[story] Gift | le don (abridged)

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Rui was just finishing off a zoom call for a symposium on Chinese artists in exile, when the doorbell rang. She went downstairs to pick him up, her steps in the pulse of her mind, about to see him for the first time after who knows how many years. When she opened the street door, she saw him dragging two big luggages. Behind them, she couldn't give him a hug. So, she offered to help carry one, and together they climbed up the winding stairs to her apartment on the seventh floor. They climbed in heavy steps and no words. Once in the studio room, he sat on the floor, laying flat one of the luggages, and zipped it open. "I've a gift for you." But when the case was flipped open, she saw nothing particular inside, among men's wear and other random items. Not a piece ready to amaze, like he told her to expect. She saw him hanging there then turning it over to check the label on the exterior. "Got the wrong one."

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Belleville rained. The daylight just barely revealed the obscure signature on the room's centerpiece, a painting of dark torrents. Rui drew the curtain and cracked the window open. She had some snowflake biscuits and figs, brewed tea, and started reading at the table. She only had one seminar today, and it was in the evening.

> *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. ^[1]*

Rui contemplated the use of "d'amitié" in this context. Simondon, this philosopher, would not personify the nature… an analogy, rather, for the individuality arising from the part of the object, like what one would confer onto a human friend… a relation formed in the process of knowing, that also individuates both sides, giving themselves new identities…

A string of raindrops kept falling from the ledge above, right onto the railing outside Rui's window, making an andante of *don don don*. Diverted with the sound, Rui remembered a joke someone made once, when speaking with her about animals, hence mentioning Simondon. It was a cute name, they said, like rounded pieces of snacks. She was amused. Like dumplings. Dumplings? Yea, dropped into water one after another, *bling bling bling*, *don don don*.

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They reported the lost luggage to the airport and got in touch with the owner. The next day, he would send the luggage to that person, take his own and move to his subleased room south of the city. Before that, they still had a day to spend. She went for a gallery opening and left him a key. He went for a walk and did grocery. After he got back, he took a shower and put on the shirt and pants she prepared. After 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, passed him soy sauce, attempted to add in a mixed spice ("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 blade along the bone and point into the joints to strip the meat off the chicken legs, 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 pot, and the warm flush on his cheek while she said, *Ça a l'air très bon!* (It could be just the

heat of the stove). She watched him under the range hood light, the glow

falling over his hair and lean figure and the cotton shirt. Then, She could finally see him, again, who he had been, coming through the past to be here in front of her. Still my boy, she thought, and sighed a silent sigh.

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Rui slid open the closet door. In the pile of folded sweaters, she saw an edge of dark green with golden stitches.

That was the gift. It was two years ago, the last time she saw him, before she took the train to another city for the symposium, and they didn't manage to meet again before he left the country. After getting back from her trip and climbing up the stairs, she found a package at her door, and took out the sweater inside.

If you ever see specks of gold shimmering in dark ores, that's what you would compare to this textile landscape. Golden threads were stitched in clusters of floral patterns that, when her hands trembled, the tens of thousands of petals quivered along. Ancient Chinese painters speak of expressive freehand and realistic brushwork. She found this piece as infused of both spirits.

Rui drew the sweater from the pile. She trimmed the loose threads and put it on. Seeing the floral patches arising from the dark ground, Rui remembered thinking how the gift was like a philosophical residue from their past, the words they used to share about the cosmo as well as everyday wonders, about animal philosophy and just how different creatures were cute, about their common Chinese roots, about Simondon and *don don don*.

They had glimpsed with joy of their gifts for something beyond themselves. Then they drifted apart. From afar, she sensed that gift of his dimmed year by year, all that she had cherished, yet he himself negligent of, *le don qu'il est gaspillé*.

But for all that mattered, she kept this sweater.

don don don ...

Rui went into the rain, with the gift.

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