

OPINION

On Loss and Regret

By André Aciman

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YOU'RE in Florence and you want to buy something, say, a rare perfume, for your mother in the States. You know which store she would like and that she will both wear this scent and treasure it, the way older people know how to be frugal and extravagant at the same time. But as you're about to buy it, you already poison the gift with this thought: the day will come, perhaps sooner than you know, when you will have to clean out her house before giving her things away and you will find the selfsame bottle there, at once oblivious or indifferent to the tragedy that has occurred, the scent still summoning up the smile you imagined on her face as you roamed that dark, large store by Santa Maria Novella on that sunny day when you said, "Why not, it'll make her happy."

But then, as you imagine sorting through all her things, you already fear finding that your mother never opened the perfume box. Either she had never liked it, or she had saved it for special occasions. The special occasions that were few and far between. How many special occasions did that poor deluded woman think she had left?

Remorse now hangs like an albatross: you should have tried harder to make special occasions for her. She had probably expected and deserved more than the handful you doled out over the years. The bottle couldn't fool her. It was a placebo, your way of making nice, of defraying the sorrow you knew you'd incur one day.



Sarah Williamson

Plus there was the guilt of not inviting her to come along to Italy, guilt of thinking such somber thoughts about her behind her back and for stabbing her with an early death, guilt of rehearsing the pain so that it wouldn't hurt so much when the time came, guilt of trying to cover up these dark thoughts with a vial of scented water.

You didn't want to buy her that present, but couldn't find another and figured, might as well this. You stare at the bottle in the store and say to yourself: Let me not forget that I looked at this bottle and thought these things, because the day will come when I may see this bottle again. I don't want it to catch me off guard and say: Why didn't you prepare for this? Didn't you know that buying her something was an act of hubris, because it presupposed that she would stay around long

enough to use up the perfume? Didn't you know that saying you knew it was hubris in no way placates the gods, who love nothing better than to punish you for presuming to buy her time with your little mind games, or your trivial little gift?

So, you come back from Florence empty-handed so as not to have your mother taken from you. And you hope that if she knew what had crossed your mind in that store, she would be grateful you never brought her a present.

But the day does come, and you think, why didn't I buy her something, give more, why didn't I know then that asking so many questions one day and not having answers is the price to pay for being left without her?

André Aciman is the author of the forthcoming novel "Harvard Square," a professor at the CUNY Graduate Center and director of The Writers' Institute.

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