumplings dropped into water one by one, *bling bling bling*, *don don don*.

Diane poured a second cup of deeper amber and sipped the subtle bitterness.

The tea was a gift from one of her aunts several years ago, white tea from China's Southwest. It was one of those teas that mellowed with age. She received the delivery package shortly after returning from her visit home home. A gift of apology, she figured. The aunt accommodated her for two nights on her transit in the capital city and treated her kindly. But when they met again in the hometown later, she accused her, right at the family dinner table, of being an ungrateful little bastard. Or maybe she used the word bitch, Diane could not remember. She poured a third cup. The liquid in the white ceramic was colored like the season, but warming unlike the season. She felt it flew through and soothed her oral cavity, throat, esophagus, and stomach, and she knew she had only love for the aunt left. This passing thought came with little sense of personal victory, as it already felt like a battle centuries ago. The past was in her, but the baggage had been cleared.

don don don. All this nostalgia.

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They reported the lost luggage to the airport, after over half an hour on the phone. Diane made the calls, as he was unable to communicate with the customer service who did not speak English. She frowned when he tried and failed, with the excuse that it was hard to hear clearly over the phone. Once the report's done, she sat down by the luggage to help him find any clue of the owner's identity. Obviously a man, neither too old to wear outdoor slippers nor too young to dress in any style. A typical urban dweller, owning an electronic toothbrush and an electronic razor. Diane picked up the book on top. It was a third volume of *The Deer and the Cauldron*, a Chinese chivalric romance popular in the 90s. Diane used to read comic-strips adapted from the book on the bus back home, after her gymnastic training, while feeling a faint pain in her left ankle, a pain that eventually ended her fantasy of being a nimble female knight errant. The book under was a clearner copy with an unknown face smiling with thumb up on the cover, some airport literature. "Nothing in mine would help whoever took it, either." He said in resignation.

Diane disregarded it, took out the sealed paper bag at the bottom, which first looked like a nondescript book, and tore it open. He took from there and drew out a leaflet. "It's about uh..." he paused searching for words. "Vibrators." She found it funny that he opted for this neutral English word. The leaflet listed a dozen different models and their specs. A hair drier's instruction manuel would look sexier. The product designs were all familiar but the brand never heard of, probably an ODM or a knock-off company. "Interesting, a man comes to sell this," he commented. Someone who had an actual purpose, at least, Diane thought, without saying it. She went back to the desk to check on her computer for any sex fair that weekend in Belleville, and he sat there, not moving, searching for the company's information in Chinese on his phone.

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When Diane finished the chapter it was still early, and she went back to take a nap. She woke up from a dream. The dream began as she went into a carpentry sound box, and inside she found it was books falling from a shelf that's making the sound. Bigger volumnes made louder notes, but pitches and timbres varied. She heard a tender mid-range note when a Neruda hit, a concise, high-pitch radio sound made by a Stigler, a bellowing sound by, she hunched and picked up the book, of course, Saul Bellow.

As if her movement unsettled the structure, the dilapidated door of the shelf suddenly fell off, on which engraved a gaudy rooster whose color had faded. When she raised up the door, so much dirt came off to cover the carpeted floor that she found herself then standing on a dusty field, with chickens walking about eating chaff, and him standing next to her. She couldn't tell

whether it was in China or some foreign countryside. She went up to hug him,

feeling his hair passing her face. Yet the next second, the hair changed, turning greasy, and she realized it was not him. She pushed away. The stranger ignored her, or pretended to, and kept feeding the chickens with a exquisite box of pastries.

Diane recalled only fragments, though. She remembered the door, which was probably alluded to the one on the closet of her grandparents' rural brick&adobe house. She felt a hug, but with whom she couldn't retrieve. A sense of barrenness was there, perhaps due to this bleak day. She got up, and started getting ready to head out. A colleague asked if she wanted to meet before the serminar. He was going to discuss his dissertation with a professor beforehand, and wanted her opinion as well. She also thought about meeting the guy with whom she had been going on a few dates lately. Last time after leaving her place, he sent a cursory handwritten note, thanking her for being a wonderful person and joyful company. The guy sometimes looked almost disheveled, and was older. But his eyes glittered at the right moments. He drank with manner, too, not trying to finish up her bottle of Don Julio last time. Diane texted the colleague that she would be around the department at three. She would text the guy later after the seminar.

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They got in touch with the sex toy businessman. In the next day, he would send the luggage to the man's hotel, take his own and move to his subleased place on the other side of the city. But before that, they still had the rest of this day to spend. Diane went for a gallery opening thing in the afternoon and left him a key. He went for a walk, bought socks and an underwear for change, and did grocery. When he got back, he took a shower and put on the shirt and pants she put out for him, which fit well. When she came back, he cooked a chicken stew, and she stood by to assist. She peeled garlic cloves, cut a spoonful of butter into the pot ("You don't have vegetable oil?"), gave him soy sauce, attempted to add in a mixed spice she got from the Asian market ("Noooo, it'd ruin it," he objected. But she added to her own bowl when eating later.), cooked the rice in the rice-cooker, and, mostly, just watched him cooking. She watched him running the knife blade along the bone and point into the joints to strip the meat off the chicken legs, watched his calm face hiding the anxiety with her Santoku knife, which didn't come handy for the task, his relief putting the meat cuts into the sizzling butter, and the hint of warm glow on his cheek when she said it smelled so good ("Ça a l'air très bon!") in the local tongue. (It could be just the heat of the stove fire). She watched him in the light shedding from the kitchen hood onto his hair and lean figure and the cotton shirt. She could then finally see him, again, who he had been, coming through the past to be here in front of her. Still my boy, she smiled, and sighed a silent sigh.

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Diane slid open the closet door to get something from the pile of folded sweaters. Just by looking and caressing the fuzz, it warded off the weird feeling in the wake of the nap and made her feel ready to go into the damp outside. At about the bottom third, she saw an edge of dark green sifting through a black layer, with stitches of golden patterns.

That was the gift he gave her when he visited Belleville. It was two years ago, also the last time she saw him. Before she took the train to another city for the symposium, for which she had been preparing a talk, she had put herself on the work and got sick, and they didn't manage to meet again and say goodbye. At that time, she was still living in the studio apartment on the seventh floor. After getting back from the trip and climbing up the stairs, she found a soft package at her door. She opened the door, carried her suitcase in, and turned to pick up and open the package. She lifted the sweater in the air with two

hands. A little card flew out but she would heed it later. She was seized by the view.

If you ever see specks of gold shimmering in dark, unrefined ores, that's what you would compare to the textile landscape present here. The golden threads were sewn in clusters of floral patterns. But they were no typical embroidery or jacquard. The threads were stitched in such a way protruding out, that each stitch was its own character, and each cluster of thousands of stitches was sprouting out like fireworks. The flowers were abstract in perspective, yet also vivid that, when her hands trembled, the tens of thousands of petals, like millets, seemed to be quivering with. In Chinese painting, one speaks of the expressive style versus the realistic style, in terms of freehand versus meticulous brushwork. Diane found the sweater as infused with the spirit of both. A synthesis. For the ending touch, the softly draped sleeves and black ribbed finishing at the collar, shoulder, cuffs, and hem rendered elements of scrolls.

Diane drew out the sweater from the pile. No card flew out this time, of course. The golden threads came loose and unravelled at a few spots, as if petals falling off in a string. She scissored those out so they would not pull off more threads. She put it on and took a look in the mirror. A different mirror from the first time, but reflecting the same calligraphy scroll hanging on the opposite wall, a quote from Zhuangzi,

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She looked at the big and small floral patches of light arising from the dark ground of her body. She remembered thinking how the gift was like a philosophical residue from his past, or their past. A reverberation of words they used to share, words concerning the cosmos as well as ordinary wonders, on aminal philosophies and just how different creatures were cute, about their Chinese roots, about Simondon and *don don don*. In those moments, they had glimpsed with joy both of their gifts for something beyond themselves. Then they drifted apart. From afar, she could not tell for sure, but sensed that gift dimmed month by month, year by year, all his gift that she had cherished, yet he himself negligent of, *le don qu'il est gaspillé*. How it pained her.

But for all that mattered, she could keep this sweater, and she was glad to wear it. On the card that flew out, he wrote,

> I often thought of the autumns we spent. I imagined the autumn in Belleville and what it's like. Here, where I am, the osmanthus are blossoming. After rain, it smells refreshing, and the color as well... I wish to give a little of this to you.

don don don

Diane went into the autumn.