

The Gift

by Jaime Karnes

Margie was definitely going through with it.

It was noon and one and two. She removed curlers from her auburn hair and matted her face with powder. Blushed her cheeks with rose colored crème, and painted her lips in an opal Chanel she saved for special occasions. She thought of the last thing Luke had said to her on the phone, their conversation hurried. He was rushing to his writing workshop at the New School, preoccupied with a story submission. She'd asked if she could see him that weekend. No, he'd be upstate with friends. The following week, too, he assured her, would be hectic. Three lectures, two interviews, and yet another story deadline.

"Friday?" Margie asked.

"No, no." Friday, Luke had an appointment to remove five stitches from his abdomen. "Nothing serious," he said, "just a suspicious mole."

"Oh, that mole," she'd said. Not telling him that sometimes while he slept, she ran her finger over it. Back and forth. How she admired its imperfection, the distorted roundness of it—the owl eye of its black center. How she thought if she knew all of his moles as well as this, she would know all of him. We hide imperfections, like our secret selves, until we find the one person we trust to touch them. Luke trusted her, she thought. So soon, too. This never happened to Margie. This never happened in New York.

He'd finally agreed to meet two weeks later at Vol de Nuit—their beer garden on West 4th—the place where they'd first met. Where they'd bought and smoked an entire pack of cigarettes (neither of them smokers) and drank exotic beer in small glasses, clinking, and cheering each new sip. They drank their way around the world that first night—into a cab, across the Williamsburg Bridge, up five flights to his loft, beneath his Ikea comforter. Drowned in his sweat stained t-shirt, her pleated skirt flattened on his dusty wood floor. Their sex smelled of hydrangeas.

In the morning, over instant black coffee, he shared thirty pages of his novel in progress. His twitchy charm unnerved her as he read.

"It's like Don DeLillo," she'd said when he was finally finished, "in a good way, I mean." Though she'd only read the dust cover of *White Noise*, she'd thought it relevant.

"Right," he said. "You're not really my ideal audience."

How exciting that she was about to see him again after all these weeks, nearly two months. She tore pages from a glossy magazine and carefully wrapped his gift in a small box using clear tape, tied with ribbon. Not pink or blue. Yellow, she decided. Yellow could mean boy or girl. She imagined they'd discuss which he preferred after he held her and exclaimed he'd be happy with either, no matter. They would kiss, his tongue tickling just behind her teeth, the way it had the very first time.

Margie sprayed the gift with her most expensive perfume and tucked it into her sweater's front pocket. This way she could hold it close to her on the subway, so no one would see the pretty wrapping and try to snatch it from her.

She wore the same blue skirt that Luke had said made her look like a character from a Tom Robbins novel. She practiced how she'd sit, spreading the fullness of the skirt across the bar stool. She envisioned spinning around cinematically and waiting for his embrace.

"A gift?" he would say, "for me?" She'd want to plead for him to open it immediately, so they could get on with the rest of their lives—together.

Margie looked for Luke inside *Vol de Nuit*, it was early. Nearly three o'clock, but not three enough for Luke, he'd admitted his unpunctual flaw early on in their first conversation. She hesitated outside the men's room, wishing he, too, had been early with anticipation. A man of nearly fifty wearing Velcro Nikes and a Pig n' Whistle ball cap came out and burped above her head. Margie fingered the gift in her pocket, tap-tapped her fingers on its smooth wrapping, careful not to smooch the bow.

"I'm waiting for my boyfriend," she told the bartender.

"Sure, great," the bartender said.

Ten, eleven, twenty minutes went by. She ordered a first beer and sipped it slowly with grace and class. She didn't want to have too much, lest she forget the look on Luke's face when he opened the gift.

She blushed, remembering their first night at Vol de Nuit. How drunk she'd been. How gentle he'd been. How he'd turned away when she'd undone her bra in his loft, letting it fall to the floor. How under the covers he'd waited and then finally brushed her thigh with the back of his hand, and then his palm. How he'd rubbed her legs all over, until she was good and spinning and ready to let him touch her more. How she'd traced her fingers across his back spelling I NEEDED YOU, when it was over, when he was asleep.

"Margie," Luke's deep voice snapped her back onto the barstool. She pushed her glasses up her nose and stood for the hug, the kiss, their lovers embrace. "Gotta take a piss," he said, smiling.

"You look amazing," she said, when they'd settled into their small table in the corner of the beer garden.

"Yeah?" Luke tugged at his wool v-neck. "Thanks. I feel like shit."

He said shit in a British accent that made Margie want to unwrap his gift and show everyone around them.

"I've missed you," she said, decidedly bold.

"Yeah?" He nodded. "I've been so fucking busy."

Margie could tell. Though she wanted to inquire as to what could be more important than calling to check up on a girlfriend, she bit her lip.

"Listen," he said, "I've got a thing. After this beer, I kind of have to skip out."

"Okay," she said, tucking her skirt beneath her thighs, like a child's blanket.

"Did you bring my watch?" he asked.

Crap. She'd been fixated on his gift, she'd forgotten his watch.

"Crap," she said, "I didn't."

"It was my grandfather's," he said, as if she didn't think his possessions precious.

She'd tried it on that first morning in his loft, admiring the thin leather, and small white face. Thinking it luck she'd found a man comfortable enough to wear such a delicate feminine watch. Still, it was clumsy of her to have left it on, to have worn it home.

Margie watched as Luke drank his beer rapidly. She made a throat clearing noise to steal his attention from a nearby table of girls.

She noticed Luke smiled at the one with the longest hair. "So where do you have to go so fast?" she asked.

"Just a thing," Luke said, looking again at Margie. "At a professor's house all the way up in Washington Heights. Can you believe that? Washington fucking Heights? It's so...It's just...well it is what it is."

"The Cloisters," Margie smiled.

"Not that far," he said.

Margie fiddled with the ashtray on the center of the table, hoping Luke would put his hands over hers and squeeze, like he had the last time they were together. She rubbed the side of her neck and let out a small groan, a fakery of pain, hoping he would reach across to touch her shoulder.

"He's a real son of bitch too. He's published a trillion books, not a one worth two shits, yet he thinks he's God's gift to the New School. Always telling us we need to crawl before we can walk. I mean, Jesus, he talks about craft in clichés. You know what I mean? Not that all craft isn't clichéd at this point, but still. With his salary you'd think he'd have at least some semblance of wisdom to dispense."

Margie didn't understand. But she knew that Luke's passion was enough.

The foam at the bottom of Luke's glass and in the corners of his mouth indicated that their time was nearly through. "It was good seeing you, Marge," he said. "I'll call you soon. That watch, you know, it was my grandfather's and all."

“Sure,” Margie said, “Yes, I mean, of course.” She pushed his gift deeper into her sweater pocket.

Luke dropped a five dollar bill on the table and hugged her loosely around the shoulders. She couldn't feel his chest. She thought that this did not feel like the kind of date when people hugged tightly and gushed. She wondered if it were even a date. She'd prepared all day for a date. She had the gift. She was supposed to take the small box from her pocket, presenting it in the palms of both of her hands, and say, “See I've got this gift for you.”

Margie walked south toward the subway, the gift still in her sweater, still bouncing lightly against her side. She couldn't throw it out like trash. Too afraid of stray dogs getting at it. Ripping the wrapping with their gnarly teeth and slobbering all over it. Or a bum could find it and think something gold were inside. No, she couldn't throw it out like that.

“My book is about a young man's journey to death,” Luke had said that morning in his loft. “It's not some bullshit coming of age, or postmodern Pynchon epic knockoff. It's simple, really. It's kind of like the difference between men and women and how we move toward the ends of our lives, except there aren't really any women in it. I didn't want to write a love story. It's just this dude and his dad and a couple friends and a few cousins, and some strangers from the neighborhood, who all share their stories about death. No one dies though. It's not demented or predictable. It's a journey book.”

Margie carried the gift home. She unwrapped it in her bedroom. Pulling on the long end of the ribbon, watching as the bow slipped into a string. She used her unpolished fingernail to get under the tape, so as not to rip the paper. She set the white box on her dresser and picked up the phone.

“I'd like to make an appointment with Doctor Silver. Yes, Tuesday is good. Anytime works for me. Well,” she said, “Early is better. Yes, ten-thirty is fine. What's that? Don't eat anything? Oh. For an hour. Okay. Margarite Thomas. M-a-r-g-a...”

The box seemed to watch as Margie went about wrecking its life. It may have sighed if boxes could do such a thing. Or it may have

leapt from atop her dresser and danced about her feet, in a tribal pleading of desperation.

She immediately dialed Luke after she hung up. "It's me," she said.

"I know it's you, Marge. What's up?" his voice was kinder than it'd seemed in the garden.

She hesitated and then said, "I forgot to tell you that I have a funeral to go to, so we couldn't have had a long date anyway."

"That wasn't a date," Luke laughed.

Margie couldn't tell if he laughed at himself or at her, but she continued. "I knew that, that's why I have to go to the funeral."

Luke was either faking it or was, in fact, entering the subway. His reception buzzed in Margie's ear until she gave up.

She opened her jewelry box. The small ballerina of her childhood sprung up. Edelweiss waned as the ballerina spun in slow motion. Luke's watch had tangled around a thin gold necklace with a pendant of Saint Rita on it. Margie fought to separate what was hers from what was Luke's. The pendant, her grandmothers; the watch, his grandfather's—both dead, both finished with their journeys. It was too late; the thin chain had made a mess of itself inside the watch's clasp. Margie opened Luke's gift and pulled out the sonogram photo. She placed Luke's watch wrapped in Saint Rita inside, tucking the photo around both, and went about retying the bow. Margie decided to put Luke's gift in Saturday's mail. By Tuesday, when he received it, their journey, too, would be over.

