

THE VALENTINE CARD

by

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(1994/2010)

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Have you ever missed out on anything in life? Miss Harriette Smith had. By the time she was forty-one years old, she had missed out on everything.

She had missed out on parents - when Harriette was six months old, her father ran off with the barmaid from the corner pub. Harriette's mother was so traumatized by this dramatic development that she became a nun, and she locked herself away in the convent of ill-health and frailty. And because of her mother's vows, Harriette had missed out on the company of siblings.

Harriette had also missed out on education - her abandoned, frail, misused, "self-sacrificing" mother had no time to worry about her daughter's education. So, in her fifteenth summer, the young Harriette embarked upon a career as a junior assistant-clerk in the local-government office. And already, life's pattern had begun to harden, and Harriette just didn't advance. You see, small clerks only move diminutive distances, and this was certainly true in Harriette's case.

By thirty, she had grown to the position of "Assistant Clerk - Archives". And there she stayed - confines in a grey dusty dungeon, wearing grey dusty livery, and caring for grey dusty files. And now, at forty-one, the metamorphosis was complete, and there was no turning back - Harriette had grey dusty hair, framing her grey dusty skin.

The previous year, Harriette had missed out on her fortieth birthday - the nun had died, and had entered higher orders; and with this event, the population of Harriette's world was cut in half.

Harriette had even missed her bus that morning, and was thirty minutes late! Such was the grey Miss Smith.

With all these events, Harriette had coped stoically; but, there was one event that Harriette had missed out on that she had never really coped with - romance. Being a bread-winner, nurse, house-keeper, and slave, Harriette had no time for romance. Her world was sealed tight - it was a safe world. There was no fear of male invasion there; her grey camouflage had kept her hidden, had kept her safe, and had protected her virginity.

Although her world was secure, all was not well, and the grey Harriette had a dark secret - a heinous vice so bad that it had to be kept hidden from all "decent society" - especially from her mother's decent society...

Harriette's vice was the reading of romantic novels!!!

From the moment of her initiation into the passion of the written word, her empty, aching heart had led her to a sweet fountain of healing wine. She had found a better world; a world where a woman could find happy endings; where a woman could find fulfilment; a world where a woman could be the woman she desired to be - Harriette had found her world. And as oft' as time and circumstance would permit, she would enter "her world" and live, and love, and enjoy the antitheses of her "real world", her sterile grey world.

Then, in her forty-first year it happened, the convergence of her two worlds occurred. The portal between the two worlds was disguised in the form of a plain pink envelope that Harriette found in her

mail tray this very morning. However, this was not just any morning; this was the most important morning of Harriette's year; this was the morning of Valentine's Day.

The unexpected visitor in her mail tray was immediately detected by Harriette's vigilant eye... Her heart stopped... And after casually looking around the grey world for signs of life, and finding none, she picked up the envelope with trembling fingers. From the weight and stiffness of the traveller her intuition reported that a card lay secreted within - not any old card... but a pearl... a pearl of great price. By this time her revived heart was pounding so loudly, that it could be heard in the canteen - four floors up.

She carefully examined the outside of the envelope for evidence of the perpetrator, but there was none. No pen had dared to demean the femininity of the soft pink paper with its ejaculated ink. The only physical contact between sender and receiver had been the soft moist tongue that had sensually brushed the flap to seal the love package forever.

Harriette's letter opener penetrated smoothly into the envelope, and with surgical precision, she sliced through the top flap. The ravished envelope smiled unashamed, and she could see the soft white interior. Nervously looking within she gasped, there was indeed a card! The oyster had not been barren, and there was a pearl - a genuine Valentine card.

Holding her breath, Harriette carefully eased the prize out of its concealment. No sacred parchment had been so delicately or reverentially treated as the one resting in her hand. Her emotions flooded as her eyes fell upon a red satin heart, swollen with desire, and had burst through the front of the card. She tenderly fingered the white lace collar that framed the heart, and time melted as Harriette drifted upon rose coloured clouds.

At last she drifted back to earth, and noticed that a love-ring of gold lettering guarded the lace. It was a message; it was her message; and it was a message that held a key: "I Want - Only You - to be - My Valentine". And the key unlocked energies that had been too long trapped, and Harriette was swept away on a flood of orgasmic fantasy that left her drained and breathless.

Could she bring herself to open the card? Could she dare reveal its secrets to the elements? She was not sure she had the courage, let alone the strength.

Nevertheless, it had to be done - the card had become the embodiment of Harriette's inner yearning. And it was a yearning that could not be ignored; consummation must take place; virginity must be lost; and true love must be confirmed.

So... summoning all of her remaining strength, Harriette closed her eyes, and with sensual caressing fingers, she gently teased open the card; and as she lifted the curtains from her eyes, they were greeted by a violet bow that was shyly nestling at the bottom of the heart. The lace collar had been stripped away, and the heart was exposed, naked except for the violet bow. Harriette felt that she was going to burst, and in a panic, she frantically scanned the card for further intelligence. A new engraving, this time in a black script, announced: "I Give You My Heart - My Valentine".

"Oh!" she sighed. "Who are you? I need to know... So I can give you my... my heart too."

A smile was born on Harriette's moist lips, and at last the perpetrator was to be unmasked! They had tried to hide in the bottom right-hand corner of the card - but Harriette had seen through the ploy, and she boldly read the confession that had been written by their own hand: "Would you have dinner with me tonight? I'll call you later..."

But, what's this? The message is incomplete! Where's the signature? Where's the initials? Who's this anonymous sender? Who's this coward who dares to hide their visage?

Harriette felt betrayed; Harriette felt scared; Harriette felt light headed; Harriette felt flushed; Harriette felt that her bladder needed to be emptied...

Paralysed, she let the card slip from her fingers, and watched helpless, from the crag of disappointment, as the butterfly of love fluttered down and kissed her blotter. Awaking, and returning

to a semi-reality, she carefully placed the red heart love-seed back into its pink womb, and allowed further gestation to take place under her blotter...

The day evolved on, and with every ring of the telephone, Harriette experienced the pain of a thousand anticipations before she could pick it up. By midday she was a punch drunk pugilist, fighting against the treachery chains of time.

Two o'clock arrived, and rudely barged into Harriette's thoughts, "What's going on? What's happened? Why haven't you been contacted?"

The icy hands on the clock started to caress her thoughts, then viciously, they pierced her swollen heart, and Harriette cried out in anguish, "Oh, God, no! It can't be! Has it only been a joke?"

Filled with righteous indignation, Harriette seized this impudent upstart of a thought, and dashed it to the floor. Then, with contempt, she crushed it into nothingness under her heel.

The telephone rang, and Harriette's system once again took a massive shot of adrenalin; then, with a damp hand she tentatively lifted the receiver.

"Archives... Miss Smith speaking."

"Hello, Miss Potter, It's Jenny... You know, Jim Grover's secretary."

"Oh! Yes... How can I help you?"

"I know you don't get involved with office goings on and that sort of thing..."

"Yes."

"Well, we've... that is... I'm in a bit of a fix."

"Oh! I am sorry, what have I done?"

"No! Good heavens no! It's not you... You see, Jim's been seeing a lot of a certain person in accounts, but there was a misunderstanding, and the certain person told Jim to go to hell. He really likes her, and wanted to make it up... He's so romantic you know... Anyway, he asked me to leave a valentine with an invitation in it on her desk..."

"I still don't understand..."

"Sorry, I'm getting to that. Well, you'll never guess what happened - I lost the damn thing - you know - Jim's valentine. And if I don't find it, he'll kill me... So I'm ringing around, like a demented loon, to see if anyone's tripped over it... You can't miss it - it's one of those fancy stuffed ones..."

Harriette was unable to speak, invisible hands were squeezing her throat, and her breath was trapped.

Jenny gushed on, "Oh hell! Jim's back. If you see it, give me a shout. Thanks, got to go... Bye."

Without further utterance, Harriette put down the receiver, and let her trapped breath slowly escape. It was all right; it was just one of those misses that was a part of life. She tentatively slid her hand under the blotter. The valentine was still there. She felt a dampness in her eyes, and her vision started to swim.

"No!" she whispered. "There's no need for that foolishness... I won't cry... It was silly to even to imagine..."

She took the pink envelope that had held so much promise, and let it kiss her fingers for the last time as it slipped into the waste bin.

There was no point resisting now. So Harriette bared her soft white breast and let the ice-tipped dagger of reality sheath itself in her aching heart. Despair spread as a contagion throughout her being, and Harriette Smith was dead by two-fifteen - her life had simply poured out through the mortal wound of realisation. However, there was no messy corpse to clean up... Harriette had been absorbed by the grey Miss Smith, and together they had again become ghosts in the dusty grey archive world...

The clock was making a dash for five-thirty, and Miss Smith was tidying up her desk. In the dungeon, the death-throws of another day were passing unnoticed.

"Hi, Harriette... sorry... I mean... Miss Smith. How are you? Thank goodness you're still here..."

Harriette started, and swung around. George, from the planning department, had entered the dungeon. She thought he fitted in quite well - a middle-aged bachelor with grey middle-aged hair, and a dusty middle-aged moustache.

Looking into his eyes, Harriette noticed there was a sadness in the faded blue. There'd been a rumour, some time back, that he had lost his mother or someone... His grey suit looked new though...

George's voice snapped her back to the present: "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you... Are you alright?"

"Yes... yes, I'm fine... It's just been one of those days... You know."

He apologetically held out a thick sheaf of printer papers and said, "I've brought the latest figures for binding."

"Thank you, put it on my desk, and I'll get to it tomorrow."

Harriette's voice was tired, and she desperately wanted to escape from the dungeon and just crawl off home.

George seemed anxious, "I'm sorry I didn't get to you earlier, the new bypass tenders are a nightmare..." He seemed to lose track of what he was saying, and drifted off on a new tack, "Did you get any internal mail today?"

"No, I haven't received anything from the planning section today."

"No," he continued uneasily, "I didn't mean that..." He stopped dead as his eyes fell onto the discarded pink envelope in the waste bin. "Oh, God! I am an ass... I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to offend you..."

"Whatever do you mean, George? You haven't offended me, I'm just a little tired..."

"I'm sorry about the card... Didn't you like it?"

Adrenalin rushed into Harriette's system, and she heard herself ask, "What card?"

"The card I left in your tray..."

"The card? Oh! The card!" Harriette snatched the pearl from the grimy hands of the waste bin, and held it to her bosom. "Yes!" she said. "It's the most... most wonderful card that I've ever got..." She felt hysterical, and her voice was charged with emotion, and her trembling lips smiled at his kind face. "Thank you..." she whispered.

"I know it's short notice and all, but would you like to have dinner with me... tonight?" He continued nervously, "I took the liberty of booking a table at a quiet place I know."

"Oh, yes," she said softly. "I'd love to."

"That's great," he grinned. "Come on then, let's go now. We'll forget this hole, have a drink, and live it up for once."

"Yes... yes," she said breathlessly, "let's."

George bent forward, and Harriette felt his lips brush a warm kiss onto her cheek. She heard his gentle voice whisper secret words into her ear, "I've wanted to do that for a very long time... Happy Valentine's Day, Harriette."

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