

The Scarlet Parcel

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A pair of blue-tits was fighting each other for exclusive access to the peanut holder Heather had just attached to the bird table. A female pheasant's dull brown feathers twitched under a bush as it waited for Heather to return to the cottage kitchen. Then it could peck at the seeds scattered liberally at the foot of the rotting bird table

Heather smiled. She pushed open the door to the kitchen where her daughter, Paula, was stirring a bowl of Coco Pops with a spoon.

"Is the pheasant there?" Paula asked.

"Yes," said Heather, as she poured herself a cup of coffee from the jug. "Not the boy pheasant, though. One of his girlfriends."

"Oh!" said Paula, disappointed. "I like the boy pheasant best. He's pretty!"

Heather sat next to her daughter by the kitchen table. Over the sound of *The Fimbles* on the television, whose morning adventures occasionally attracted Paula's attention, Heather could hear the reassuring sound of lambs bleating in the field that abutted the cottage garden. She loved her cottage and everything about it. The garden she tended when she had the time. The view over the fields to the distant copse and farmhouse. The birdsong that greeted her every morning as she drew the curtains to her bedroom. It might be an expensive luxury. The mortgage was easily the most expensive thing she had to budget for. But she didn't begrudge it at all.

If there was any consolation resulting from her separation from Roger, it was the agreement that she keep the cottage (even if she was burdened with the mortgage). And, of course, Paula. It wasn't as if Heather could have either Roger's job at the Insurance Company or the girlfriend he'd left her for. Nevertheless, she sometimes wished Roger showed more interest in his daughter other than the child subsistence payments, the rare

phone call and the birthday presents.

“What are you doing in school today, Polly?” Heather asked, as she sipped her black coffee. “Are you doing sums?”

“Oh Mummy!” Paula laughed. “We do sums every day. And reading.”

“What are you reading at the moment?”

Paula pulled a book out of her school bag with illustrations in bright primary colours of animals with smiling faces. Heather took it from her hand and turned the pages languidly. She was putting it back in her daughter’s bag when she noticed the cover of Paula’s copy book had words scrawled over it. She pulled it out and read them to herself.

“Who wrote these words?” she asked, keeping her voice as calm as she could.

“Debbie did.”

“Why did she do that?”

“She said that’s what you are, Mummy.”

Heather tore the cover off the copy book, crumpled it up and threw it in the kitchen fliptop bin.

“Why did you do that, Mummy?”

“Because they were bad words that Debbie wrote. Do you know what they mean?”

“No.”

“Didn’t Debbie tell you?”

“She did, but I didn’t understand. I don’t think she really knows either. Is it something grownups do?”

Heather bit her lip. “If your teacher, Mrs Ridley, asks why the cover’s missing,

tell her I tore it off. And if she wants to know more, she can talk to me. Do you understand, Polly?”

“Yes, Mummy,” said Paula, who was already losing interest in the exchange and whose attention was wandering back to children’s morning television.

Heather smiled indulgently and patted her daughter lovingly on her head.

“I love you, Polly,” she said, as she so often did.

“I know, Mummy!” said Paula.

Why did Heather feel the need to tell her daughter that? Wasn’t it obvious to everyone? Perhaps she did so because it needed to be said the more urgently when there was no father around to share the burden of childcare. Perhaps she just felt that in some ways she was less the perfect mother than she’d like to be.

When breakfast was finished, Heather took her daughter hand-in-hand out the cottage door, down the path to the village lane and past other cottages to the school bus stop. She regarded with regret the neighbouring cottages she was no longer welcome to visit as she was when Roger was living with her, even though he was more often away than at home. Heather felt a residual bitterness. It wasn’t, after all, her fault that Roger took off with another woman, but she was the one being punished for it.

She saw Mrs Butterfield and her two young children, one a boy and the other a girl, dawdling ahead of them as the boy sorted out some toys in his satchel. Mrs Butterfield raised her head and looked at Heather and her daughter with obvious alarm. She then pointedly hurried her children over onto the other side of the road so Heather could overtake them without there being the need to greet each other.

Heather tried to catch Mrs Butterfield’s eyes as they passed in the hope that she

could make a conciliatory nod. In many ways they were very similar people. They were both young mothers in their late twenties, whose children went to the same village primary school, and they wore similar clothes of sweater, slacks and trainers. But Mrs Butterfield had the benefit of a Mr Butterfield who let her fulfil her role as a modern middle-class housewife without the need to work while her children were still young.

“Do you play with Bobby and Lucy at school, Polly?” she asked her daughter, nodding towards Mrs Butterfield’s two children.

“I used to, Mummy,” said Paula, squeezing her mother’s hand. “But they don’t want to play with me any more. And anyway I’m best friends with Amandip and Mustapha. And with Sveta in Painting and Drawing.”

Heather nodded. She was pleased that there were still pupils who got on with her daughter, but, as someone whose own childhood had been as ordinary as it could be, it sometimes pained her that her daughter was forced to make friends with children on the ethnic margins of country life.

Heather and Paula lined up near the stone bus shelter with all the other parents and their children, but were notable for their relative isolation. No parents and no children came up to chat with them, to ask how they were, whether Paula had her MMR jab or if Heather might consider helping out on a stall at the next village fund-raiser. In fact, the parents, all mothers up to the age of forty, were intent on avoiding eye-contact at all costs, taking advantage of the need to fuss with their children to ensure that they need never look directly at the mother and daughter standing in the shade of the picturesque cherry tree. The children were equally complicit, although Heather was comforted that none of them were old enough to do so from genuine malice. It was worse with the older

children, whose school bus was parked further along the country lane. They sometimes took pride in their rudeness. Especially Judy Evans, whose mother had once been one of Heather's closest friends in the village.

Heather waved at Paula as the bus pulled off to take her and the other village children to the school in Upper Dumbledean. Paula was the only child sitting by herself on a bus that was already more than half full since picking up children from the neighbouring villages of Winstone and Cressington.

It was a fine sunny day, so Heather was rather looking forward to her morning stroll across the fields to the petrol station shop, which was the nearest place she could go to buy groceries and a newspaper. But she couldn't dawdle. She needed to be back at the cottage before the postman arrived. She was expecting a parcel and she didn't want the hassle of having to drive fifteen miles to the nearest sorting office if she missed the delivery.

Heather often considered this brief hour between seeing Paula off to school and returning home as the only part of the day when she could truly be herself. She loved the walk over the fields, past the grazing sheep and cattle, past the copse where she sometimes saw deer, and over the stiles. Even the few words exchanged with the staff at the petrol station, who mostly lived miles away from her village, were a source of inestimable pleasure to her.

"It's a lovely day, isn't it?" remarked Betty, as Heather knew she was called from the label on her blouse.

"Perfect!" Heather replied with a grin as she picked up the blue plastic bag of magazines, milk, biscuits and a newspaper.

She strode out of the petrol station, slightly regretting that her excursion was more than halfway over, but she needed to get back in good time. And she wanted to be ready for when Gerry came round. He said he'd be there this morning, depending on his appointments, of course, and he didn't normally disappoint. Heather's heart jumped slightly as she remembered her morning caller. At least Gerry loved her, as he was so keen on telling her; although Heather knew he was far too sensible to abandon his wife and teenage children for her.

Heather got back to the cottage only just in time. She could see the postman's red van parked outside the village hall, under the notice-board with its announcements of flower shows and jamborees. She widened her step, hoping to be at the cottage before the postman.

"Oh, hi there, Mrs Printon," greeted the postman who was coming towards her. Heather didn't wish to correct him about her marital status, though had she and Roger got married perhaps she'd have got a better deal from their separation. "I popped a card through your door, but seeing as you're here, you might as well have your parcel."

He handed Heather a shapeless package that crinkled with plastic, cloth and paper. She almost snatched it from him. "Where do I sign?"

"Here," said the postman, proffering a form. "Another scarlet parcel. The packaging these days!"

"Indeed," said Heather, who was annoyed that the parcel couldn't have been plain manilla. What would the postman think? He'd almost certainly noticed the sending address and drawn his own conclusions. However, Bill was a good sort. He never passed judgement and, in any case, Heather was sure he delivered far more incriminating parcels

than one in scarlet from a coquettishly ambiguous internet address.

Heather rushed into the cottage, sat down in the kitchen and pulled apart from the parcel. Yes, it was from *Scarlet Dream* and did contain the lingerie she'd ordered off the internet at attractively low prices with special discounts for regular customers. It was lacy, deep red, and revealing in exactly the right places. It also accentuated her medium-sized bosom. Gerry would be pleased.

Heather gazed out the kitchen window. Paula would be happy if she were here now. The male pheasant was pecking at the seeds she'd left out, surrounded by his harem of plain brown female pheasants. Small birds flew back and forth to the peanut holder, perching just long enough to peck free a few crumbs before flapping off to the bush where they waited for their next turn.

It was only after reading the newspaper over another cup of coffee that Heather decided to try out her new purchases. She'd never been bothered with things like this when Roger lived with her. Perhaps it might have made a difference if she had. Gerry liked the texture and look of erotic lingerie, though Heather wasn't sure if she were a man she might not prefer total nudity. It wasn't as if men ever dressed in such things. Well, not normally. Although since Roger left she'd learnt that what was apparently normal and what men actually got up to were not necessarily the same things.

Heather spun around on the stiletto heels that seemed most appropriate when you wore *Scarlet Dream's* lingerie. It was a perfect fit. She was still a very good-looking woman, as Gerry always reminded her (and Roger very rarely did). The evidence of the caesarean section was almost completely invisible. Her waist was trim as a result of all the exercise and, of course, her twice-weekly step aerobics classes in nearby Eastchurch.

Her breasts may not be huge, but they were pert and apple shaped. She now trimmed her crotch, another thing she never did when Roger lived with her. It looked better like that in *Scarlet Dream* panties and, anyway, Gerry appreciated it.

Heather sat on the double bed that was a legacy of her near-married past and idly flicked through the woman's magazine she'd bought at the petrol station. It was all about film stars, fashion hints and, of greatest fascination to Heather, articles about finding, keeping and pleasing boyfriends and lovers. There was a world outside represented in these magazines, a long way from country villages and domestic drudgery, where a girl could go out for the night, dance the night away, and return home with the man of her dreams. And this man was someone who, with a little patience and the benefit of having read articles in magazines like this, would be nothing but putty in the hands of a modern Ms. Before long, it would be roses, wedding bells, a sporty Audi TT, and one of those diamonds that were featured in those decidedly erotic advertisements.

Suddenly, Heather heard the familiar squawk of a startled pheasant followed by the low buzz of his wings. She jumped to her feet and looked out of the window to see Gerry's Mazda parked in front of the cottage. He was early! She watched as he got out of the driver's door, opened the rear door to retrieve the jacket of his suit he'd hung up, and, with a swift manoeuvre copied from *The West Wing*, slipped it over his shoulders. Heather hurried down the stairs to the front door. She composed herself, still wearing only her scarlet lingerie, while Gerry hovered over the front door bell. It wouldn't do to be too hasty in opening the door, but on the other hand she didn't want to antagonise her neighbours more by leaving Gerry on the doorstep for too long.

At last, after counting to ten after Gerry first rang the doorbell and breathing

slowly and deeply to compose herself and her nerves, Heather opened the door. She hoped that no neighbour could glimpse her in the underwear she wore specifically for Gerry's benefit.

"My gosh, Heather! You needn't have!" Gerry exclaimed when he saw her in her lace and silk outfit.

"For you, my love, nothing is too much," said Heather with a broad smile. "Come in! Come in! You're a bit earlier than you said. Do you want a cup of coffee?"

Gerry nodded. "It's been a long drive from Worcester," he said. "But I might just have clinched the deal. A coffee would do me the world of good!"

As he entered the cottage, he kissed Heather shyly on the cheek and followed her to the kitchen. He sat down on a stool and glanced at a photograph of Paula.

"Your daughter's at school today?" he asked with a kindly smile.

Heather nodded as she poured a cup of coffee, put in the milk and three sugars that Gerry liked, and handed it to him. "It's not the school holidays, as you know."

"No, of course not. I'd know if *my* two girls were off school," he laughed.

Heather leant against the washing machine, her long legs stockinged from her high-heeled shoes to the top of her thigh, and a bright square of Spring sun shining on her bare midriff. She sipped her coffee and studied Gerry with trepidation. Although she'd known him for well over a year and had got to know him very intimately indeed, perhaps more so than his wife or colleagues, she knew there were huge parts of him that were barred from her forever. He was a very ordinary looking man in many ways. Only just in his forties, filling out around the waist, and with a hair-line that was receding quite noticeably.

He took a tissue out of his pocket and wiped a sliver of sweat off his forehead.

“It’s very hot driving, you know,” he said apologetically.

Heather smiled. “Especially all that way! Was the motorway bad?”

As Gerry proceeded to give an account of his drive from Worcester and the tortuous A and B roads he’d navigated, Heather gathered her wits about her. Gerry always perspired when he visited. Heather knew that it was more his nerves than the temperature. He was worried about his wife discovering that he was seeing someone else, even someone who lived so far away. And he also felt very guilty. What would his daughters think?

When Heather had judged that both she and Gerry were sufficiently relaxed, she strode seductively across the kitchen, one impossibly long leg in front of the other, and smiled as Gerry became visibly more aroused by her presence. And it wasn’t just that he perspired the more heavily: sweat trickling down his high temple and onto his reddened cheeks. He was getting more excited in another area that in a sense mattered much more.

She placed a hand on the front of his trousers. His penis was rock hard and a splendid seven inches of manhood it was too. He flinched slightly as Heather squeezed his testicles through the loose fabric of his trousers and the boxer shorts she knew he wore underneath. She kissed him tenderly on the forehead, which smelt quite distinctively of some Indian curry he’d no doubt been feasting on the night before.

“You seem ready for action,” Heather remarked.

“It’s your outfit!” Gerry protested. “You know how much I like silk and lace. And red as well! I love you, you know. No one else understands me so well.”

Heather had heard his protestations of love many times before, but words were

worthless with a family in tow. She pretended not to hear him, although it sometimes occurred to her that although Gerry was a sales rep and all that often implied, he probably wasn't that bad a father. And one who would probably get on quite well with Paula.

“Shush!” said Heather, placing a finger gently but firmly on Gerry's lips. “You probably don't have much time. Shall we go upstairs and make as much of the time we've got together as we can?”

“Yes. Yes, of course,” said Gerry, taking off his jacket in preparation. He then folded it over his shoulder and loosened his tie as he followed Heather up the familiar staircase to her well-lit bedroom at the top of the stairs.

Heather was aware that the disrobing was often the most awkward part of her meetings with Gerry, so she put especial effort into making the ceremony as erotic and natural as possible. Thankfully, she didn't have to remove any of her own clothes. The split crotch of the panties ensured that this was not necessary, though she usually liked to throw them to one side at some point or other. She was able to concentrate her attention on Gerry's shirt, trousers and underpants. She was unhurried and sensual as she spread her fingers open on his hair-tangled stomach and eased his boxer shorts down his upper thighs, kissing his erect penis as she did so.

Soon he was naked and on his back on the bed, while Heather returned her mouth to his penis, not only her lips, but also her tongue and teeth, busy at keeping his penis erect, while her fingers, with their sensibly manicured nails, ensured that it didn't spend itself too soon in the process. The advice given in the women's magazines about suppressing premature ejaculation had proven their worth many times over, although nothing was as good as actual practice.

Gerry was well blessed. His penis was straight and stiff, no kink in it and the skin pulled off the glans completely and easily. His testicles were like eggs in size and shape, much like those in the fridge, but much more tender. Gerry would gasp whenever Heather squeezed them, but as he expected her to do it she did this every time. Just as she would also take each testicle into her mouth, closing her lips around it, while her hand continued to grip his penis, and run her tongue through the long scrotum hairs and over the strange tubes that would channel his seed to his member. But not yet. And not while he was still unprotected.

It was a very explicitly illustrated book that Heather managed to trace on the internet that taught her the skill she had now perfected of taking a condom out of its wrapper, putting it onto her partly opened mouth where she kept it in place by sucking the rubber in, and then with her mouth, sliding the condom down the length of Gerry's erect penis, using a single hand to secure it in place. Heather had learnt that there were different size condoms appropriate for different men, and that Gerry required a very average sized condom for a good fit. She wondered whether there actually were many men who required the larger sized condoms, but she had learnt that there was certainly a need for the smaller models. A good fit was a necessity and any looseness was very dangerous indeed.

Once protected, Gerry could now enter her. For reasons of comfort more than anything else, Heather slipped off her lacy red panties and dropped them to the floor. Gerry had once complained that a condom made him less sensitive and wondered whether he could make love without it, but Heather was very strict on such matters. Whatever his protestations of love, what would they be worth if something unpleasant or

unexpected happened as a result of their conjoining?

Although very different in most other ways, Gerry was much like Roger in his lovemaking. He preferred making love from the front so that he could look down at Heather's face beneath his outstretched supporting arms. He liked to thrust in slowly and steadily at first, pulling his penis almost free from her vagina and then plunging it deep inside again. He liked to gradually build up his thrusts into a faster and more urgent rhythm, which was Heather's cue to vent forth those urgent whimpering gasps for which she was so grateful there were no party walls between her and her neighbours' cottages.

Heather wasn't sure that she was actually faking it. She certainly faked the orgasm, but then she did that with Roger as well. Orgasms came rarely for her and most often when she was pleasuring herself. The cries of ecstasy and joy, however, that signified orgasm had become such a routine part of her lovemaking, Heather wondered whether they had just become something as natural as the thrusts she found herself reciprocating without ever planning to do so.

Another feature Gerry had in common with Roger was his love of anal intercourse, but this was a privilege Heather rarely granted. It was something best kept for special occasions. She worried about it ever since she read that article in *Cosmopolitan* about the long-term health risks of too frequent penetration. Perhaps if Gerry were less well-endowed and the risk less great, she might have thought differently.

So when Gerry's finger probed her anus from behind, his penis thrusting vigorously at the front, Heather let the finger enter as far as the second joint, but squeezed her buttocks tight to make further penetration impossibly difficult. She then orchestrated her thrusts and her ecstatic cries to the climax she could see Gerry was pretty much on the

verge of achieving.

As he did with his own grunts and gasps. And like all men, the moment of release was fairly obvious, although his penis didn't automatically collapse after releasing semen into the condom's nipple.

Afterwards, Heather and Gerry lay together on the sweat-sodden sheets, soon to be changed, Gerry's arm around Heather's shoulders, while the sales rep talked about his wife, his daughters, and the deal he was hoping to close in Shrewsbury. This was different to Roger, who'd normally doze after they'd made love, but then Gerry would soon have to get back into his Mazda and onto the road again.

Heather kissed Gerry quite tenderly on the cheek before she opened the front door to the cottage to let him out. He made his usual protestations that he'd be back as soon as he could and that he loved her.

"Well, just ring when you can," said Heather with a smile.

"I will. I will. It's been... it's been wonderful seeing you again. I can hardly wait till next time!"

Heather wandered to the living room to watch Gerry drive off in his Mazda. She still wore her scarlet outfit with the panties back on, but she'd soon change into something else. It carried rather too obviously the smell of recent sex.

Heather returned to the kitchen and looked out at the garden where a goldfinch was perched on the bird table and a host of sparrows were pecking at the seeds on the ground. No pheasants this time.

She looked at the notes in her hand. As always, Gerry had been more generous than he needed to be. And even though they'd not had anal sex, he insisted on paying for

it. Heather put the money in a jar in the kitchen and glanced at her desk diary. Three more appointments this afternoon: two regulars and a new one. As always, it was the new one she was most anxious about, but Phil and Jeremy would be just as demanding as Gerry.

Heather sipped her coffee. She'd have to change the sheets and put on a fresh outfit, perhaps a black or a white number from *Scarlet Dream's* catalogue. And then back to work.

Heather glanced at the school photograph of her daughter in the frame by the kitchen window. She sighed.

Oh, the sacrifices the single working mother has to make!