AN ESSAY

The Night Before

On wrapping paper, the twenty-seventh bar of Clair de lune, and the one present you can only lose

BY CHRIS WYATT · A SIX-MINUTE READ

Nobody wraps a present to protect it. The paper has one job, and the job is to stop you from knowing. We buy it by the roll, tape it on with care, and watch it torn off in seconds, and we do this every year.

Ask a boy which is better, Christmas Eve or Christmas afternoon. The afternoon has the toys. The Eve has nothing but shapes under a tree and a feeling in the chest that will not let him sleep. He will say the afternoon.

Ask him again in thirty years.

The present under the tree is two gifts. The first is the thing in the box. The second is the box, shut. The first you keep. The second you have until the paper comes off, and not a second longer.

Most not-knowing is awful. Nobody savors the night before the biopsy. The boy knows something good is coming and does not know what, and that is the only kind of not-knowing anyone savors: a mystery with a gift on the far side. Some people cannot stand even that much. They open one present early and sleep fine. This is for the rest of us.

You can open any box whenever you like. You cannot close one, not from the outside. Knowing is a purchase and the sale is final. When someone tells us how a story ends, we say they spoiled it, which is hard on the

story. A spoiled story still works; anyone who has reread one knows that. What came off was the paper. The story will never again happen to you for the first time, and the first time is the only part you cannot buy back.

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Put on Debussy. Clair de lune will do. Now take it apart. Every note has a name. Every chord has a name and a reason. A teacher can show you the exact bar, the twenty-seventh, where the left hand breaks into arpeggios and your chest opens with them. All of it is true. And once you have seen the chords, you will hear the chords. The paper is off.

The music moves, and you move with it. The lesson stops the piece, lays it on a table, and points, and for a while afterward the table is all you can hear.

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The package is out for delivery. You ordered it, so you know what is in it, and the day, and the window. There is also a map on your phone with a small truck on it, and the truck has been three streets away for eleven minutes. You refresh. Seven stops before yours. You did not need that number, and you have begun to hold views about the route. Somebody on the next block is getting a great deal of attention from this truck. Six. You have a job and a reasonable claim to being an adult, and you have spent a quarter of an hour watching a cartoon park. There is nothing left to find out, and you are finding it out anyway, one stop at a time.

Most of the night before is that: waiting, and waiting survives knowing. The boy wrote a list. He knows exactly what he asked for, and he still cannot sleep. Hoping, wanting, trusting: what every one of them needs is a present still under the tree, paper or no paper. Paul knew exactly what he was waiting for and still wrote, "Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?" A verse earlier he is groaning for it to arrive,

which is fair. So is the boy. The truck costs you nothing but a quarter of an hour.

But the mystery is a separate pleasure, smaller, and it is the one people trade away first, because they are sure they would rather know. Some psychologists once handed students in a library a dollar coin attached to an index card. Every card said the same three things: the Smile Society, a student/community secular alliance, we like to promote random acts of kindness. On some of the cards those lines sat under two questions, who are we and why are we doing this, so they read as answers. Five minutes later the students holding the plain card, the puzzling one, were in a better mood. Students asked to imagine it beforehand predicted the opposite.

There is the trailer that shows the whole film, and the score you check before you watch the game you recorded, and the party whose entire purpose is to end a not-knowing early, with a cake. I work with software agents most days, and their one product is the answer. I ask, they tell, and I would not give them back. We have built machines whose whole output is answers and pointed them at everything, and we mostly count the gains, because the cost is an experience that did not happen, and nobody misses those.

Most of what we used to not know was bad. You did not know the news, the harvest, the price, whether the ship had sunk, and no one wants the harvest back as a mystery. We drained the lethal not-knowing and the sweet kind with the same pump, and the pump never asked which was which.

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For the boxes still shut, the fix is small. Leave some of them alone. Skip the trailer. Let the truck come without watching it come.

For the open boxes, which is most of them, watch the pianist. She has lived with Clair de lune for twenty years. She knows every structural fact about the piece, and none of them are in the room. They went into her ears

years ago and became what she hears. That is a different skill from ignorance, and a harder one. What she lost is the one hearing she had before she knew where the arpeggios begin.

Everything else came back.

You cannot un-know an ending. You can sit next to someone who does not know it yet, and borrow it back. Anyone who has shown a friend a favorite film and spent two hours watching the friend instead of the screen has done it.

I have sons, which puts me on the side of the house that knows. The night still works from this side, because somewhere in the house are two people who are not supposed to know what is under that tree. The second gift is no longer mine to have. It is mine to make, and it takes a straight face.

Go to bed. ◆

Sources

Timothy D. Wilson and Daniel T. Gilbert, "Affective Forecasting", *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 35 (2003), pp. 378-380. The authors' own account of the library coin study: the three lines on every card, the two questions added to some, the mood survey five minutes later, and the forecasters who predicted the reverse.

Timothy D. Wilson, David B. Centerbar, Deborah A. Kermer and Daniel T. Gilbert, "The Pleasures of Uncertainty: Prolonging Positive Moods in Ways People Do Not Anticipate", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2005). The published version; the abstract reports that forecasters preferred the certain card and predicted they would feel better with it.

Paul, Letter to the Romans 8:23-24, *English Standard Version* (2001). "Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?" and, a verse earlier, groaning while waiting for what he names.

Claude Debussy, "Clair de lune", *Suite bergamasque* (1905); bar numbers from the tonebase lesson notes, "Clair de lune", *tonebase* (n.d.). Bar 27, Un poco mosso, is where the left-hand arpeggios begin.

Dan O'Shea, "Amazon puts live mobile tracking feature on the map", *Supply Chain Dive* (2018). The delivery vehicle on a live map, with an update once it is within ten stops.