

The Gift

By Adair Broughton

The ticking clock was silent through familiarity. The man's breath wasn't. The shallow and laboured inhale gave no perceptible rise to the chest, no swell of life. Everything was silent compared to that struggling breath. It was the barely audible admittance of times encroachment. The quietest thing was now strangely the loudest. It was hard to watch and harder to listen to. He strained to listen, hoping for a sign, a message that it would become stronger and deeper, and some sound of hope that life still had a chance. It had been the same for hours, endless time waiting patiently for the end.

He sat next to the bed of the dying man. His large exhale of frustration seemed unfair against the respiration of a much longer sleep due.

A certain peace filtered through the room but seemed unfair, a mockery of their relationship and unjust in its simplicity. The calm still had an edge to it, slightly unreal. There was still something hidden. There was a lull before a storm and a lull after. Which was this?

It was odd what power a helpless old man could yield.

He wouldn't believe anything until it was over and even then it would seem like it hadn't happened. He would be hunted by memory just like he had been surrounded by mist on his walk that morning. He could see things clearly around him but looking any further was impossible. Ghosts could only form at a distance. The further you looked the more they seemed solid. Time itself was like that. The moment was fluid the past set in stone. So what was the future? He was lost in a cloud. It intrigued him as a child; it was a perfect metaphor for now.

Clouds bring rain. Mist envelops like a silent assassin. Foggy thoughts wanted to suffocate him but for once he had to be strong, to face things. He at least owed the man that. He knew the man would be pleased he could still intimidate even from a powerless prostate slumber. He was facing him directly, head on but of course the other man could not see this renewed strength. It wouldn't last. Energy was absorbed through the air, sucked into the dying man to take on his journey to hell, or the trip to nowhere.

He hadn't decided yet. Luckily this was outside of his choice.

The call should not have been unexpected but it was. He had walked slowly, listening to footstep tap reluctance with the pavement. Occasionally a car passed, a headlight slicing through mist then disappearing as quickly as it appeared. It had made him think of a lighthouse as it turned the corner, he was the ship, his fate to hit the rock.

He had wanted to walk, to feel the solidity of steps, feel human.

It was early, dawn cold and grey, suiting the mood or creating the mood he wasn't sure. The fact that he had been told so early in the day would make the closure last as

long as possible. It seemed deliberate but he knew it wasn't. How many times had he tormented himself with things that didn't matter? How many times had he believed things that lacked any truth?

He needed to worry, to feel subdued with life. There was a difference between knowing and admittance. He wanted these feelings, the ambiguity that was more pronounced in death than life.

The nurse entered the room ignoring the man in the chair, checking the monitor and scribbling set procedure into an information sheet at the end of the bed. She looked around thinking she saw a strange glow, but dismissed it. She then looked up at the clock, shaking her head. Was that a look of sadness or frustration?

He watched the nurse leave. Would there be enough debris to cling to and find dry land once the storm had passed. He needed something to cling too. Just one memory of something good this man had done. He didn't like calling him his father. He had not been one even if blood made the connection for him. Yet no one else could have had that power, could have poured onto someone so much oil of blame. He constantly held the match through nasty and harsh word, sniping comments, and mumblings under breath but never once lighting the match. In some ways it had been over before it had begun. He had been a baby, and then he had been no more.

He was too young to remember the suffocation, the new existence born while one departed.

That guilt eventually soaked him to the bone, ready to combust. He had taken it all, pushed further than anyone should have been. It was not his fault. These things happen. Her death tore him apart too, like it had done through all the years and he had spent his life comforting others and making things right without ever once having someone do that for him. He had never been given a chance. They had taken him away. He was sure they could have saved him.

Most people had a burden of life and he didn't even have that. He had the burden of having to do good deed. It was constant, no reprieve. He should have felt special, but doing good things was not to about making one feel better. It was always strange how that was misconstrued.

He had met only one other person on the way. A young girl who had walked passed him and stared at him with eyes like burning cigarettes. She was different, pale and not like them at all. But he was confused, couldn't be sure of what he had seen. Those eyes would be a quicker death than lung cancer.

From that cold morning the afternoon had now darkened to evening but his feelings had always been like the night when with this man. Everything in life that was bad seemed to happen at night. It was his time, watching and listening to the world sleep as he introspected and cognised existence from far away. It never got him far. He had always been a thinker and not much else. There seemed to be a spirit permanently dragging him down. That spirit wasn't too far away. His father lying there should not be the excuse but he was bright enough to find correlation just not confident enough to free the chains and break into a world that seemed permanently harsh and critical.

The strength of moments before was undulating with the past thirty years to a new low, a new depth of sadness.

It was not his business to be sad. It shouldn't have been that way.

He shouldn't be feeling anything, wanted desperately not too but there was little he could do. Death was important. It was the end. He wished the man who had so often put him down, kept him silent, intimidated him would rise up once more, like a tower of anger and hate, something he could fight against now he had made the journey into life. He could chip away at the stone of contempt like a woodsman and a tree. The woodman was cutting into life, which was the difference.

The man had done all that without knowing he was there. He watched from a distance. He had wanted to understand the man who could have been a father, to interpret whether it was a moment of madness or whether nature had really given him a dark force of hatred that consumed the good in the world. Even now things weren't so simple. The man was an enigma, he let no thoughts out, let no one in. He had not come across anyone like that before. He always felt he knew what he was dealing with. Maybe he was too close for a balanced perspective. When he tried to get away, something always drew him back.

Life had no fair way of letting go. There was only one way to enter but so many ways to leave. He had seen them all. Sometimes there was nothing he could do. It didn't faze the others but it affected him. He couldn't question the heavens but it seemed selection of who should live and die should not be a game of the angels.

Even life and death was about choice, and not ones own.

People would die for an ending like this, sleeping, timid and serene. In some ways his father didn't deserve it, not for what he had done. Forgiveness was all too easy. Forgiveness was a moment. Memories and time should not distil things. Had he come to offer forgiveness or to find understanding? Any event can be cancelled by forgiveness. It was a gift given to the guilty. It took too much strength to resist giving that present. Anger was a difficult thing to cling too. He had kept sane by having that anger, knowing that where life and death meet would be the one time he could finally cross paths with his father, to ask the question once and for all.

He was meant to keep away but what did he have to lose. He saw life as a greater role than what he was doing now. There was a freedom with life, even if it was less comfortable. He would never have it. He was given brief glimpses when he had to collect but they were teasing examples nothing more.

He could help hundreds of people but never himself.

He focused on the clock hands instead of the pallid form whose journey into shadow was in the nascent. Life can be seen to slip away. Had the clock slowed down to match his eternity? His father could destroy the only chance at life he had but he could not change time, of that he was sure.

He almost felt sorry for his father, for what lay ahead. Things were not so simple. He was sure they still hadn't decided where he would go.

It was something always feared, trepidation follows age but not to age becomes more frightening. There had to be some escape. His father may be the answer. Was that what he secretly hoped and risked?

For thirty years he had wanted to see something good in his father, a sign that he had cared. There had been nothing. Hope and faith were not an endless well. There was something ugly about not finding at least one beautiful thing within a person. He hated himself for that.

The man stirred, his body finding energy to move. He didn't know whether to call the nurse but she would have ignored him anyway, the connected machines much more trustworthy indicators.

The eyes opened, examining the ceiling. It must have been nearing the time. He could see the soul behind them swirling with regret. It does come to everyone. Things must catch up. Actions produce ripples sent through time that always find a way of coming back bouncing through years and people and places until they return with added magnitude.

The eyes closed.

He had seen regret so many times but always too late, like now. He had needed that weakness from his father. It was strange, how weakness could change everything. Weakness had not yet merged into forgiveness. It took strength for his father to become that weak. He had fought for so long.

His father laid still, face pointing towards unopened heavens, yet it still felt like he was examining him for the first time.

"Son, I know you are there"

No words would form. He looked back. His father spoke again.

"I've seen the angels. I've seen them fight for me. I can see you."

How could he even see the man sitting by his bed? Death was close, palpable in the room like a serpent ready to strike. The heart monitor remained steady, no alarm activating personnel. It was surprising that his father could find the energy with such shallow breath to speak.

He was here to listen not to talk back.

"You have watched me many times. I always knew you were there."

He knew that was impossible. He was one of the unseen, directing lives, taking people to and from eternity.

Still his father spoke, finding resource in the silence that echoed back.

"I have a gift before I go. It's called truth. It will confuse you; confound you like it has done to me for all these years. You don't acknowledge the years like I do, feel that time pass, knowing what might have been. But truth binds us all."

Minutes passed before he could continue. The fatigue of life was fighting against the last sleep in a body held together by broken dreams and anger.

He was patient but intrigued.

"Your mother was like you are now. I was one of the few who could see her. She said I was the only one. She had destroyed herself much too young in front of a mirror. She had flown far then, given a new beginning, one of the select few. A perfect angel but who took with her the sorrows of humanity. She had felt something at that last moment as her life slipped by. She needed that taste, that feeling again. Even if it meant to lose the new being she had become."

He could now hear his own breath, intrigued, ashamed for all his previous thoughts but he knew the story wasn't finished, that there would be no closure to this. There were no words he could form. He sat still transfixed. This was the gift handed down generations. It was the knowledge of who we are, what motivates us, what it all means. Worth more than any trinket or piece of jewellery, it was the knowledge of self.

He was saying too much, trying too hard. It would push the barrier of nothingness even closer, force the decision of life and death to be made. He would not stop his dad's dying soliloquy. This was his dues, his inheritance.

"She had seen something in me, maybe an impossibility, her own revolution of independence to strike back against them. She needed that life she had tasted so fleetingly again, so she sacrificed eternity for me, to come back. Do you know how hard that is to live with? I killed your mother as much as you killed her."

He fell silent. The body was still but nothing seemed complete. Moments became minutes. The blame in dying diatribe was crystal clear, precious but easily smashed. Yet he was being given the truth. He was meant to see that, but he had missed so much, for so long.

"Your mother was honest with me, she told me about her life. It was a sad story, but I realised she had used me, to get back into this life, this world. How could I come to terms with that? I had taken her willingly from beauty and eternity because I was too arrogant to believe she didn't like me for who I am. It was hubris. It was false."

The nurse entered, looking at the screen. She took a glance twice more at the clock, making an example of time. Why did she need to look at it a second time? Why was it more important than the man in the bed? She still ignored him sitting in the chair, walking by him as if he was as insignificant as air itself.

"I missed her. The baby should have completed us but it was the death of her and then the death of me. We were family but never together. I hated you for that but I had to protect you from this life. She had told me the secrets of the angels. They take only those that are young and have had no chance at life. Which parent would not give their son and daughter eternity? I could get back at her and give you a greater life than any father could. I will not regret that."

He wanted to speak. What was he meant to think? Could he still hate that man, his father?

"I won't regret that decision till my dying breath. I wish I could see her burning eyes for one last time."

It was his dying breath. The endless hours were consumed by one moment. Everything changes with death but it all looks the same. The man became the bed and the bed became the room. The room became the building. It was inanimate and it was over. Death was like that, simple and effective.

The monitor had recognised the failing heart. Alarms sounded and feet rushed. Five minutes passed as the man stood up from the chair and stepped aside and let the doctors and nurses try and produce a miracle that would not happen. The sheet was pulled over his fathers face but the man was not ushered out the room as solemn footsteps signalled he was once again alone.

He stared at the sheets for a few moments; he had no time left, no wish to follow his father on his own journey. He didn't want to think where that would be. The clock had stopped. He was back in his own time. He had people to help. He had what he wanted. A single solitary tear ran down that angelic face.

So that was the truth.