

Several of this issue's stories deal with unsought gifts. This tale's gift could be a piece of incomprehensible alien bric-a-brack—or the gift of self-knowledge.

A Piece of Strangeness

by Mary Soon Lee

Dearest Jessie, I find myself in an awkward situation for an old man. On the desk beside me lies what may well be the first alien sculpture anyone in the world has handled. The prevailing theory goes that the alien is an artist, dropping in for inspiration at various places, but the object in question conforms to no aesthetic that I have studied.

Naturally I ought to take this object to the appropriate authorities for examination, but I have no inclination to do so.

You see, it was a gift.

Now you are wondering who would give any kind of gift to an old curmudgeon like me. Or at least I shall pretend that you would wonder about it, if you could read this. Evenings are getting dark early now. I'll just make a mug of hot chocolate, half milk, half water, the way I used to make it for you.

That's better. Very well, I'll stop prevaricating. This morning my students arrived, irrepressible as ever. I tell them every time that there is no need to return, that there is no significant difference between their lack of ability and the lack of ability found in students from previous years, and I swear that I'll give them each a B, if they merely hand in one semi-decent picture and leave me in peace. But naturally they don't choose to believe me.

So they trooped upstairs and sat in a semi-circle in the attic. The room was at its best: a clear, even light falling from the skylight onto the wooden planks, the air cool as it never is up here in the summer. I handed them each a mirror, and told them this morning's assignment was a self-portrait, nose and mouth only, in pencil. I did a couple of sketches of my own mottled proboscis, then wandered round the students.

I reminded Colin, the quiet, overly serious one, about

the importance of shadows, wishing the lad had a twentieth the talent he so clearly yearned for. Marcie and Tyler, both constitutionally unable to focus on one thing at a time, jabbered on about the recent sightings of an alien while they wasted good paper. I thought about the alien myself as I listened to the pair of them—how it would materialize for a while, ignore everyone around it, and then disappear without leaving so much as a footprint behind. If only I could likewise absent myself from the class.

When Fiona and Eric started offering their opinions as well, I told myself to let them chatter on, that they would only be young once, thank the Lord. But then Marcie declared she wanted the President to hug the alien to show Earth's cosmic friendship, and I rang the bell and told them that the remaining fifteen minutes of class would be conducted in silence or not at all.

Marcie, entirely unquashed, smirked at Eric for the rest of the time. It is amazing how much longer my ninety minute sessions are these days than when I first began teaching. Perhaps I should ask your brother to write a paper on it, "Subjectivity of Time Flow in Extremis."

At length, seven of my eight students departed, making up for their brief silence with an inordinate clatter as they went.

Colin hung around. I looked at his efforts, found something encouraging to say about the third sketch.

His face stained a notable shade of pink, he stammered, "Could I, like, be a professional, one day?"

I don't like to deflate the serious pupils, but nor will I mislead them. "Have you considered taking up photography?" I asked.

"No, I wanted to paint..." His voice trailed off, and I knew that he understood me all too well.

"If you keep working at it, who knows?" I tried to