

## The Gift

### The Velvet Underground

Waldo Jeffers had reached his limit. It was now Mid-August which meant he had been separated from Marsha for more than two months. Two months, and all he had to show was three dog-eared letters and two very expensive long-distance phone calls. True, when school had ended and she'd returned to Wisconsin, and he to Locust, Pennsylvania, she had sworn to maintain a certain fidelity. She would date occasionally, but merely as amusement. She would remain faithful.

But lately Waldo had begun to worry. He had trouble sleeping at night and when he did, he had horrible dreams. He lay awake at night, tossing and turning underneath his pleated quilt protector, tears welling in his eyes as he pictured Marsha, her sworn vows overcome by liquor and the smooth soothing of some neanderthal, finally submitting to the final caresses of sexual oblivion. It was more than the human mind could bear.

Visions of Marsha's faithlessness haunted him. Daytime fantasies of sexual abandon permeated his thoughts. And the thing was, they wouldn't understand how she really was. He, Waldo, alone understood this. He had intuitively grasped every nook and cranny of her psyche. He had made her smile. She needed him, and he wasn't there (Awww...).

The idea came to him on the Thursday before the Mummers' Parade was scheduled to appear. He'd just finished mowing and etching the Edelsons lawn for a dollar fifty and had checked the mailbox to see if there was at least a word from Marsha. There was nothing but a circular from the Amalgamated Aluminum Company of America inquiring into his awning needs. At least they cared enough to write.

It was a New York company. You could go anywhere in the mails. Then it struck him. He didn't have enough money to go to Wisconsin in the accepted fashion, true, but why not mail himself? It was absurdly simple. He would ship himself parcel post, special delivery. The next day Waldo went to the supermarket to purchase the necessary equipment. He bought masking tape, a staple gun and a medium sized cardboard box just right for a person of his build. He judged that with a minimum of jostling he could ride quite comfortably. A few airholes, some water, perhaps some midnight snacks, and it would probably be as good as going tourist.

By Friday afternoon, Waldo was set. He was thoroughly packed and the post office had agreed to pick him up at three o'clock. He'd marked the package "Fragile", and as he sat curled up inside, resting on the foam rubber

cushioning he'd thoughtfully included, he tried to picture the look of awe and happiness on Marsha's face as she opened her door, saw the package, tipped the deliverer, and then opened it to see her Waldo finally there in person. She would kiss him, and then maybe they could see a movie. If he'd only thought of this before. Suddenly rough hands gripped his package and he felt himself borne up. He landed with a thud in a truck and was off.

Marsha Bronson had just finished setting her hair. It had been a very rough weekend. She had to remember not to drink like that. Bill had been nice about it though. After it was over he'd said he still respected her and, after all, it was certainly the way of nature, and even though, no he didn't love her, he did feel an affection for her. And after all, they were grown adults. Oh, what Bill could teach Waldo - but that seemed many years ago.

Sheila Klein, her very, very best friend, walked in through the porch screen door and into the kitchen. "Oh gawd, it's absolutely maudlin outside." "Ach, I know what you mean, I feel all icky!" Marsha tightened the belt on her cotton robe with the silk outer edge. Sheila ran her finger over some salt grains on the kitchen table, licked her finger and made a face. "I'm supposed to be taking these salt pills, but," she wrinkled her nose, "they make me feel like throwing up." Marsha started to pat herself under the chin, an exercise she'd seen on television. "God, don't even talk about that." She got up from the table and went to the sink where she picked up a bottle of pink and blue vitamins. "Want one? Supposed to be better than steak," and then attempted to touch her knees. "I don't think I'll ever touch a daiquiri again."

She gave up and sat down, this time nearer the small table that supported the telephone. "Maybe Bill'll call," she said to Sheila's glance. Sheila nibbled on a cuticle. "After last night, I thought maybe you'd be through with him." "I know what you mean. My God, he was like an octopus. Hands all over the place."

She gestured, raising her arms upwards in defense. "The thing is, after a while, you get tired of fighting with him, you know, and after all I didn't really do anything Friday and Saturday so I kind of owed it to him. You know what I mean." She started to scratch. Sheila was giggling with her hand over her mouth. "I'll tell you, I felt the same way, and even after a while," here she bent forward in a whisper, "I wanted to!" Now she was laughing very loudly.

It was at this point that Mr. Jameson of the Clarence Darrow Post Office rang the doorbell of the large stucco colored frame house. When Marsha Bronson opened the door, he helped her carry the package in. He had his yellow and his green slips of paper signed and left with a fifteen cent tip that Marsha had gotten out of her mother's small beige pocketbook in the den. "What do you

think it is?" Sheila asked. Marsha stood with her arms folded behind her back. She stared at the brown cardboard carton that sat in the middle of the living room. "I dunno."

Inside the package, Waldo quivered with excitement as he listened to the muffled voices. Sheila ran her fingernail over the masking tape that ran down the center of the carton. "Why don't you look at the return address and see who it's from?" Waldo felt his heart beating. He could feel the vibrating footsteps. It would be soon.

Marsha walked around the carton and read the ink-scratched label. "Ah, god, it's from Waldo!" "That schmuck!" said Sheila. Waldo trembled with expectation. "Well, you might as well open it," said Sheila. Both of them tried to lift the staple flap. "Ah sst," said Marsha, groaning, "he must have nailed it shut." They tugged on the flap again. "My God, you need a power drill to get this thing open!" They pulled again. "You can't get a grip." They both stood still, breathing heavily.

"Why don't you get a scissor," said Sheila. Marsha ran into the kitchen, but all she could find was a little sewing scissor. Then she remembered that her father kept a collection of tools in the basement. She ran downstairs, and when she came back up, she had a large sheet metal cutter in her hand. "This is the best I could find." She was very out of breath. "Here, you do it. I-I'm gonna die." She sank into a large fluffy couch and exhaled noisily. Sheila tried to make a slit between the masking tape and the end of the cardboard flap, but the blade was too big and there wasn't enough room. "God damn this thing!" she said feeling very exasperated. Then smiling, "I got an idea." "What?" said Marsha. "Just watch," said Sheila, touching her finger to her head.

Inside the package, Waldo was so transfixed with excitement that he could barely breathe. His skin felt prickly from the heat, and he could feel his heart beating in his throat. It would be soon. Sheila stood quite upright and walked around to the other side of the package. Then she sank down to her knees, grasped the cutter by both handles, took a deep breath, and plunged the long blade through the middle of the package, through the masking tape, through the cardboard, through the cushioning and (thud) right through the center of Waldo Jeffers head, which split slightly and caused little rhythmic arcs of red to pulsate gently in the morning sun.