

## The Gift

I never meant to fall in love with Gerhard. It fulfilled far too many cliches, after all; plain, overweight assistant falling for her older, married boss, and one thing I've tried hard to do all my life is confound cliches. While I was young, still plump but wearing my weight as though it was a suit I could take off, I did ballet. So patient were my teachers that I reached a Grade 5 and people whispered about 'how marvellous it was', as though I had only one leg, or was blind. I had riding lessons. I was the dour-faced antithesis of the 'happy fat girl', making others laugh, playing the fool. I was serious, ambitious, good at what I did.

Except love. As I grew older, and larger, love circumvented me like a ruthless sailor, dedicated to other destinations. It would come close, then tack and veer in a wind I couldn't sense, passing so close that I could see the sails, then a tiny movement of life's rudder and it would be gone, waving a half-hearted farewell.

So, as I say, I never meant to fall in love with Gerhard. And I am sure he would say, to his wife at least, that he never meant to fall in love with me. And yet, it happened. Eyes met across many crowded rooms, signalling despair, boredom, frustration; conversations turned, working trips became explorations and then, there it was. Fresh and shiny and new, my love, like a horse-chestnut inside the prickly shell that only Gerhard took the time and the risk to split open, protecting himself against the sharp pains with the padding of a marriage and three children back home in Himmighausen.

By now I had passed through being simply 'large'. No longer did the description 'well built' apply, there would simply not be enough mortar for a construct so determined. I was, without prevarication, 'fat'. Huge, creamy rolls spilled from my clothing, as though my food went through no processing and was simply stuck to my external surfaces, scrambled egg thighs puckered and dimpled, cream doughnut breasts, buttery arms and stomach. But when Gerhard laid me down in that hotel room with the green curtains, the light coming through so strained and verdant that it tinted my skin like moss, I was no longer the efficient, fat assistant. He had handed me my life.

I was proud. I wore the affair like a brooch, a subtle stone only noticeable in certain lights but its presence tugging at me; a reminder that there was a man who saw me. Whose eyes didn't skim my surface and dismiss me as fat, so barely female, barely human. Men who, during telephone conversations would joke and flirt and tell me what a nice voice I had, being faced with the size and weight of reality would turn and tease instead with the girls who manned the keyboards, the girls pinned to their seats by their headsets; the acned-dotted, the badly-dressed, anything but me. I didn't care. Gerhard loved me, his dark, glossy skin pressed into my buttermilk paleness, my skin and flesh moving abundantly beneath him, rolling and gliding with his eagerness.

We never talked about my size. For me it would have been like discussing the colour of my eyes; something unchangeable, a part of me so fixed that it *was* me. There were nights, at my flat, in my car, when he would ask if I was 'comfortable', in a tone which I

could never quite translate. Later, after he had left, I would scry and scabble through his words, his inflections to seek the meanings, lay out every conversation in order; did *this* pause mean he truly loved me? Or *this* half-begun sentence, truncated by his desire?

His wife was thin. I found her picture in his wallet, searching one night while he slept for clues to his true implications. He talked of her now and then, she was a doctor, a good cook, a reader of poetry; I clasped all this knowledge to me as I clasped him – to know this woman was to have a degree of power over her. She, in turn, knew nothing of me, this slim, clever woman in the photograph, wearing a shimmering red silk dress which emphasised her tiny waist, her lack of bosom. Hard to imagine that a woman this fragile could have borne the three grown-up sons who graced his desk with their images; the two now married with children of their own, the one dark, intense, with a look of his father's sternness in his eyes, now a doctor in his own right.

He returned to them every month or so. I would use these times to work, to practise my piano playing, to paint; all evidences of how little I needed him, but all providing tangible evidence of how I wished to impress, to show him how I had used his absences to gain myself a little more. For now, I truly *was* myself. I was happy. Big and happy. For the first time I began to conform; to laugh and joke with the company visitors, the other girls, so that they would say 'oh, she's a big girl, but she's always jolly'. And during the nights, I would guide Gerhard, move my flesh to slow him or speed him, take his hands and work them across the folds and valleys of my body, oiled with sweat and pleasure.

I returned to the flat one evening, when Gerhard had left for his monthly visit to Germany and the air smelled strangely stale, of sex and old cigarettes. Perhaps it was stronger than usual because he'd spent the whole weekend with me, pounding at my body with a vigour he'd attributed to his impending absence. My flesh had risen and dipped like the sea beneath his onslaught, rippled with an incoming tide, slipped and fallen. My coasts were eroded.

On the bed was a parcel. Carefully placed in the centre of the plump duvet as though to make the maximum impression, wrapped in films of gold lace and tied with a pert gold ribbon, as upstanding as a puppy's ears. I sat down, the bed's sinking sliding the parcel closer towards me as though it thrust itself into my hands. Too large for jewellery, too flat for books, it nestled itself against me, begging for trust. I opened it carefully, slowly, to prolong the moment, the surprise; smoothing each layer of gold lace, unwinding the ribbon and stretching it the length of his side of the bed. Lifting the lid, oh, so gently.

Inside was a dress. Silk. Red. Size 10.