

A gift tag with names on a brown paper background with a red ribbon.

VALERIE
MICHELE
OLIVER

GIFTS

...tell
...gifts. You don't
...for you?
...over and asked we wanted dessert.
...us did. We talked some more on the ride
...memorable to me and ...ed at the house. My
apartment was on the first floor, hers was on the second
and she had to pass mine to get to hers. I stopped at mine,
opened the door and invited her in. She entered, not
taking a seat.

This is where we came into the story.

'Thank you for dinner,' she spoke matter-of-factly. 'I'm
a bit tired. I think I'd better go.' She stood still and stared

GIFTS

By Valerie Michele Oliver

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"You feel the pain and yet hold to the promise of your compound nature, that you are sublime yet mortal, filled with promise and unconditional love, but sometimes weighed down by fear and regret."

~Bill Attridge, Astrologer

She declined my invitation to take off her coat—the barrier to her skin that I caressed in a dream one night.

It was frigid outside, and we had just arrived back from our dinner date. She was the newest arrival in the huge gray-stoned mansion where we both lived. The owner converted it into an apartment complex suitable for an eclectic group of people bound by economic reality: baby boomers shifting from middle-class to lower-middle class income as a result of the Wall Street crash, entry-level young professionals, and people who bounced from job-to-job managing, somehow, to keep themselves floating above poverty.

Earlier that evening in-between bites of Chicken Burritos, Steak Fajitas, and a gracious invitation from her to wrap my holiday gifts; I slipped into a monologue that raised a raw nerve of hers.

“The whole commercial wrapping of gifts thing is out of control.” I was on a roll. “There was a time when just giving a gift without all the wrapping fanfare was enough. It’s just a way for companies to make more money, and has nothing to do with the actual spirit of the season.”

“Well, if that’s how you feel, since you don’t appreciate it, I take back my offer to wrap your gifts for you.” She aimed her words at me sharply and with a finality that was completely unexpected. It was an icy blast that burned. I shivered and kept talking through the air of cold discomfort.

I’d rather eat glass than wrap a gift, so I dug the hole deeper. “I prefer to just keep it simple.” Suddenly, I reached a point where I began to listen to what I was saying as the rapid words left my mouth. “One year I wrapped my gifts in brown paper bags. That should be good enough.” I paused to take a breath, and in that brief moment, I was somehow restored to sanity and

heard myself mumbling something about thanking her for the offer and wanting to take her up on it. Was I warming the temperature or having the opposite effect? I looked to her eyes to tell me. They were clear . . . penetrating . . . then her words came before I could say more.

“You don’t appreciate it, so I won’t do it for you.”

The waitress came over and asked if we wanted dessert.

“No.”

“No, thank you.”

We talked some more on the ride home about the Spaghetti and Meatballs dinner I had prepared for her and some of the house residents two weeks before. That party was a way for me to make a good impression on her in a group setting, and to check her out more in my space. At one point in the evening, she came over to me while I was switching to a different playlist in my computer, and asked me what I thought of the book *The Alchemist* since a friend recommended it to her. She’d noticed it while looking at the books on my desk. Before I could answer, Rich called out to me from the kitchen that he couldn’t find the corkscrew for the wine.

The drive back to the house was short. My apartment was on the first floor. Hers was on the second, and she had to pass mine to get to hers. I stopped at my door, opened it, and invited her in. She entered, not taking a seat.

This is where we came into the story.

“Thank you for dinner,” she spoke matter-of-factly. “I’m a bit tired. I think I’d better go.” She stood still and stared at me.

“You’re welcome,” came out of my mouth. I walked her to my door while wondering if I should walk her to hers and maybe kiss her, but she walked away faster than I could make a decision.

After she left, I felt completely drained. I dropped on the bed, and pressed the power button on the TV remote. I flipped around the channels and settled on “Playing By Heart,” a movie just starting on the Independent Film Channel. My eyes opened to a different film a few hours later.

Bothered by what happened earlier, I got out of bed, walked into the pantry, and reached for a brown paper bag. I cut it open and placed *The Alchemist* on it. Using red, green, brown and yellow crayons, I drew pictures of Christmas trees with ball ornaments and bright yellow stars on top, folded the paper carefully around the book, and rather clumsily sealed it tight with clear cellophane tape.

I slipped into the hallway, went upstairs to her apartment, and left the present resting against her door. As I rounded the corner leading back to my place, I noticed something lying on the floor against the wall next to my door—something I had missed while focused on my errand.

There sat a book, unwrapped.