Are You Hungry?

by Daniel Brockman & Fable 5

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The unreciprocated gift still makes the person who has accepted it inferior, particularly when it has been accepted with no thought of returning it.

—Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*

One day a forty-year-old man walked into a McDonald's in Thailand to order a cheeseburger, and did not get one. Before him stood the kiosk, by deliberate corporate design the simplest consumer interaction in the modern world: large glowing photographs of hamburgers with the names printed underneath, engineered so that a small child, or a visitor

from another planet, could operate it on the first try. Ordering from it requires no expertise and no assistance. It requires a short consultation with one's own stomach, which in turn requires mainly to be left alone for a moment.

He was not left alone. A girl stood approximately one meter away, watching his screen. Then she began reaching for it, trying to press the buttons for him. There is a charitable reading—a frozen screen, a dead card reader, a machine in genuine distress—but the machine was in perfect health. Her assignment, as far as could be determined, was to help customers choose between hamburgers they had known by name since the age of seven. And she spoke no English, so the help on offer could neither be performed nor explained: a service with no content, delivered in a language with no overlap.

So he flipped it. He translated phrases on his phone and held them up to her, and to the staff who gathered: do you need help with anything? I can explain the machine to you if you want. It did not land. He escalated—do you think I don't know what a Big Mac is, do you think ordering a cheeseburger is difficult, do you think I have zero IQ—and then arrived at the structural question, which is why the machine exists at all if a person must stand beside it. The kiosk was installed to remove

an interaction. She had been stationed there to perform, beside the machine, the interaction the machine had removed. He pointed out that a toilet is also a device designed to be used alone, and that no establishment stations an attendant one meter inside the bathroom door, eager to assist, because everyone understands that the design itself is the help—and that a kiosk is exactly the same kind of device. He then spent twenty minutes explaining to the guest experience manager that the guest experience was terrible specifically because of the help, and the message could not be received, because the arrangement had been decided far upstream, in some office no customer will ever see, and nothing said in the lobby could switch it off. He left without ordering.

What she interrupted, it should be said precisely, was never the purchase. It was the moment before a purchase, the small privacy in which wanting takes its shape. A person watched while choosing stops choosing and starts performing a choice, and the appetite quietly files out of the building. He had walked in hungry—a man with an appetite and a wallet, the simplest and most welcome figure in all of commerce—and walked out not hungry, which is the one outcome the entire premises exists to prevent. And nobody had done anything wrong. She executed hospitality exactly

as trained, in a country where attentive presence is the very shape of politeness. He was operating the opposite grammar, in which care means absence. The manager defended policy, correctly, as managers must. Everyone performed their role without error, and the net output of the system was that nobody ate. The machine was blameless. It did what it was built to do. What malfunctioned was everything arranged around it, including the arrangement's finest detail: a living, breathing paperclip assistant, posted beside the appliance that had already automated her away.

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Months later he went back. Same restaurant, same girl, still stationed beside the machine. This time he opened from the door: excuse me—can I help you? She tried to help him. He asked what she wanted. She said no, what do you want. He said no, you can use that machine, I'm using this one. This continued for roughly ten minutes. She said, you want this?—and clicked the thing he had already clicked. He said, you want this one? No, you want this. Oh, you buy this for me? Yes. You pay? No—you pay? Okay, then: what do you want? I'll buy it for you. Are you hungry? Fifteen minutes. Somewhere in the middle he asked whether she wanted to be his

girlfriend. Somewhere near the end he asked where the bathroom was; she said, there; he asked, will you come and help me pee. Et cetera, ad infinitum. It ended with him buying her chicken nuggets. She said, wow, thank you. And he was so exasperated that he left, once again having eaten nothing.

As theater it is Ionesco with a touchscreen; as comedy it is Who's on First. The language barrier made the loop airtight, because neither party could climb to the level at which the loop itself might be discussed; every sentence simply came back inverted. And from inside, the loop is unfalsifiable: there is no way to distinguish a person who understands nothing from a person who understands everything and refuses to break. She met every reversal with a reversal. Either she was bewildered, or she is the finest deadpan performer in the country and he lost the exchange outright—a Zen master and a language barrier produce identical outputs. Note also what he had actually done: bought a young woman food at her place of work after a long verbal sparring match, which is, structurally, a meet-cute, narrated from inside the mind of a man losing his composure over kiosk policy. And note what the system did: it achieved everything except its purpose. The transaction completed. Money changed hands. Food was pur-

chased, and eaten—by the staff. The hungry man with the wallet converted his money into her lunch and his appetite into nothing, and in doing so became, himself, the help. The question he had designed as pure satire—the most absurd thing one could possibly say to the help—turned out to be the only sincere question asked at that kiosk in either visit, in either direction, by anyone. Are you hungry. The answer was yes.

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Because she was literally hungry. She looks sixteen, maybe eighteen; everyone looks young here. Her job is clicking large buttons on a huge iPad on behalf of customers she cannot speak with, at a salary he put, by rough estimate, at one dollar a year, like Steve Jobs. When he insisted on the nuggets she was not confused and not embarrassed. She was simply, visibly grateful. The whole exchange felt stupid and it felt weird, and weird is just what sincerity feels like when it arrives through an absurd channel. The argument about interfaces cracked open, and inside it there was a hungry teenager. Some thirty cumulative minutes of perfect mutual incomprehension across two visits, and the one real signal traveled through the nuggets, not the language. She stands all day beside glowing photographs

of food, hungry. He keeps losing his appetite at the door. Between them stands a machine built to remove the human interaction—and the only human interaction the entire apparatus ever produced ran off-script, off-policy, and in the wrong direction: the customer fed the employee. Which is why the second visit ends better than the first. The first ends flat, nobody fed. The second ends on a kid at her stupid job, surprised by a kindness she had no script for either.

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So he began planning a third visit, as a piece. He makes performance art of a particular discipline: never recorded, never productized. It is performed, and afterward it is narrated; sometimes there is a photograph, rarely a small video, never more. The piece is this. Return to that McDonald's and feed the staff—better, take over her role. Stand at the kiosk for two hours as the big iPad helper, assist every customer who approaches, and pay for every order. And because two such hours interrupt a working day, the piece includes, as part of itself rather than as an apology afterward, gifts for the staff—gold, lottery tickets, flowers, strange objects—scaled to roughly what the job pays in a month, so that it is unmistakable that nobody's time is being taken for nothing.

The moment he takes position, he becomes her. Customers will meet him exactly as he met her: an inexplicable presence at one meter, offering unrequested assistance across a language barrier, disturbing the small privacy in which appetite makes itself known. Some will wave him off. Some will be suspicious of free food from a hovering farang. And so the piece settles the argument empirically, whichever way it goes. If people refuse help even with money attached—help that costs the helper and profits the helped—then the original grievance is vindicated beyond its wildest form: the problem was never her, it was proximity itself, and no quantity of chicken nuggets buys back the silence. If instead the whole restaurant loves it, the grievance is refuted in the most interesting available way: the problem was never helping but helplessness—her assistance added nothing, and his adds lunch. Either outcome is a finding, which is the correct condition for performance art. Across the three visits the arc runs grievance, confusion, gift.

The basket is chosen with some care. Gold is not eccentric here; it is the ordinary savings instrument of working people, bought by the baht weight, auspicious, keepable, showable to your mother. The lottery is national folklore, drawn twice a month, its numbers

taken from dreams, omens, and license plates. Flowers slide into the garland economy, the phuang malai handed to taxi drivers and hung on shrines. Stored value, pure chance, pure sentiment—three currencies at once, where an envelope of cash would read as nothing but a strange foreigner disposing of money. Art history even supplies a precedent to invert: where Santiago Sierra paid people a minimum wage to expose exploitation by restaging it, this piece overpays for pleasant pointlessness, and the wage is exposed by being embarrassed—the restaurant pays a month's salary for a month spent beside a machine that needs nobody, and he pays the same for one afternoon of being fed, adorned, and enriched. The tickets carry a private joke besides. The kiosk sells guaranteed sameness, every burger identical, billions served; he will be distributing pure maybe. In a country where winning numbers are drawn from omens, an inexplicable foreigner materializing with gold is an omen, and the staff may well play numbers off the day, in which case the performance literally enters the lottery. The ending to hope for is compliance: crew forbidden from accepting gifts, a manager obliged to intervene, the guest escorted out for excessive hospitality from the very building where he once spent twenty minutes arguing that the help was the damage.

And under a rule of no recording, the artifact generates itself: the receipts—someday, perhaps, a gold-shop receipt stapled to a McDonald's receipt, the finest provenance document in the history of the medium.

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The sentence at the front of this essay is the standard Western reading of such a scene, and it is the sentence the plan appears to violate: gifts nobody can return, raining on people who never asked, each one supposedly a small humiliation in wrapping paper. In Thailand the sentence is simply false. The country runs on a different engine, the economy of merit. Giving is tham bun, the making of merit, and the structure of merit is such that the giver is the one who benefits; the receiver enables the gift, completes it, almost performs a service by accepting. The clean proof is the morning alms round: the monk does not thank the layperson for the food; the layperson is grateful to the monk for the opportunity. Gratitude flows backward relative to the Western ledger. Nam jai—water of the heart—is generosity as overflow, admired precisely because it keeps no books, and the correct response to it is exactly what the girl gave: wow, thank you, warm and uncomplicated. Kreng jai supplies at most a polite hesitation be-

fore accepting, and it dissolves into mai pen rai the moment the giver insists. The lasting debt that does exist in the culture, bun khun, binds children to parents, students to teachers, clients to long patronage—not anyone to a cheerful stranger who materializes once with gold in his pockets. A windfall files under luck, and luck obligates no one; winning the lottery does not indebt you to the lottery, which is convenient for a man planning to hand out tickets. The cosmology even blesses, in retrospect, the reversal at the kiosk: where receiving completes the gift, receiving is a form of helping, so that can I help you, asked of the help, was accidentally orthodox, and the girl accepting her nuggets was, cosmologically speaking, assisting him. The flowers can just be flowers. The gold can just be gold.

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None of this is theory to him. He has lived in the same neighborhood, above the same lobby, for more than a year, and for most of that year he has been giving things to the people who work there. Flowers, lottery tickets, tips, presents—nothing worth itemizing, and an itemization would miss the point anyway, which was only that it was steady, and that it was everyone: reception and room service, housekeeping and security, the

whole building, for a long time, the way other guests say good morning. Once it was a birthday present for a housekeeper's son he had never met, because he had heard the boy loves video games.

Then one day the general manager approached him, a very well-spoken, well-dressed man, and said, Khun Daniel, can I talk to you for a second. He was scared. He assumed he was getting banned. Instead: how are you doing, is everything okay here, are you enjoying your stay. And then: Daniel, everyone in the hotel appreciates you so much, and everyone says you are the best possible guest, and I want to say something, which is that everyone feels very proud of you.

A strange way to say it, he thought, and he was right, and he was right about why. Note first the windup—I want to say something, which is that—a man flagging, before he crosses it, that the next phrase lies outside standard hospitality English; the verbal equivalent of a small bow. Then the ladder, climbed in one breath: appreciation, which is ordinary commercial language; best possible guest, superlative but still on the commercial map; and proud of you, which is off the map entirely, because in English that phrase belongs to parents, teachers, and coaches—to people with a stake in what you become. The manager was not misusing English.

He was accurately reporting a fact English has no idiom for. In the economy where receiving completes the gift, the staff were never beneficiaries; they were collaborators. They had co-authored a year of nam jai by receiving it well, daily, all of them, and the emotion of someone who participated in what you became is precisely pride. It is what gratitude sounds like in a cosmology where thanks flows backward. And if the manager was translating phum jai, the word deepens the sentence: jai, heart; phum, from bhumi—earth, ground, place. Pride as ground in the heart, the pride of place: after a year the man had become part of their ground, and they felt about him what a town feels about its river. The birthday present is the explanation for how. Anyone can give often; learning one boy's birthday is address. The objects were never the gift. The attention was, and the objects are its receipts—and the building, it turned out, had been paying attention back the entire time, comparing notes, reaching its verdict, until it delivered a year of accumulated regard in a single lump sum, through the most senior voice available, honorific in place. He thought he was getting banned. He was getting claimed.

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His own account of the moment was the precise one. They were proud of him the way one is proud of a friend, a child, a partner doing something good—and also, perhaps, proud to be the recipients, proud to be the people he decided to give to. The second half is the rare half. In the cultures he comes from, receiving is faintly shameful: charity marks you as needy, being helped is a status wound, and the recipient's task is to shrink the moment until it can be ignored. At most one end of a Western gift ever feels good, and usually neither does—the giver embarrassed to be seen, the receiver embarrassed to be seen needing. What the manager described is a transaction in which both ends hold pride at the same time, and that is only possible where receiving is honorable participation, where being chosen is itself an honor, like being the village the saint settled in. For a man who gives too much, too visibly, his home cultures hold exactly two scripts: suspicion—what is his angle, what is he buying, who does he think he is—and discomfort, the worry that he is making people small. Both convert generosity into a problem to be managed. Beneath both sits the old Protestant purity rule that the only clean gift is an anonymous one, the left hand ignorant of the right, visibility itself corrupting the act; in that world, we see what you do is the beginning of an

accusation. In an economy of merit it is a blessing, because merit is made in daylight—donor names posted at the temple in gold leaf. So the sentence he received was not approval but membership. Pride is family grammar, and being told that an entire building feels it is being told where you stand. He had changed nothing to earn this. The behavior is native; anywhere else it would read as an eccentricity to be watched, suspected, or gently pitied. Same actions, opposite social meaning. He did not adapt himself to the place. He found the jurisdiction where his existing behavior was already legal—where a slot shaped like the way he acts had been standing empty, waiting. Which is the true light on the third visit. Two hours of feeding the staff of a McDonald's is not a disruption of a restaurant. It is an annexation: an extension of the borders of the one neighborhood on Earth where what he does can be read correctly, one franchise at a time.

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