

The Gift

By

Colin Pink

Helen is tense. She is at home trying to do relaxation exercises. She has a tape going and is trying, clumsily, to do the exercises in time to the tape.

The doorbell rings.

Helen [Shouting to the door.] I'm not in.

Martin It's me.

Helen Who?

Martin Me. Martin. We met at the supermarket.

Helen The supermarket?

Martin Don't you remember? In the parking lot?

Helen Oh you. We did not "meet" at the supermarket, you backed into my car.

Martin Yes. Sorry about that. Have my insurance people been in touch with your insurance people yet?

Helen I don't know.

Martin May I come in?

Helen Why?

Martin I have something for you.

Helen [Sighs, opens door. Martin stands in doorway holding a large box.]

Martin I wanted to give you something.

Helen What?

Martin A gift. Here.

Helen Why are you bringing me a gift?

Martin I -

Helen It's not my birthday or -

Martin I wanted to make up for the . . . , for your trouble.

Helen You really shouldn't have.

Martin I wanted to.

Helen You'd better come in.

Martin Where shall I . . . ?

Helen On the table.

Martin Here?

Helen Why not. (Beat) Is it heavy?

Martin No. Not really.

Helen [Silence.]

Martin [Silence.]

Helen [Silence.]

Martin Aren't you going to open it?

Helen Yes. Yes, I suppose it's the least I can do. Since you've gone to all this trouble.

Martin It wasn't any trouble.

Helen [Opens the box. Takes out object wrapped in tissue paper. Tears off tissue paper to reveal a large and truly hideous piece of ceramic (for instance a large fish or frog).]

Martin What do you think of it?

Helen It's . . .

Martin Yes?

Helen It's . . .

Martin Yes?

Helen How can I put it? It's . . . would you like a drink?

Martin Don't open anything on my account.

Helen No trouble. I think I need a drink.

Martin I saw it and instantly thought of you.

Helen You did?

Martin Yes. I did.

Helen Really.

Martin It has that . . . it sort of . . . you know don't you?

Helen [Doubtfully.] Yes.

Martin Yes, yes, it certainly, it captures, it . . . it . . . speaks!

Helen [Examining the ceramic.] It speaks!?

Martin Not literally, of course.

Helen Thank God for small mercies.

Martin What?

Helen It's a phrase, a saying.

Martin Yes, yes of course it is.

Helen My mother used to say it.

Martin Did she?

Helen Yes. I never found it very convincing.

Martin No?

Helen No. It always sounded a little desperate to me.

Martin How is your mother?

Helen She's dead.

Martin Oh.

Helen Don't worry, it's not your fault.

Martin I have a tendency to say the wrong thing. Put my foot in it . . . you know.

Helen It's easily done.

Martin Once, in a shop I helped this pregnant woman out the door. I held the door for her.

Helen How very old fashioned.

Martin It was an old fashioned shop.

Helen I like that kind.

Martin And as she left I had this sudden urge to make polite conversation. So I said, When's it due?

Helen How original.

Martin Yes, and she said, When's what due? And I said, The baby.
[Pause.]
Then she looked at me as if she wanted me to drop dead there and then in the doorway.

Helen Which would have been very inconvenient for the other shoppers.

Martin And she walked away without a word.

Helen She wasn't pregnant, was she.

Martin No. How was I to know?
[Pause.]
Where are you going to put it?

Helen Put what?

Martin The 'objet d'art'.

Helen Oh that. I haven't decided yet.

Martin I could help you select a suitable place for it.

Helen I already have one or two in mind.

Martin Over here would be good.

Helen No, I don't think so.

Martin Perhaps you're right. Here might be better, it would get the morning light.

Helen I'll think about it.

Martin Don't think too much.

Helen I should give you something.

Martin Oh, no, no, no.

Helen Yes. Yes, I should.

Martin But why?

Helen Because you gave me something. Now I have to give you something in return.

Martin I wouldn't hear of it.

Helen Isn't that the way gifts work? You give, I give, we have both given. Like Christmas.

Martin I, ah.

Helen If I don't give you something I'm . . . what is the word . . .

Martin [Silence.]

Helen Obligated.

Martin You are?

Helen Yes, I'm afraid I am. That's the thing about gifts – they obligate.

Martin I didn't mean to obligate you. I would never dream of creating any obli-

Helen But you have, you see. Unfortunately, unintentionally or not, you have -

Martin I have?

Helen Created a -

Martin Obli-

Helen gation. Exactly.

Martin Oh dear.

Helen Precisely.

Martin What can we do?

Helen [Silence.]

Martin [Silence.]

I know!

Helen [Jumps.]
What?

Martin Give me a glass of water.

Helen Water?

Martin It's a hot day. I'm thirsty.

Helen Okay.
[Gets Martin a glass of water.]

Martin [Drinks the water.]

Helen Is that okay?

Martin Mmmm, very nice.

Helen Really?

Martin Yes. A truly transcendent glass of water.

Helen It's only tap. [Beat.] Are you sure you don't want anything else?

Martin No, no, the water was fine. We're even.

Helen If you say so.

Martin I'd better go.

Helen [Disappointed.] Oh.

Martin Yes, people to see, things to do, you know.

Helen Doors to open.

Martin Exactly.

Helen So . . .

Martin Yes?

Helen That's it. [Beat.] You're not going to ask for my phone number or anything like that?

Martin No.

Helen Oh.

Martin There wouldn't be any point.

Helen Not necessar-

Martin I'm just passing through . . . travelling . . . I don't suppose I'll be in these parts again.

Helen I see. [Beat.] So, it's goodbye.

Martin Yes. Don't forget to . . . look after . . . the gift.

Helen The? . . . Oh yes . . . of course.

Martin Bye.
[Exit Martin.]

Helen Bye.
[Helen pauses. Silence. Sits and contemplates the gift. Now decides she rather likes it, in a funny sort of way. Places it in the spot Martin had suggested. Switches on her relaxation tape again. Does her exercises, this time with a new found grace.]

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