The Gift That Keeps On Giving

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"The day I turned sixteen, my mother gave me some presents I've since forgotten, and an ultimatum I'll never forget. She informed me that I was to begin putting in job applications immediately, and that I was not allowed to get my driver's permit until I had landed that job."

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by Patti Weaver

The day I turned sixteen, my mother gave me some presents I've since forgotten, and an ultimatum I'll never forget. She informed me that I was to begin putting in job applications immediately, and that I was not allowed to get my driver's permit until I had landed that job.

Under duress, I got a job as a grocery store cashier. I loathed it. I had been sheltered. Any abuses I had received before had been from my family and dear friends. Now I was servile to the masses, amazed and sickened to find out how they treated me, and each other. A grocery store may not seem worthy of such melodramatic feelings—it was not a coal mine, or a sweat shop, but every day I worked there grated away at my rosy illusion of humanity and my fragile pride.

One day, after I dressed in my work uniform, I stood in front of the bathroom mirror, modeling an assortment of smiles, all fake. I could hear my mother all the way across the house, chatting with some lady from church in a loud, animated voice. Her voice annoyed me. In a few minutes she would have to drive me to work, and, I thought, she should sound sad. If she understood how I felt, I thought, she would be quiet and subdued, as if I was going off to war.

I gazed into the mirror still. Vague resentment was the only thing infringing on my feelings of emptiness. The idea to kill myself presented itself with about the same force as the idea to wear blue eyeshadow instead of green might have. I slid the mirror aside to reveal the medicine cabinet. I took the small bottle of aspirin out and swallowed its contents: about ten pills. Then I opened the economy-sized bottle.

There was one pill left in the bottle. I scanned the cabinet to see if there was anything else. There wasn't. I looked into the bottle again. If I had felt anything, I might have been furious. Or I might have laughed. As it was, I just nodded to no one in particular. It made sense.

My mother was calling, so I swallowed the lone pill and went out to the car. If she noticed my lack of mood, she didn't comment. At work, I punched in, and my boss told me to go sort the reshops. All the fresh produce looked more interesting than it ever had before, and the canned goods drifted from side to side of their own accord. My boss was asking me if I felt alright. I smiled at him, and said, no, I didn't feel particularly well. He said I could go home.

A few minutes later, I was in the car again, traveling in the opposite direction. My mother ranted about the idiocy of sending me home as soon as I got to work. I leaned against the window and watched the road pass, debating on whether or not I needed to throw up.

This is a true story, so it doesn't work out neatly, and can't be assigned a moral. Nothing has changed for me. The only thing that has changed is that I gave up suicide as an excuse to avoid going to work. It's too unreliable a method.