

Things the Internet Has Ruined (Gift-Giving)

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The giving was once as
magical as the receiving,
such that I was thrilled to find
that gold and black floor-to-ceiling satin wall shroud of The
Lizard King
before The Material Girl had become immaterial,

(Oh, how I had loved the musky moon-scent
of her irreverent cassette tape back in her Brunette Age!)
Objects had meaning then:
they were desired, displayed,
perhaps, even respected in some way

such that when my mom's friend's husband
proudly showed us his basement collection
of Marion Morrison commemorative treasures
a few months before he was sentenced to the federal
penitentiary
for a paper crime of some sort,

I was not able to search online and find out
that there were hundreds,
or even thousands, of these so-called limited-edition prints,
faux bronze-busts, and oil paintings available,
and that these precious pieces were really

worthless, to everyone, but the pre-trial releasee,
(who probably ended up selling these images of a
late-middle-aged man
in a cowboy hat and a pink bandana
at a garage sale in the south suburbs
for under a hundred dollars- cumulatively!)

But now, we have Bezos, Facebook, and eBay,
and we can all check on the price of things —
instantaneously —
so pretty much nothing has value.
We can search for the worth of a gift in a second:

swap it,
sell it,
return it,
or throw it away.
There is nothing mysterious about *any* object anymore.

Before I had my driver's license
my mother would drop L. and me off
at the Crystal Point Mall;
we would flip through the album covers at the music store,
LP after LP at our fingertips.

Sometimes I couldn't find the new release —
the one I had seen on MTV at L.'s house —
and when I would ask about it, the store clerk would look bored.
He would say it was "Sold Out,"
and that it would be days,

maybe even a whole week,
until the store would get a new shipment,
from New York or California,
or some other place that sounded really far away,
and really was.

In truth, there was something magical
about that want of a material thing,
being followed by deprivation:
the desire to possess an object that was unattainable —
not because of its price — but because of its inaccessibility.

In the present, everything is available on-demand,
such that when I go to buy elk sausage in downtown Sioux Falls,

to ship to an Illinoisan for Christmas,
and learn that it is out of stock,
I simply go online and order it from another store.

The gift is supposed to be true.
South Dakota:
prairie-pure,
unbroken.

Instead, for all I know the gift may be shipped
from Elk Grove Village to Palatine,
so that there is nothing unique about this computerized order.
We have become
an isolated, robotic, world market.

The glow of gift-giving has been diminished in some way.
The connecting of human face,
human hand,
human soul,
is forgotten:

just as the days when there were full-service gas stations,
and men in jumpsuits with names like "Lou" or "Rick"
would come out to your car to pump your gas,
squeegee your windows,
and put air in your tires,

and there are things like this
that you only miss
when you randomly
come across
something that once brought you minor joy,

but is now obsolete,
though it was once commonplace,
before the Internet destroyed humanity;
kind of like last summer when I pulled
into the Sinclair in Pierre

and I discovered that full-service is not extinct
and I took out my stupid cell phone
to film the guy cleaning my windshield
as though I had found the remains of some
great prehistoric shark fossilized beneath the gas pumps,

and I kept repeating,
“I didn’t know they still had these.”
I was simply ecstatic.
It was like the moment I saw the bald eagles
flying outside of Lacrosse above the bluffs,

or when a bobcat jogged across my path
at dusk along Bull Valley Road
or the time I spotted Joan Jett
stepping into a limo at the Des Plaines Oasis
and I wasn’t quite sure it was her,

because it was drizzling and dark
and I was a hundred feet away,
and all I could see was a slim body
and black leather
and hair the color of the night.

So, I called out, “Hey, are you someone famous?”
and her voice globe-saluted at me,
strong and distinct
like a double-axed cherry bomb,
taunting the tollway traffic, “Don’t you know who I am?”

And when I shouted, “Joan Jett!”
she pointed a finger,
fired, and said,
“You’ve got it.”

Then, she just disappeared:

this shapeshifting raven,
deliquesced into the dark vehicle,
down the exit ramp,
onto I-90,
into the wet night.

I didn't take a video of this to post onto Facebook
because there weren't cell phones back then,
and this was years before some politician invented the Internet,
such that I did not sprint over to Joan Jett to pose alongside her,
to take some awkward photo to impress all of my not-really
friends.

Instead, I have this:
the voice,
jagged and defiant,
the crow's wing bangs,
the parking-lot lights,
kicking against a shock
of might and beauty.

You see, the memory holds
such things still,
and it will always be better than a cell phone.