

THE PARCEL
by
Jonathan Lomas

The ink from the thick black letters has bled into the brown paper. You know, that spikey effect that makes each character look like it's got an Afro. Either that or the letters are shocked to have ended up on a parcel. The brown paper is that cheap stuff you get from Dollarama not the satisfyingly thick and creamy kind they sell at the post office. The address is still readable, just, and clearly meant for me. But who is it from? There's no hint of that. It should make me paranoid, shouldn't it, in this age of letter bombs and terrorists? But, despite not recognizing the handwriting, it doesn't. Who would want to send me a letter bomb? And anyway it hardly weighs anything. Mind you that could make me suspicious too – it should weigh more for its size. But even that doesn't trouble me.

Without ceremony I rip off the paper to reveal ... a shoebox. Hmm, unless they're paper slippers or ballet pumps I'm not going to find an actual pair of shoes in there. Curiosity aroused I start to play along with the mystery that whoever sent this intends. I slowly lift the edge of the shoebox lid and peek inside. It reveals ... a box of chocolates surrounded by crumpled paper. Well, probably not a box **of** chocolates, more likely a box **for** chocolates that now contains ... what? Using both hands I carefully remove it from its crumpled nest, pushing aside the shoebox and brown paper with my elbow. I lay it down in pride of place on the table. This is getting more and more intriguing. The box implies a treasure of Ferrero Rocher will greet me inside. I suspect not. I'm right. When I whisk off the lid, like French restaurant service revealing

what's under the cloche, I find ... another box in another nest of crumpled paper. Russian dolls come to mind. This time, if I'm to believe the lid of this perfectly square four inch by four inch box, it contains a 'Miniature Masterpiece', an 80-piece jigsaw puzzle of Vincent Van Gogh's Sunflowers. "Delightful," I think, "but unlikely." Easing it open, quel surprise, it **is** a jigsaw and from the fractured pieces it does indeed look as if it's Van Gogh's Sunflowers except ... on the underside of each piece are handwritten partial words or letters. Someone, presumably my mystery correspondent, has written a message on the puzzle's reverse. This riddle will yield only to my visual-spatial skills – complete the puzzle and turn it over.

My ears, indeed my whole being, recoils at a piercing claxon of sound that shocks me from my preoccupation. The goddamn fire alarm! And I can smell the smoke. The puzzle will have to wait, a swift exit calls.

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