

## AN UNEXPECTED GIFT

by Joseph Gueron

Timothy was on his knees, holding the barrel of a skeet gun, making an effort to keep it steady inside his open mouth. The other end was held, with trembling hands, by twelve years old Sarah, as her small skinny body shakes uncontrollably. Her small voice cracked, barely covering the rhythmic sounds of the sea waves crashing on the shore.

"I don't want you to be hurting anymore... My father is mean. He does not understand."

A gust of sea breeze coming through the open tent flap triggers in Timothy a rush of memories, which suspend the present time, and sparks in him a stream of images and feelings.

He is six, crying, clinging to his mother's legs, while she gently tries to disengage herself from the

child's embrace, as she loads her suitcase in the trunk of the car. The full moon illuminating the waves, the smell of the sea mixed with her strong perfume.

Suddenly, the memory of his mother's perfume is replaced by the scent of his pregnant wife, Debby's perfume. And with it appears the image he dreaded most, the one which had invaded his mind the last days - day and night - filling every fiber of his body, shocking every neuron of his cortex; the one which caused him such despair. That bitter acrid taste of vomit in his mouth, the rage, the hate, bubbling, impairing his breath as it generated in him an overwhelming feeling of inadequacy, of being worthless. Regardless of what he did he was unable to forget; to stop reliving the same image over and over again.

The sound of their voices, mixed with the high notes of a soprano singing Norma, played in his mind as the soundtrack of a cheap B rated film, where he was familiar with all the actors. He kept wondering if

he had known, would he have left the computer security conference a day early? Would he have stopped at the Union Station florist to buy the bouquet of yellow roses for Debby? When the taxi dropped him, would he have decided to use his own key instead of using the buzzer? He relived the moment once again in slow motion.

When he entered the house, the sound of opera and the strong smell of Cesar's cigar smoke clouded the living room. Cesar, Timothy's father, had insisted on being called by his first name from the moment Timothy's mother had left them. He detested being called Father or Dad. Timothy was surprised to hear both. Cesar's resonant voice, with his slight Italian accent, and Debby's sultry voice emanating from the bedroom. Timothy opened the door and was confronted with the most unexpected scene, which would burn in his mind, and be replayed in an endless loop, over and over again.

Debby, naked and on her knees, has her face buried on the pillow, as she was being taken from behind by his father, with his shirt open, still wearing

socks, both producing guttural sounds of pleasure and pain.

Timothy was overwhelmed by the scene being played on the bed, the smell of sex, and Debby's perfume, he felt sick. Slamming the door closed, he rushed and barely made it to the kitchen sink where he vomited.

Debby was standing behind him, clutching closed her slightly soiled white robe, stammered.

"I'm sorry. We... I... I didn't... He... " She said, as she searched for words.

Timothy, drying his lips with a kitchen towel, refused to look at her.

"How could you?...With my own father!... Pregnant... Is that even my baby?... you... you... slut!" Timothy responded, short of breath, as he hissed his words.

His father entered the room, closed his belt holding his pants, and walked behind Debby. In a protective gesture he held Debby by her shoulders, and blurted out with surprising bitterness.

"Your mother was a whore... I don't even know if you are my son! "

Debby added, "What did you expect Timothy, you have not touched me in four months."

An unbearable silence engulfed them, each one observing the other, trying to disguise their feelings of guilt, shame, and inadequacy. Each one resenting they had been found and put in such a position.

At last Debby broke the silence, "At least Cesar makes me feel like a woman."

Timothy, full of rage, approached Debby and slapped her once. Cesar, pulling Debby aside, grabbed Timothy by his shirt collar, and in a controlled voice full of menace said:

"Do not dare to hit her again... I will kill you."

"Why don't you? ...You bastard... Of all the women you could have... my wife... WHY?..."

"You are the son of bitch!... no wonder mother left... She must have despised you as I do... I HATE

you." Timothy spitted out his words, as he turned to leave.

With tears flowing, making an effort not to sob, he grabbed the flowers from the floor, and turning his head and addressed both

"You... You deserve each other!" He said, slamming the door behind.

# # #

The days following his discovery of Debby's betrayal were for Timothy a blurred string of meaningless actions and events. He asked for a two weeks leave from his work. He found a cheap motel room on Lee highway and decorated his room with the drying yellow roses. It was his way to keep the smothering flames of his rage alive, burning his entrails.

Feeling a fatal weariness, he determined only death would provide the release, obliterating the despair engulfing him, the self pity mixed with self hate reflected for his hate, his disgust, his jealousy of Cesar and Debby. He decided he would kill himself

before Friday when he would become thirty years old. Determined to succeed, Timothy decided to go to the seashore and picked the Chincoteague Island camping grounds. He would walk into the ocean at sunset and let himself be swallowed by the riptide. A visit to Sears produced the right camping equipment. He bought enough food for three days, which would give him plenty of time to pick the perfect moment. Timothy reached the campsite by mid-afternoon on Tuesday on time to set the tent up before dusk. Only one other family was camping and they were about five campsites away. The late afternoon sunlight created a glowing atmosphere; the gentle sea breeze was soothing. The perfect peace was interrupted only by a large man skeet shooting at a distance, the clay disks being released by a young girl, perhaps eleven years old. Irritated with the noisy intrusion, Timothy put on earphones, and searching the music in his iPhone found the piece he was looking for. The plaintive notes of the cello playing Marcello's adagio enveloped him, filling him with a sense of melancholy, as though missing happiness; he

had, in reality, never experienced. The image of Debby and his father appeared at random moments, obliterating the magical peaceful moment. His heart started beating madly and he could not breathe. What a better moment for reaching his goal, he thought. With determination, he started walking into the waves, struggling with the strong currents to keep his balance as he advanced the sea slowly rising up to his chin. Two more steps and he would reach his goal - everlasting peace and oblivion.

Suddenly, a pair of large hands grabbed him by the arms, dragging him towards the shore. As soon as they reached it, a large man shook him. The man, perhaps in his late forties with a slight accent, started preaching in a loud voice.

"How do you dare to play God?" The man said, and then smacked him.

"Don't you believe in the sanctity of your life? Life is a gift from the Lord, and only he can take it away!" The man blasted in a loud voice, as he was getting ready to slap him again;



Timothy lifted his arm to defend himself, and full of rage, screamed.

"They would not care... No one cares."

The man, calmer, put his arms around Timothy's shoulders and with a smile, and a slight tone of disdain said:

"You would be surprised... I am Redmond, what is your name? "

"Timothy", he responded with frustration as he attempted to contain some tears and failed,

"I will be alright... Just need to be alone," he added.

"Just want to be sure you will be OK," Redmond insisted.

Silently, Redmond escorted the sobbing young man to his campsite. As he entered the tent, Timothy pushed aside the bunch of dried yellow roses, as he laid face down on the sleeping bag, resting his head on his crossed arms. He remained immobile for a long time, composing his breath, calming down. Last night had come, and Timothy was warming a can of soup with little

enthusiasm, when the young girl appeared.

"Hi, my name is Sarah. My parents want to invite you for dinner," she said.

"That's very kind of them, but I can't," Timothy said.

"Please. If you don't come my father will punish me,"

Sarah responded, with tears swelling in her eyes.

Reluctantly Timothy smothered the fire, to follow the young girl.

Few minutes later Sarah led Timothy by the hand, as they approached her parent's campsite. Redmond, remaining seated declared,

"Ah, I'm glad Sarah succeeded... This is my wife Linda. Please sit."

Linda, a small blond woman in her thirties, with her hair tightly pulled together in a bun, looked up at Timothy and gave him a timid smile, as she stirred a pot on the fire. With a southern accent she exclaimed, as she furtively gave a glance at her husband, and spoke,

"So glad you could join us. Would you like some tea?" Timothy carefully chose a seat away from Redmond and making an effort, responded:

"Thank you, tea would be nice."

They ate in silence, Timothy barely being able to swallow the spicy fish-with-rice dish, smothered in a white sauce. He hated the garlic aftertaste, and made an effort to conceal his disgust as he reluctantly took small bites. At last the food was consumed, and the long silence was interrupted by the assertive voice of Redmond, Timothy was almost grateful.

"Well young man, what could make you do such a stupid act?"

"Sorry, I don't want to talk about it," replied Timothy. Redmond, full of self-righteousness, "Don't you know life is a gift?"

"Not if living is a constant agony," replied Timothy. Linda, timidly, said, "I agree, that's why I think mercy killing of someone suffering a terminal and

painful disease is an act of love."

"Shut your mouth, stupid woman. What do you know about God's intention, or what is right!" shouted Redmond in an unexpected insulting tone. Sarah standing up walked towards her mother, and sat beside her. Holding her hand, with a trembling voice she addressed her father:

"Mother is right... you are the stupid one." Redmond, enraged, walked to Sarah, and slapped her. "How do you dare to talk to your father that way!" As he was getting ready to slap Sarah again, her mother stood up to protect Sarah and pushed him away. Redmond, full of anger, and with cruel fury, hit her in the stomach. Timothy, angered by the brutality of the act, ran toward Redmond, pushing him away as he shouted:

"Leave them alone."

Redmond, blinded with rage, punched Timothy in the face, stomach, and back to the face. The hits were being given in a slow, methodical fashion in order to cause major pain. Timothy was defenseless. Blood ran from his mouth, his nose, and one of his

eyebrows. He fell to the ground and the older man started kicking him. Linda, surprised and horrified by the savagery of the punishment, threw herself on Timothy's body in a protective gesture. Redmond turned in disgust and walked away towards the seashore.

Moments later, Sarah, with silent tears running down her face, was cleaning Timothy's face with loving care, as his head rested on her lap. When done, with great tenderness, she deposited a soft kiss on his forehead, and murmured something in his ear.

"Thank you so much, I shall wait," Timothy responded. Later that night Sarah quietly approached Timothy's tent holding the skeet gun. The small light projected on the side of the tent the shadow of her small figure aiming the gun at Timothy who is on his knees. Wanting to help Sarah, he inclined his head on an angle to accommodate the barrel of the gun.

Timothy was surprised by the intensity to which all his senses were reacting. The smells of the sea, of Sarah, sea, of gun oil and powder, the pain from his wounds,

the sound of the waves, of his own breathing, the beauty in the eyes of the young girl, of her trembling lips, the ocean breeze, the fear of death, combined produced in Timothy a rush of high intensity.

An immense sense of exultation and a feeling of pure love filled his very being. In a flash, he understood the magnitude of the child's gesture of unconditional giving, even if her actions were repugnant to her. Such an unexpected gift coming from such a young girl.

Timothy glanced intensely at Sarah's eyes and slowly pushed the skeet gun away from his mouth as he said,

"Don't, Sarah"

Sarah was surprised, and started quietly weeping again.

"But I thought you wanted to..." Sarah protested.

Timothy, still on his knees, took the skeet gun away from the child, and gave her a big embrace. Sarah rested her head on his shoulders as she sobbed with a mix of relief and failure. Timothy gently stroked her hair in a soothing gesture. "Yes I did, and you are very brave, but you deserve better." Timothy says, as he gently disengaged her from his embrace, and still on his knees,

held Sarah's hands and looked intensely at her eyes.

"I want to be as brave as you are, and learn to live with my pain," he murmured.

"Will you be sad all the time?" Sarah asked. Timothy smiled, and with resolution he stood up, fetched one of the dried yellow roses and offered it to Sarah. Then holding one of her hands they left the tent, as he said,

"No, I promise you. Now, let's go look for your mother."

As they walked away, seven galloping wild horses appeared on the nearby dunes, the sea spray on their bodies softly reflecting the moonlight. The rhythmic sound of the horses hooves, the waves, the seagull calls, filled Timothy with wonder, as he grasped the thousand pieces of beauty surrounding them, engulfing them. And he was grateful for experiencing the magic of that moment, and already fearful of losing such a gift.