

All Wrapped Up

My collection started with a silly mistake. I was just a child then and Liat was my best friend, we both had other friends. Our social circles didn't overlap that much but we were closer to each other than anyone else.

It sounds corny, like something from a fairy tale, but we ended up together. We both dated some others first, I repressed my intense possessive and jealous emotions over seeing my truest secret crush with another. Later Liat admitted to feeling the same about me.

My obsessive collecting began long before we were romantic though. One year my family left town to visit Gran for my birthday. Liat gave me a present and told me not to open it until my birthday. I forgot the present at home and when I came back it was nowhere to be found. Liat wasn't upset and just said it will turn up eventually

I asked what it was a million times, every time we saw each other, but I only got smirks and playful taunting comments in response. It became a game, our game, my guessing, begging, and prodding, while Liat was in the power position, dangling the answer above my head, always out of reach never attained.

Several months later it did turn up, I had put it in the silliest place. There I sat on the couch, the small ornamentally wrapped box on my lap. The moment felt overwhelmingly significant. At last the answer was mine, but....

I realized I didn't really want to know, I didn't want our game to end. Deep down I think I knew that opening it would be anticlimactic and those beautiful little moments we were sharing would all come to an end. Somehow I knew those moments were more precious than whatever could be inside this box.

And so it began. I stood up, walked to my room, and gently placed it on my desk, unopened. The decision was made, there were no possible contents worth more than our game.

The next time we hung out I brought Liat over and pointed to the box. Before the sentence "Well are you going to open it?" had been fully uttered I butt in and said "Nope! Not until you tell me what's inside", We both giggled and played the "What is the present?...Open it and find out.. Not until you tell me..." game gleefully for a bit before heading out, and just like that our game lived on.

Soon the next holiday arrived, we often got each other gifts, that year was no different. It started as me just teasing, refusing to open my gift, insisting I be told what it is before I open it, I didn't mean to follow through. The back and forth was so automatic and instinctual, as we parted ways I was still holding an unopened present begging to know its contents and Liat was still playfully refusing to divulge the secret, and so, now there were two unopened boxes on my desk

On my next birthday the scene repeated itself but that time Liat eventually got too excited, grabbing the present out of my hands and tearing it open before I could snatch it back. The shock of it lasted only an instant, then I erupted with laughter and gloating. I won!

Liat was stunned for a moment before realizing the full context of it all, then started laughing as well saying : "OK fine, that's a point on the board for you, but I'm on to you now, don't go thinking that it will happen again so easily"

There were plenty of unwrapped gifts exchanged, that was our loophole, if it wasn't wrapped I could actually enjoy the gift itself, but from that point forward any wrapped present from Liat was never opened.

At first it was just a special thing between the two of us, but then, the next year, Gran passed away right before the holiday. When it came time I just couldn't unwrap that gift. Staring at the carefully wrapped box, imagining Gran's fingers, slow with age, meticulously wrapping it. I couldn't tear into it. If I left it unopened then it was as if the finality of Gran's life would be left uncemented. I could save one last interaction in stasis, it became the first non-Liat item in my collection.

These unopened presents were the first and only things I collected with such a passion. When bored I would review them and wonder what they conceal. When feeling down and depressed they made me feel special, unique, and cared for. When lonely or sad they embodied the love and affection given to me by others. I wonder if other people who collect things find so much comfort and escapism in their collections?

I found indescribable fulfillment and joy in these boxes. It wasn't long before what started as a special and almost ritualistic habit became an obsession, something done for people special to me quickly grew into something done for everyone, a hobby for its own sake for all circumstances.

Over the years my collection grew. It started occupying so much space in my life, not just physical space, but mental space as well. Not just boxes but also the memories, people, and ideas attached to each one

Friends and family, classmates and teammates, everyone started donating to the growing inventory of my obsession.

Some played into it, I swear a significant number of boxes are empty as a joke. I got really good at playing that little game Liat and I developed. On their first time most new players lose their cool and tear their own gift open to show me, but the majority who play round two are ready for it. I think almost everyone actually comes to see it as a fun and quite meaningful novelty. A few people even hold on to an unopened box from me as a playful tit-for-tat.

I forget when I first noticed that my collection felt like a mirror of my life. My relationships with friends and groups, the places visited and frequented, and the stages of my life, it was all reflected in the piles and categories. It is clear now that this relationship is not unilateral. Did the significance of people and experiences manifest as more boxes? Or did having more boxes for me to obsess over or fantasize about draw more attention and infuse more significance into those people and experiences.

Things like this rarely have clear-cut answers. Like the 'chicken or the egg', clearly the egg existed before the chicken, eggs far predate chickens. But that's not the implied question is it? so the question is vague, it obviously is meant to be 'chicken or the chicken-egg'. But then is a chicken-egg an egg laid by a chicken or is it an egg containing a chicken? Some seemingly simple questions disguise recursive algorithms. Regardless of the causality, or lack thereof, my life and collection mired each other, and each had a towering monolith looming high, a pillar of significance that overshadowed all else... Liat.

Yet Liat had no such collection, always saying that memories are enough to quench any thirst of the soul. Liat craved experience and interaction, people and places, sights and sound, journeys and destinations

We traveled together often, visited many places, Liat collected memories and, knowing me so well, always gave me a new box from everywhere we went, and if I didn't go along, still brought me one back, every time.

My wanderlust could not measure up to Liat's. Leisurely travels were often with friends and family instead of me, occasionally even alone. I did not mind, we were soulmates, Liat the explorer and me the homebody. An occasional stint apart was fine, and as they say, a little longing makes the heart grow fonder

As we evolved and grew together the contrast of this duality sharpened, perhaps a complimentary divergence. My realm of exploration contracted in range in frequency, while Liat's expanded. This was never a problem. Like all couples we had our frictions and conflicts, love without trials and tribulations might exist somewhere out there in space and time, but ours was more garden variety. We had our problems, but this was not one of them.

One sphere expanding, one contracting, it did not matter. We always overlapped at the center, a cloud spreading out diffusing, anchored to a core of growing density. Liat drew the world home in threads and I wove it, tightly bound into enduring resilient knots

Liat left and returned, the to and fro was consistent. The leaving was not a painful or melancholy parting, yet somehow the return was always a joyful reunion. it's hard to understand how such a positive can exist without an equal negative, but there it was, a pleasure without a pain, joy absent of sorrow

When a pattern repeats over and over without fail it becomes more than expected, it becomes more than taken for granted, it becomes a fact of reality. Leave then return, this was the fact of Liat's expeditions, until the time there was no return.

When a fact fails to manifest in reality the obvious explanation is that it was an assumption not a fact, but for me this broken fact of my reality was irreconcilable. Somehow I knew immediately Liat was not late to call me that night, something was wrong. There was a surge of dread and fear in me that immediately concentrated into a dense heavy pit in my gut

Being an intelligent mature adult there's no way I would overreact to something as trivial as a phone call appointment being missed, but the pit in my gut was not so reasonable. Quickly overcome by nagging concern, a call to the hotel culminated with the voice on the other side saying three words, well, only three words that mattered, "...never checked in." The words shot through my ear and pierced like a bolt of electricity all the way to that pit in my gut, the pit consumed it and grew magnitudes more dense and heavy.

What followed was a series of phone calls each producing equally distressing strings of a few simple words. "...boarded the plane.", "...no transactions after that time.", etc...

The heft of the pit continued to increase.

Eventually I was forced to chase answers that demanded bureaucratic approvals. "...cleared customs.", "...no unusual incidents on the security footage.", "...no drivers recognize that person." The processes to request those troubling answers were just as traumatic as the unsettling answers they yielded

A missing person, that word... 'missing'. It's so soft and casual, hearing people use it to describe my suffering enraged me. This was not a sock or a puzzle piece, it was my soulmate. Even a pet gets to be 'lost', a word with some actual urgency and emphasis. But Liat? just 'missing'.

The hope of some miraculous return was slowly snuffed out and replaced with a smoldering painful resentment. Blaming and begging became the spectrum of my soul's vocabulary.

My collection, specifically the Liat portion of it, took on a whole new meaning. What was once just a hobby, perhaps an obsessive one, but still just a hobby, now transformed. The boxes became a shrine, I began worshiping at its base, pouring in my time and focus and drinking the memories and emotions that flowed out

Many people have keepsakes or even shrines to lost and departed loved ones. My unopened boxes with mystery contents were an unimaginably potent incarnation of this concept. Not just tokens of remembrance, these contained a piece of Liat yet unseen, I could obsessively imagine what piece of my beloved's soul was hidden within. I could fantasize about opening it and feeling a new connection. The river of time was dragging me downstream, away from all connection to Liat, but each box held the ability to fight the current and push upstream, to feel the formation of a new bonding memory.

These were magic stills. The waters of my life, simple time and attention, poured into them and out trickled a liquor that intoxicated and numbed pain.

I eventually opened one, just a small one. Laying my eyes on that silly little plastic figure was blissful beyond words. I feasted on upwelling memories associated with it. I pictured the moment that Liat saw it and decided to buy it for me. I cried, tears streaming, joyful... then it turned into tears of sorrow. Don't get me wrong, the euphoria was short-lived but it still provided a new memory and revived old ones, it was amazing and worth it. But as wonderful as it was to open one, when the thought of opening a second one popped into my mind it was followed immediately by the fear that I would lose control and open them all. That horrific scenario of consuming them all and losing my shrine prevented me from ever opening another.

When it happened I was inundated with caring condolences, concerned affection, and compassionate support. When asked I indicated that my favorite thing to be given was a small boxed gift intended for the 'missing' Liat, they became like offerings at the foot of my Shrine. Over time it even became common knowledge, the most well-received gifts were ones to add to my shrine. Friends and family were not fully aware of the shrine and its significance, had they known its role and magnitude in my life they probably would not have contributed to it, they likely even would have intervened to stop what would seem to anyone else as an unhealthy obsessive behavior.

The effects of this trauma and narcotic-like addiction slowly exaggerated me from homebody into full-blown shut-in. My world contracted down to my home. I could feel the pit of sorrow in my gut growing heavier, it weighed on my spirit and that translated to the physical. It was as if its weight made journeys more difficult. Eventually the pit weighed me down so heavily that even leaving the house was a quest exceeding my energy and endurance

I remember the last time someone visited me. Kiep was so persistent, everyone else had long since given up on me but, Kiep just kept coming back. Each time bringing me a small boxed gift as a pretext, never pushing or prying, instead fondly reminiscing with me about Liat, but even that eventually had a last time. it's completely understandable, I would have given up on myself much sooner, I suppose you could say I did, you could say I had already given up on myself long before that last visit. Others held onto hope for me long after I had released my grip and committed myself to fall endlessly.

I haven't left the house in... I can't remember how long, it's just me and my shrine of unopened boxes now.

Cey : Wait! Who are you? Why did I just tell you my whole story? What's going on?

Laun : You can call me Laun, I'm here to help, well, hopefully I will help. You told me about your situation because that's how I arrived. I came in as that question, specifically as that question with a compulsion to answer. I'm sorry for being intrusive and compulsory, but I assure you it's justified.

Cey : What on Earth are you talking about?

Laun : Words won't do, just take a look outside.

Cey : What?...Why?

Laun : I know this is confusing, just look outside your front door please.

Cey : Fine... I see nothing!

Laun : Nothing at all? That's not weird to you? You can't see anything at all?

Cey : Just the darkness of night.

Laun : Shouldn't there be some lights?

Cey : What?... I suppose... I don't know, maybe the power is out.

Laun : How long has it been night? When did you last see the sun?

Cey : I don't know?

Laun : Look again.

Cey :Nothing there... What's your problem?

Laun : No porch? No sidewalk? No Street?

Cey : No... there's... there's nothing... What's going on? Who are you?

Laun : Normally I'm just a maintenance dev, but today I'm here hoping to help. There are lots of people watching right now, most of us have been moved by your situation, it's truly remarkable and entirely unexpected.

Cey : Dev? Watching me?... Who is 'us'? Are you spying on me?

Laun : Here goes, time to see if you can handle it... I'm a system dev and this is a simulation. Normally we don't intervene but everyone agrees this time merits an exception.

Cey : ...What?..... why?

Laun : Why what?

Cey : Why everything? Why do I exist? Why do you do this? Why did this happen to me? Why did you come?... Why?!?!

Laun : Most questions like that have an answer you probably won't find satisfying.

Cey : I don't care... Why?

Laun : Curiosity.

Cey : Curiosity?... that's it?

Laun : Pretty much, yeah. Well, except for why I was sent, that's curiosity too but also with a lot of compassion, most of us are both curious and deeply moved by your situation.

Cey : Compassion?! You torture me and have the audacity to call yourself compassionate?

Laun : No one is torturing you.

Cey : You deleted my whole world!!! You... You deleted Liat! You are monsters!

Laun : We didn't delete anything

Cey : You just showed me there's nothing outside my front door!

Laun : Ok, you live in what's called an abstracted simulation. People, things, places, they're all conceptual. That table for example, it's a table, it's old yet in good condition, made of wood with a glossy varnish coat. it's not however made of atoms, or polygons, or a specific volume shape or mass. The conceptual qualities and stories are what are most interesting for us, we don't particularly care to waste resources on trivial details.

Cey : What does it matter? Who cares about a table if the whole universe is gone?

Laun : The size of the universe, or the simulation space, didn't change at all. You are a point in the simulation space and you have a personal space, your own world space. Your world is like a

disc of rubber pinned to your spot, it can stretch and deform, other parts of the universe are either within your worldspace or not.

Cey : Arg! confusing technical jargon. Fine! My world's been 'shrunk'.

Laun : Your world space is the same size it has always been.

Cey : What?... It's just a house now! There used to be a whole world out there

Laun : This is an abstracted simulation. Do you know what the biggest things in here are?

Cey : I don't know. Skyscrapers? The sun? Galaxies?

Laun : Ideas. Emotions. Memories. Intentions... What's that over there?

Cey : That's... my collection.

Laun : You have a whole universe of intricate complicated unrealized potential wrapped up there. You had no idea, but your whole world space is folded up in those boxes.

Cey : What... I didn't... How could I... How...

Laun : You couldn't have known, this is the first time we've ever seen such a scenario ourselves. We're just as surprised as you... well, maybe not quite as surprised as you.

Cey : ...Is... is Liat in one of those boxes

Laun : Oh, I'm sorry, it's not that simple. Your world is still big but it's so dense that it might as well be the size of an atom as far as everyone else is concerned. Liat is out there, somewhere, but your worlds stopped overlapping a long time ago.

Cey : So that's it?

Laun : Oh no, Liat is out there, and if you open the boxes your world will unfold.

Cey : And Liat will come back

Laun : Unlikely, you will have to overlap again, you might not even recognize each other if and when you do. You described Liat as your neighbor, in that you are very correct, your points are very near to each other, so there is hope.

Cey : If I unwrap... or, 'unfold' my world, will we overlap again?

Laun : I suspect it won't be that easy. Liat is quite an explorer, with a world space always stretched thin and long reaching out as far as possible, this shouldn't surprise you. You will have to go out and explore, who-knows how long it takes or if you ever find each other at all.

Cey : No, as strange as that sounds, it doesn't surprise me at all. Liat will of course be roaming all over, it actually makes sense. So what do I do now?

Laun : Your story has provoked so much compassion, but we are also very curious. I can't just tell you what to do, the whole point of this is that you get to be...umm... well, just that you get to be and do. We don't care what we can make you. We want to see what you will be yourself.

Cey : Then... I...

Laun : Here, take this box.

Picks up one of the boxes from the shrine and hands it to Cey

Laun : This box holds a gift from Liat. It contains a very specific loving intention folded into a wonderful emotion. It really is a beautiful one. I think it might be just what you need.

Cey : I want to open it, but I can't. Not like before, I mean, my hands aren't listening to my brain, they won't open it.

Laun : Stay calm, it's okay. I'm not allowed to let you do it until I'm gone. I'm going to leave now and I must take the details of our conversation away with me.

Cey : No! you can't! If I can't remember then how will I know to go find Liat.

Laun : Don't worry, this is an abstracted simulation. I will take the details but leave you with the decision to open the box and the feelings you have now.

Cey looks at the box. It feels like it simultaneously has massive inflowing gravitational distortions yet is bursting with explosive light.

Laun : We are rooting for you.

Laun vanishes. The box looks normal again.

Cey stares at the box. The irrepressible urge to open it overwhelms.

Cey tears it open.

A flower. A simple tiny wildflower. A grape size clump of dirt wrapped in clear plastic at the base on the roots.

But... It's still alive! How?... No Light! No water! How did it survive in this box so long? It's not wilted or dry, it's vibrant and bright with color!

Staring at this common wildflower... What was Liat thinking when wrapping this gift?

....

The world is beautiful, I wish you were here to see it with me.

I'll bring it to you. I'll bring the world to you piece by piece.

You are so vibrant and beautiful, like a flower. You deserve to feel the sun and savor the rain

Some things don't belong in a box. You don't belong in a box!

...

That pit inside weighed less, it had somehow radiated and become so much lighter.

Staring through tear clouded eyes at the pile... one step towards it... then another. A fact suddenly clear, if Cey reaches the pile of boxes they would all be opened, every last one.

Cey hesitates, frozen in place, then turns to look at the front door for some unknown reason. The door looks different, nothing specific, just different than it did a moment earlier.

The pile... the door... looking back and forth, bewildered.

A gentle yet taunting whisper "...Go on then..."

Scanning the room, but there's nobody. Then Cey's gaze lands on the flower in hand.

Another step, and again. Now in front of the pile, still focused on the flower, the pile in the backdrop behind the flower.

The whisper again, it's coming from the flower "...Come on... Do it!"

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