

The Gift

Marta Tarnawsky

“Ah, but a man’s reach should always exceed his grasp...”

Robert Browning

The suitcase was made of smooth light-brown calfskin and had bright golden clasps. Lida already imagined it covered with colorful stickers from hotels in London, Paris, and Madrid.

“I’ll take it,” she said firmly.

The shop clerk launched into complimenting other items in his store and quickly opened a second suitcase. This one was entirely like the first on the exterior, but its silken interior was divided specifically into compartments for ladies’ wear.

“An elegant pair of suitcases for an elegant pair of travelers,” he said cheerfully and expectantly, waiting for the words to call forth her response.

“No, thank you. I’m not interested,” she said abruptly. Seeing the disappointment on the clerk’s face, she smiled.

“Maybe later sometime...”

As he wrote up the receipt, Lida stood holding out several banknotes, her thoughts already far away.

She was revisiting her conversation with Andrii. Now that the decision was made, she was entirely at ease. Sometimes it seemed to Lida that she could observe the whole situation like an outsider, disconnected from her own feelings, as Oscar Wilde had advised. Or were those just other feelings taking over? A human is an *animal émotif*, Andrii said. Always a captive to feelings.

If only it hadn’t been obligatory to sign that contract with the company! Even so, two years wasn’t such a long time. They would pass quickly, practically unnoticed, like a breeze. Quickly—and irreplaceably. But why this “irreplaceably?” Hopeless sentimentality. That was the flaw in all this. You had to think with your head, not your heart. *Ratio, ratio*—not *emotio*.

In the crowd of people leaning against the cold and damp walls of the station as they waited for the subway, she chanced on Mrs. Kachmar.

“So, where are you going?” asked Mrs. Kachmar, glancing down curiously at the sturdy suitcase that Lida had carefully put down beside her.

“Between the suburbs and downtown—there and back,” Lida laughed. “Just like you,” she said, nodding toward the five colorful packages Mrs. Kachmar was struggling to keep aloft. “Like everyone else here.”

“Everyone else” was the multitude of individuals in multi-hued coats, loaded down with bags, packages, and boxes of every kind after the weekly

Friday evening downtown shopping—now all packed together in the subway car and heading home.

"And the suitcase? What about that? You bought it? That's a man's bag—double straps, double handles, a 'two-suiter,' isn't it?"

How has she managed to spot all that? marveled Lida silently.

"A present for my husband," she answered.

"Is he going somewhere?"

How easily people ask such questions! Where are you going, with whom, for what, where do you work, how much do you make? Lida didn't know how to pose such questions freely and directly. To her, they amounted to breaching the barriers around somebody's private life. Other people's spontaneous persistence always surprised her.

"No, it's a birthday gift."

She felt annoyed at being obliged to lie. She didn't lie well, which was immediately evident.

"But why a suitcase, my dear? A suitcase is a dangerous present!"

"It's a symbolic gift. So he knows that he's totally free and can go wherever he likes."

Lida was trying to joke, in an effort to veil her discomfort.

"What do you mean? And in your condition! You've got one still in diapers and another one on the way, and you're talking about your husband's freedom? Don't you know that there are plenty of men in that situation out there who choose freedom over difficult responsibilities? They do, for sure, and without suggestions from their wives or symbolic gifts!"

Mrs. Kachmar's sister was the source of this experience. Her husband had left her and their little daughter Nina after three years of marriage. Now Nina was with her aunt every day as her mother did factory work. For Mrs. Kachmar, the problem was close and painful.

Lida said nothing in response, and the other woman, sensing her discomfort, changed the topic. Before getting off, she smiled at Lida and tried to smooth things over.

"Maybe we should get a suitcase like that too. Then maybe we'd do some traveling. It wasn't very expensive, was it?"

"No, not very," said Lida.

It cost what she had been setting aside for months, intending to buy her first-ever evening gown. Why? she now asked herself—to catch up belatedly on her youth? Or to begin a second one, since the first had been lost in the war? And now here it lay—that amount, that dress, that youth, in a rectangle made of light-brown calf's leather.

Tenderly she fingered one of the strong leather straps. What did she need an evening dress for? She couldn't dance now, anyway. And she wouldn't be dancing later either, when Andrii was gone. If only it would happen already. The worst part was the uncertainty and the wait.

She began musing about the letters he would write her. Such rich, lush letters. They'd be about the Louvre, the Sorbonne, Notre Dame. About the

boulevards along the Seine. About openings at art galleries. And she would write to him—about Roma's development and about little Nestor (Nestor— for sure!). And about life here. In detail and as it really was, the way he liked her descriptions to be. And she wouldn't write too often, or about her feelings. She'd deal with her loneliness privately, away from everybody, rereading his letters ten times by the lamp on her nightstand, alone with his still-lives and landscapes.

Let him go. He absolutely has to go. Another opportunity like this might never come again. It's just what he needs right now. An exciting environment, abounding in creativity, a shot of bohemian enthusiasm. And impressions— new impressions, new experiences, new emotions—to broaden his horizons, to deepen his reaction to the world around him.

This is not the way they had planned his pilgrimage to the Mecca of art and culture. His role as draftsman and project director would still fill an 8-hour workday, just as it did here. But there, his working hours would include half of every night, as well as all those countless hours that he dedicated here to Lida, Roma, and the chores of home ownership.

There was nothing else to say. The benefits that would come from a two-year stay were obvious. Lida can already see new canvases illuminated by joyful golden sunshine. The illusion carries her off, and she herself begins to imagine new projects, ideas, subjects—lovely new paintings. Andrii's paintings. And then, maybe, a third year in that exuberant capital. A year of real creativity, a year of culmination. And afterwards, a one-man show at a Parisian gallery with one of those magical names that would open wide the doors of the whole art world . . .

At home, the adolescent babysitter sat engrossed in the television screen and didn't notice Lida until she turned on the lights in the dining room. Roma was already asleep, but toys still cluttered the whole house and on the kitchen table the toddler's plates stood unwashed.

A couple of years of carefree bachelor life in a delightful foreign city. After that, how easy would it be to again take part in ordinary, everyday life, to return heart and soul to a home full of children's activity and commotion, to family concerns?

Paid for her two hours of caring for Roma, the babysitter turned the television off and left. In complete silence, Lida was again alone with her thoughts. She tidied up the rooms and waited for Andrii.

Tonight's meeting must be running late. She lay down on the living room couch and half-closed her eyes. She was tired. Shopping downtown always tired her out. Not only because of the hours spent going from store to store but, mainly, because of the crowds of people there. Crowds always wore her out and frightened her. Now there was another reason, obliging her to rest more frequently. Would she be able to manage it all on her own? She would have to write her aunt and ask her to come down for a week or two. She didn't like to ask for help—she always sought to be independent. But now she would have to. Her biggest concern was for Roma: this would be a hard time for the

little girl. Someone from the family would have to stay with her while Lida was in the hospital. Later, everything would get sorted out somehow. After all, other women managed on their own, and she had never lacked good-natured enthusiasm or energy, and she didn't fear physical effort. If only this wave of weakness would recede quickly. Once Nestor was born, everything would surely fall into place.

With Andrii's arrival a cheerful freshness entered the house, as if a strong and lively sea breeze had unexpectedly blown through the opened door. He greeted her with bright, smiling eyes, impatiently tossing back his shock of unruly blonde hair. There was a sort of boyish tenderness about him, making Lida recall something vague and indistinct yet close and familiar from her childhood.

"Wi-i-fe! I'm starving!" he sang out in his pleasant baritone.

She knew that their serious talk had to wait until after dinner. "You can't discuss such things on an empty stomach," he'd once good-humoredly declared, and afterward he'd faithfully kept to this folk wisdom. She didn't want to breach that tradition now.

He asked a lot about Roma. Unhurriedly enjoying the meal, he listened to the details of Roma's accomplishments during the day, laughing heartily at the toddler's antics as if at the wittiest of jokes.

"And what'll it be like when little Vera joins the party?!"

The expected baby whom Lida thought of as Nestor was Vera to Andrii. "What a lovely creature a little girl is!" he'd often say. Lida sometimes thought he did it on purpose and for her sake, because he knew how much she wanted the baby to be a boy, since she was convinced that Andrii very much wanted a son. He was readying the stage in advance to spare her a possible disappointment. That was very much his way.

"Lida," he said, suddenly serious. "I talked with the boss today."

"And?"

"I won't be going to France."

"What do you mean?" She was nearly shouting. "But that's not right! We decided—"

"Not we, Lida, but you—and now I have made a different decision."

There was not a trace of agitation in his voice. He spoke directly, calmly, nearly tenderly. Maybe he was right—Lida had been so absorbed in coming to her own decision that she hadn't really considered what his might be. She had been absolutely certain that Andrii's own wish was to go.

"Why?" She now spoke in a whisper.

But she didn't give him a chance to answer. All the great anxiety, pain, and sadness that had been brewing in her over the last couple of weeks boiled over into an uncontrollable spasm of weeping.

"We are to blame! We're the ones keeping you back! We're the constant brake on your career. Family and children are weighing you down. You stick by your wife and can't move forward. Why did you marry? Now you won't go, and then you'll always regret it. Don't deceive yourself: you'll never have

another chance like this! You'll regret it, and silently curse us. You'll never forget that we stood in your way. Then a rift will arise between us. One bigger than an absence of two or three years would create..."

He waited until she had quieted.

"Lida," he said. "You are the kind of person who strives at any cost to be heroic. You want the satisfaction of having made a sacrifice. That's an egotistical trait!"

Lida, offended, fell silent.

"You want to see me as a genius. You identify yourself with me, and so my success becomes your success too. That, too, is egotistical. This is not an accusation against you. We are all egoists; we all want to satisfy our own egos. And egoism comes in different types. Yours is a noble egoism. It brings benefit to someone else—and leaves you on the moral high ground."

Lida said nothing.

"I am not a genius, Lida. I know and love art too much not to recognize my own shortcomings. That's not morbid self-criticism. I also recognize what I have to offer. I am a decent, perhaps even quite good artist, Lida—one of the hundreds in every country. And, you must understand, artists like that are important. Without them, any true culture would be impossible. They form the foundation from which true genius can spring."

Are these the cries of maturity? thought Lida, surprised at her own thinking. As children, each of us believes that we are a special being with an extraordinary destiny before us. Only gradually does life itself bring us to our senses, make us realize that we are just a single grain of sand in the infinite sand of the sea, where entire rivers of the past, present, and future flow.

"I won't leave you on your own, Lida, at what may be the most demanding time in your life, to go search for some illusory fantasy—"

"You want to sacrifice yourself too!" Lida interrupted.

He let out a laugh.

"Maybe that's true—who knows! Maybe an old-fashioned, petty-bourgeois sense of responsibility is what's winning out."

Lida was trying to fight him with his own weapons, and that was making him light-hearted. His eyes again had a boyish gleam.

Lida went out into the garden, wanting to collect her turbulent thoughts. There, in solitude and under the stars, how petty human ambitions seemed.

His warm, strong hands on her shoulders startled her.

"I was alone in life for a long time, Lida, and I don't want to live like that again."

Lida gazed up at the stars, sparkling in the dark-blue dome of the heavens.

"None of us can escape our essential solitude," she said quietly.

"But there are times when we can. And then—that's our only true desire. For me, love is one such effort to shed absolute solitude. And can it be that just that ephemeral, uncertain, and illusory escape is the quintessence of our human existence?"

Lida gazed on at the darkness, her hot cheeks cooling in the soft night air. Anguish rolled out from her heart like a shooting star swirling into eternity. And then she understood: her private, unexpressed, half-formed and yet painfully fervent wish was being fulfilled.

"But I've already bought you a suitcase!" she remembered suddenly, and fell silent.

Translated by Uliana Pasicznyk

Original publication: Marta Tarnavs'ka, "Stara istoriia" [Title changed to "Podarunok" in later publications], *Nashe zhyttia*, Oct. 1958, 5–8.