

A Gift From The Grave



A short story by Dave Hawkins

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Nobody likes funerals, except undertakers and maybe the odd priest. Beneath a grey sky mourners hovered like a collection of sombre gnomes in a gloomy garden, close family lining the open grave, friends and acquaintances at a respectable distance. As a light shower began to fall, a shaft of sunlight speared through a break in the cloud. Patrick watched tiny droplets of water sparkling and smiled - he could almost hear his mother saying: "There's a monkey's birthday, to be sure." A sideways glance confirmed his father didn't share the pleasant reflection. That he would be reminiscing wasn't in doubt, but now that the love of his life had gone, all memories for Brendan O'Connell would be painful and heart-breaking.

Mary being Irish, there was the obligatory wake which her widower attended. At least, he was there in body; his spirit was seemingly elsewhere. The family had expected him to take it hard and thought it might be good for the old man to spend a few days with them. Contrary as always, Brendan met the suggestion with cold indifference. His place, he said, was in the home he and Mary had shared for their entire married life. That was where he was going, and he would prefer to keep his own company. In an attempt to take the edge off his curt reply, he offered a small concession: "I could take Guthrie, if that's alright with you."

There was no need to ask Guthrie. The instant his leash was off the hook he was there, tail wagging, tongue lolling and slurping. When it came to walks, he was anyone's dog. A mutt with a deal of hound in him, he craned his neck and let out a small howl, unusual because he normally only did that if a folk song was playing, hence the name. The instant the clip was on his collar, Guthrie took off, dragging Brendan to the front door. The family stood back, exchanging glances reflecting individual concerns, having to concede that this was the best they were going to get for now.

The non-interference policy didn't last long. It was hoped Brendan might call at some stage to confirm he was okay; but no matter how hard they stared at it, the phone declined to ring. By late afternoon the tension

had become unbearable. Respecting Brendan's wishes for solitude was well and good, but in all conscience they couldn't just leave him to his own devices, so the intention was to commission young Will to go round and check on his grandfather. Music could be heard playing in the boy's room, which was probably why he failed to respond to the knock on the door. His mother entered quietly to see him sobbing on his bed, the strains of a Buddy Holly number echoing from the record player. The singer's recent death was unlikely to be the cause of her son's sadness, but in seconds the lyrics of the song provided the connection and she was crying too. It definitely was raining in her heart, heavily in Will's it would seem. Asking him to revisit more pain was unfair, so Joanne turned to leave without speaking. The record finished before she was through the door, Will's tearful request catching up with her: "I'd like to go to Gran'pa's. I think he might need someone."

On the advice of his parents, he took a shopping bag containing some groceries and dog food, an excuse that Brendan saw through as Will knew he would. "They're just worried about you," the boy explained unnecessarily. "Me too," he added as he watched the old man turn and head for the kitchen. They sat at the table for a long while, Will sipping tea and trying not to betray his dislike for it, Brendan hardly aware that his was untouched and going cold, neither saying a word. The heavy silence was oppressive and in need of breaking. There was a chance Guthrie might oblige. He was by the cupboard minding the bag of food, rustling it with his nose, occasionally turning his head towards the humans with a pretty-please look of anticipation. Sensing the mood of the other two, however, he apparently thought it best to make no sound, not even a whimper. Will figured it was down to him. "I miss her too," he said quietly. The old man reacted with a little jerk, the same as he did when he was dozing off and woke with a start. "Maybe we could talk about Gran'ma the way we used to," the boy continued, "Like after she'd given us a roasting when we'd done something we shouldn't. It would be as if she was still here."

Brendan's eyes were wide, his face colouring as something boiled inside; then his eyelids drooped, bitterness and anxiety under control. "She is, lad," he croaked tenderly. A weathered hand reached for the lace mat under a fruit bowl and his fingers stroked the intricate pattern absently. "For me, she always will be." Then he was staring, at his grandson, through him, eyes misting, blinking to drive away tears he had managed to hold back until now. Maybe he thought the show of emotion would upset the boy; more likely he was afraid for himself, that once begun, the crying would never stop. He almost managed the cover-up until the realisation dawned that true grief wasn't something a person could just turn off when it suited. Not thinking clearly, he rose from the chair rather too quickly and, as he turned, his hand caught the cup sweeping it from the table to shatter on the floor. Her mother's wedding present, Mary had treasured the tea-set and had kept every single item safe over the years, even from her husband's clumsiness. For Brendan the indiscretion epitomised her importance in his life and the bleak, uncertain future he would now have to face without her. Standing motionless, his tears began streaming in rivers. Inevitably, the sadness overwhelmed him and he was sobbing uncontrollably into his hands.

Will stayed the night and managed to convince Brendan to let him hang around for the rest of the week. His parents didn't have a problem with that - there was no more school since he had just graduated and was now awaiting the results of applications for a university place. As a bonus which excused their reluctance to become involved in matters of someone else's heart that made them very uncomfortable, they reasoned the boy had a special relationship with his grandfather; and if anyone could help the old man cope with his grief,

Will was the obvious choice. The way it turned out, it was just as well Brendan wasn't alone, because on Friday the desk arrived.

At the time, Guthrie was dragging him on their morning walk and took about as much notice of the man at the gate as Brendan did of the delivery docket he was presented with. Following a brief scan, he handed it back. "You must have the wrong address," he grumbled. "I didn't order any desk." With that, he let himself be propelled along the street by a dog on a mission, leaving Will to handle the mix-up.

The delivery man was positive the mistake wasn't his. Following a quick check of the address on the docket which tallied with the number on the gate post, he shrugged. "Well, it's definitely for here, all bought and paid for. What do you want I should do?" Will wasn't too sure, but he signed for it anyway and had the man and his assistant carry the desk into the spare room, the one he was using. Sitting on the bed staring at the desk, he was annoyed with himself for not sending it back to the shop and dreading the consequences. There was no doubt it was antique, at least it seemed to be; a beautiful piece of furniture, anyway. Maybe if Brendan had seen it he might have reconsidered his decision to reject it out of hand; how he would react when he discovered Will had taken it in was anyone's guess. The boy continued to fret over the problem until he heard the front door open inflicting a mild, juvenile heart-attack. Tension increased with each advancing footstep until he was almost ready to explode; then they passed by. The sound of his grandfather's door opening and closing seemed to herald a respite, albeit temporary. Guthrie scampering in should have lightened the mood further and Will was ready to defend himself against an onslaught of jumping and licking, but it never came. The dog hesitated in the middle of the room, craned his neck and sniffed the air. Then he was hurrying to the desk. Before he could be stopped, Guthrie was on his hind legs, one foot on the top, the other pawing at the drawer. Will lurched up and hurried over, growling disapproval at the animal; too late, as it happened. The dog pushed off, his claws raking more scratches into the polished surface.

Will fingered the fresh damage, moaning softly. His hand continued on to brush the surface of the top, leaving a shiny trail through the light coating of dust. At some stage it had been restored, judging by previous marks and scratches that had been polished over, so Guthrie's indiscretion wasn't the first, just the most obvious. Will gazed dismally at the gouges then down at the dog. "See what you've done, stupid hair-bag!" Ignoring the insult, Guthrie continued with his fixation on the drawer, sniffing it before sitting back to raise a single paw - his way of begging. Will let out a long sigh conceding defeat. "Okay, I'll open it, but there won't be anything in there a dog would want. It's probably empty..." His prediction died as he pulled out the drawer and found the envelope. Guthrie saw it, spun on the spot in a tight circle and let out a soft whine. Another second and he was straining to push his muzzle closer, tail wagging excitedly. Puzzled by the behaviour, Will drew the envelope up to his own nose, inhaled and felt the sudden eerie tingle of goose-flesh rising.

He had all-but forgotten Lily of the Valley; now it was back to haunt him. The scent used to conjure pictures of old ladies and lace handkerchiefs because it had been his grandmother's favourite: "Just a dab, though," she would advise, then went on to lecture: "Choking people half to death isn't ladylike." Despite her subtle application, the distinctive perfume had still preceded her every arrival; past tense, until that moment. The boy caught himself darting a look behind, almost expecting her to be there, knowing that was impossible, feeling the hollow ache of disappointment when she wasn't. Returning his attention to the

envelope, he read the simple address: *For you, Brendan*. The handwriting looked very much like his Grandmother's as he recalled it, stylishly scripted with a fountain pen - she would never touch a ball-point. This did, at least, condone his acceptance of the delivery as she was, presumably - well pretty much certainly - the one who had bought and paid for the desk; but it also posed two awkward questions: why did his grandfather know nothing about it; and how would he react on receiving what amounted to a gift from the grave?

Realising he couldn't keep the secret forever, Will let it out that evening. Predictably, Brendan ranted, mainly about the inconsideration of young people who seemed incapable of thinking past their noses, pacing and wringing his hands in desperation as he did so. The boy took it on the chin, guessing there was worse to come and waited until the furore died somewhat before presenting the envelope. "This was in the drawer," he mumbled sheepishly. Brendan snatched it and was on the verge of remonstrating once more, imagining it contained the bill for something he had never agreed to buy; then he noticed the message. There was no doubt in his mind who had written it, but maybe it actually was in his mind and not real, just an imaginary straw to clutch in his despair. Eyes that were misting couldn't be trusted, so he blinked hard, wiped them and looked again. Will started to say: "She must have..." cutting short to rush over in support as the old man began to totter. The boy managed to guide him to the bed and helped him sit. Still in disbelief, Brendan stared down at the envelope. Seeing his chance, Guthrie came over to nose it, then let out a soft, encouraging bark. If the turmoil in his head could make sense of nothing else, it must have comprehended dog-speak, because with a trembling hand Brendan opened the flap and withdrew the single, folded sheet of paper. His eyes widened again and tears flowed as he began to read Mary's script:

"You never did like writing, but now that I am gone I am relying on you to stay in touch with family and friends. My pen and address book should be where I left them, so you have no excuse. Knowing you, however, and fully expecting you to find one, I purchased this desk as motivation, a reminder too large to put in a drawer and conveniently forget. I imagine incentive will be hard to come by for you, especially at this time, but you must try, for your sake as well as mine. Perhaps you could practise on a letter to me: that would certainly be a first! Chin up, my one and only love; and mind your spelling."

Following a night of tossing and turning, Brendan decided to keep the desk. Not that he had any intention of complying with Mary's suggestion, but to reject a gift from her was unthinkable. The next-door neighbour helped Will move it into the lounge room. Although formerly a place of fond memories where the two of them had spent many a pleasant evening, for some strange reason the "new" addition changed the ambience, causing Brendan discomfort to the point where he avoided entering the room. Even passing by the door stirred pangs of an illogical fear within. What was he expecting, that Mary would be there, sitting at the desk writing, saying in her pedantic way: "See, Brendan, this is how you do it."? Ever a down-to-earth man, such a thought was nonsense and the need to prove it eventually drove him back to the door. He paused momentarily to swallow deeply, a courage-booster prior to reaching for the door knob. Made of solid brass it was usually cold to the touch; on this occasion, however, it was warm and, dare he think, welcoming...?

Will returned late after a night out with friends and was surprised to see a light still burning in the lounge room. His grandfather was fast asleep on the couch, Guthrie curled up next to him. The dog opened a lazy eye, just briefly; the old man didn't stir at all, probably courtesy of the half-empty bottle of Jameson's on the

coffee table. Will was about to leave when he caught sight of a kitchen chair in front of the desk. Walking over, he discovered a few items on the polished top that tugged at his heart strings. Easily-recognised because he had seen them so often, there was his grandmother's writing case, a box of paper with envelopes, her address book; and as he moved closer the scent of her favourite perfume rose to greet him. Her fountain pen was there too, laying at an angle on a sheet of paper. Presumably his grandfather had succumbed and had started a letter; just started, though. All he had managed to write was "Dear Mary".

Breakfast next day was a surly affair as a hung-over Brendan grumped his way around. Will kept silent, curbing a desire to mention the business with the letter. As it happened, the old man brought up the subject. "It's stupid," he mumbled through his corn flakes, "Writing to a dead person."

A wave of hurtful disappointment flowed through the boy. He had been hoping that his grandfather would eventually learn to cope with his grief, not dismiss it altogether. "Gran'ma won't like you calling her suggestion stupid."

"What's it matter? She's not here to complain, is she?" Brendan snapped irritably.

Will looked across the table and waited until Brendan's eyes met his. "That's not true, Gran'pa," he said, reproachfully. "She is here. For you, for me. You know she is - you said so before."

Long seconds passed through air that was less electric than it was moody, pensive certainly. Finally, Brendan broke the impasse. "Well, I can't write to her sitting at an antique desk on a plastic chair. It's off-putting." Will seized on the moment and, ignoring a barrage of weak protests, dragged his grandfather off to the store.

Shops selling antiques have a feel about them. It isn't so much that they embody strong reflections of yesteryear, more like brief snippets of it; a swan-song effort to retain significance in the continuing present when there is little left of the past to substantiate it. Dining settings, a chaise longue, china cabinets, old clocks and a litter of mis-matched furniture were on display: uncoordinated bits and pieces of different people's lives, former owners now gone perhaps, left-overs unwanted by surviving relatives. These were relics that Brendan glimpsed briefly, his purpose obvious - to *not* find a suitable chair. He almost succeeded and was on his way out when the manager hailed to him from the rear of the store: "Hang on. I've got exactly what you're looking for." He bustled over, eager to make the sale. "It was from the same estate as the desk, but it was away being repaired when your wife came in. I'd forgotten all about it."

Later that day, Brendan was silently cursing the store-manager's memory as he regarded his reluctant purchase. Despite some misgivings, he had to admit the chair went well with the desk, a comfortable reunion contrasting with his lonely separation from Mary. What he was about to do was never likely to change that, but he lowered himself onto the chair anyway. After five minutes of trying he gave up. His inability to pen a single word of interest or otherwise drove him to frustration resulting in an angry sweep of everything on the desk top into the open drawer which he proceeded to slam shut. As inanimate objects do, it refused to comply, choosing to spring open a fraction. Believing the cause to be something that had jumped behind the drawer preventing it from closing, he took it out, placed it on the top, then swept his hand around in the recess. Finding nothing, he puzzled the conundrum and while doing so the mind of a practical man clicked in. The desk top was some twenty inches wide, whereas the drawer-depth was considerably

less. A hand went into the recess, fingers testing the wood at the back. There was resistance, but it moved when pushed. Following a dull click, the panel stayed put. He pushed again. There was another click a little quieter than the first and the strip of wood sprang forward. Further groping located a recessed handle. Very tentatively, he began sliding the secret drawer forward.

Happy mistakes occasionally birth important discoveries; fits of temper, however, tend to spawn less gratifying offspring. At that moment, no such thoughts crossed Brendan's conscious mind, yet for some inexplicable reason he was gripped by a mixture of excitement and apprehension. Was this a result of finding the secret drawer, then instinct telling him to push it back in without looking and forget about it? He shrugged: it was probably empty anyway - a person who had a secret drawer would surely remove the contents before selling the desk. Taking a deep breath, he slid the drawer out to its fullest extent and felt his heart miss a beat. The bundle of envelopes could be love letters, something a woman might keep; the rubber band holding them, however, was suggestive of a man's practicality, a talent Brendan could readily identify with. Also in keeping with his masculinity and the fact that he had always believed reading someone else's mail was simply not done, he dismissed the urge to pry; but only initially. Even a casual glance at an open page alongside failed to weaken his resolve; until his eyes strayed to the closing words - "Forever your loving Mary"!

Brendan's heart missed a beat. Surely this couldn't be another letter from *his* Mary? Personal pride and a hint of jealousy gone in seconds, he skipped back to the beginning. No, it was addressed not to him, but a man named Michael. Momentary relief replaced by growing curiosity, he began reading, promising that if it became too intimate or even mushy, he would go no further. Coincidentally, the words and sentence structure were so similar to the way his Mary wrote - used to write, he corrected - that the letter might actually have been from her, except for the script which was close to copperplate. This woman had been from Ireland too and was presumably still there. Past tense, he decided after a quick skip to the date at the top - 9th February 1912. To begin with she was concerned over the need to send this latest letter, not to Michael's address but to that of his friend. Despite there being nothing in her recent letters to be ashamed of, she was disappointed Michael had not received them and was apologetic of harbouring unkind feelings towards his sister whom, they assumed, had apparently intercepted them. She went on to add that, although she could not understand why his sister disliked her so, she only hoped Cynthia would relent and come to terms with their forthcoming marriage.

He paused and sat back. His relationship with Mary had never been beset by such trials, but it was not hard to imagine how opposition of this nature could damage even the strongest of unions. Based on his reading of the last line, the writer remained optimistic and this ought to have encouraged him to continue. The only problem now was that the rest of the letter might not resolve the issue; and as anyone knows who has been intrigued by a mystery but has missed the conclusion, assumption is a poor substitute for the truth. Despite the strong possibility that he would have to suffer a cliff-hanger, Brendan returned to where he had left off.

The next lines were more positive. In four weeks she would leave for England and, once there, she would be counting the days to the time her ship sailed for New York. Then, she added, there would be little Cynthia could do to destroy their future happiness when they were finally together again. The knot that had formed in Brendan's stomach began to untie as she reflected expectations of the wonderful adventure on which she

as an Irish country girl was about to embark, one that would turn the dreams of long, lonely months into reality. Especially, she continued, because she was about to be part of history-in-the-making as one of the first passengers on the maiden voyage of The Titanic...

Brendan recalled little of what transpired next until the following morning. He had obviously made it to his bed where he awoke, eyes bloodshot and head booming. An object kicked across the carpet on his way out was the apparent cause for his condition - an empty whisky bottle, another one. Mary would not approve. Saying her name, if only just in his thoughts, triggered vague reflections of a strange evening, but it was mist-enshrouded, perhaps a figment of imagination.

The only item on the desktop was a framed photograph of Mary in her younger days before their wedding. Brendan guessed he must have taken it from his room and put it there, maybe for inspiration; also, perhaps, because he had heard that memories fade quickly, something he could not afford to happen. He did remember clearing the mess in a fit of exasperation and checked in the drawer. It was tidy: paper and envelopes placed neatly on the left, writing case in the centre, address book on the right, ink bottle at the back; no sign of either Mary's pen or his unfinished letter, though. What about the secret drawer - did it actually exist, had he opened it, or was that merely a fantasy too? A push of the main drawer disturbed butterflies in his stomach when it sprang out a couple of inches. Wings began flapping madly at the sight of his letter laying in the wooden tray. It continued on from much more than his original "Dear Mary" for almost the entire page. He had even signed off on it. With a frown, Brendan picked up the single sheet and started to read what amounted to an impassioned plea - surely not him? Anger and petulance certainly, but sensitivity never!

The emotion was uncharacteristic, the content puzzling at first. A pause and a glimpse at the letter still in the drawer unlatched the door of recollection and the draught it released almost bowled him over. A glance back to his own words and a quick scan through brought it all back. The word Titanic jumped out at him, then the tragedy of lives lost on its fateful voyage; one in particular - that of Mary Riley. As soon as he had read that she intended to be on board he had wanted to scream across the miles, back through the years: "No Mary! Don't take the ship, please don't!" In sheer panic, he had snatched up his wife's pen intending to write those very words begging this other Mary to change her plans and book a later passage on a vessel that *would* reach its destination. He had begun in this way, but as the letter progressed, it was obvious his desperate appeal had switched to his own Mary: "She was as alive when she wrote this as she is to me now when I read it. Surely there must be some way to get through to her? You of all people could surely prevent this terrible tragedy from happening, even though it already has. You always were able to fix things that couldn't be fixed, Mary. If there was ever a time that you should, this is it."

Under normal circumstances he might have been embarrassed by this foolishness; what he actually felt was apologetic. Not bad enough that he had written to his lost love as if she were still alive, he was asking her to perform a miracle and change the past. Brendan unscrewed the cap from Mary's pen and started a PS, intending to add how sorry he was to shoulder her with an impossible burden. He paused to look up at her photo. Mary had never liked her picture being taken, claiming she wasn't photogenic. Brendan had used up an entire roll of film to prove her wrong, all for a single shot that was barely half-decent. Even then, it was patently obvious that the pleasant expression was put on for his benefit. Strangely, the smile she returned now from her frame was anything but forced. It radiated genuine warmth and the soft reassurance that all

would be well. Accepting this to be one of her talents that would not, could not ever die, he put pen to paper and wrote simply: "I love you."

Over a week elapsed before Brendan wrote to Mary again. He told himself it was therapy, simply a matter of jotting down the confusion of thoughts which had been plaguing him for days. The fate of Mary Riley had seemed fairly plain at first. She would have drowned along with so many others. Then again, he had reasoned in hope, some had survived the disaster, so there was a slim chance that she had been one of them. This being true, she and Michael could have met up and married. Perhaps they were still living, although the desk seemed to indicate one or both had passed away: the man at the store hadn't actually used the word, but "deceased" usually preceded "estate". The more he wondered, the more he needed to know, so he left the letter unfinished to ask Will to do some research for him without telling the boy exactly why. "Just curiosity," he explained, trying to sound casual. "I read something about this woman the other day and wondered if she had survived, that's all. I could go down the library myself if you've got better things to do."

Whether he had or not, Will agreed to help, but his findings were less than Brendan hoped for. According to the passenger list, nobody called Riley had sailed on Titanic. Mary could, of course, have boarded under a different name, or she might have used someone else's ticket; both, however, seemed unlikely. In the absence of satisfactory documentation, leg-work was the obvious alternative

Although the manager of the antique store was prepared to confirm the desk to be part of a deceased estate, he remained adamant that it was unethical to divulge the address. All he would say was that it came from a house in Queens. That rang a bell. Brendan raced home to check Mary Riley's envelopes, just the top one because it was all he could read, having left them secured by the rubber band, a mark of respect for the couple's privacy. Sure enough, it had been sent to a place in Queens, a piece of the puzzle that should have been obvious but had been overlooked. So, what about Michael's friend's address? If the original one bombed out, maybe that might prove useful.

Researching records was only likely to add more questions to a growing list so, deciding on the direct approach Brendan and Will took the subway to Queens, then caught a cab. Michael's house was old-style and had been well cared for; it was also up for sale. Although he had expected as much, Brendan sighed his disappointment anyway and climbed out of the taxi. At the same moment, the front door of the house opened and a group of people oozed out. Brendan intercepted them on their way to the cars parked in the drive and spoke to a lady wearing a business suit and carrying a folder bearing the real estate agent's logo. "Michael Robinson may have lived here," she replied in answer to his enquiry, "But the house was owned by a Cynthia Robinson: probably a relative. I'm afraid Cynthia passed away two months ago." She was less courteous following Brendan's next question: "No, I can't tell you that. The seller is none of your business. Who are you, anyway?"

Defeat reluctantly accepted, the pair trudged back to the cab and asked the driver to drop them off at the closest diner. Conversation over coffee and donuts did nothing to revive their earlier optimism, merely confirmed that Perry Mason definitely was pure TV fiction and real-life investigations by ordinary folk were, in comparison, destined to go nowhere. That they had to keep on, however, wasn't an option. Surely they were closer to a conclusion of sorts? A waitress with a strong Bronx accent sauntered over and asked if

they wanted a coffee refill, casually adding through a mouthful of gum: "Hey guys - live dangerously. What you got to lose? It's free this week." She feigned professional happiness over their dumb smiles and nods. The insincerity went unnoticed, but the essence of her words sparked renewed motivation: no, there was nothing to lose by continuing, as long as one discounted perfect satisfaction at the end of it all; and the search was costing only cab and train fares, plus the first coffee, of course; as for living dangerously, what was likely to befall them - death by rocking chair? The lone fly in the ointment was timing - if they just had one week to take advantage of the refill, would a straight black be enough to do the trick?

Michael's friend was no longer at the place Mary Riley had sent her last letter, but he had only recently moved and the new owner was able to provide a forwarding address. Frank's story clarified the situation both past and present and added an interesting twist: "By some chance of fate, Mary cancelled her ticket on the Titanic and sailed on a later ship. They married and lived happily in Brooklyn until both of them found independence too hard and they went into a nursing home."

"What about the desk?" asked Will impatiently, "Why were Mary's letters still in the secret drawer?"

Frank shrugged. "Michael left his sister's and stayed with me until Mary arrived. He was in a terrible state to begin with following news of the sinking and probably wasn't thinking straight. Needless to say, he was over the moon when her next letter arrived with the good news. She was all Michael cared about. The desk was obviously still at Cynthia's, but Michael didn't mention it and he never spoke to his sister again after that. She probably didn't know it had a secret drawer. Guaranteed if she had, judging by the kind of person she was, the letters wouldn't have been left in it."

"The nursing home," said Brendan, "I'd like to return the letters to Michael. I think it's only right."

Frank sighed. "Sorry, but you're too late. Michael died six months ago. Mary's still there, though. You could give them to her."

Brendan was unsure. "How do you think she'd take that? After all, a complete stranger reading her mail...?"

"Did you?" asked Frank bluntly.

"Well, no. Only the last letter, the one about the Titanic."

"So, where's the problem?"

As it turned out there wasn't one. Mary Riley was a treasure. Although slightly younger than Brendan, she had suffered tuberculosis and was riddled with arthritis which made her seem much older than her years. Despite her disabilities, however, she was bright as a new penny and so glad to receive the bundle of envelopes. "Oh, my," she said, "I never expected to see these again." She smiled and looked up when the rubber band snapped as she tried to remove it. "A ribbon would have been better, but Michael was..." Her thoughts drifted to memories of her man and precious moments shared with him. A brief sigh returned her to the present. She looked at Brendan, rocked her head from side to side as if dissecting and analysing him. "Why did you really come? What was it - curiosity, a sense of duty or intrigue, what...?"

"I...," Brendan started, then paused to regroup. "Duty in a way, yes, to start with; but it was more than that. I don't know if I should tell you and before I do, if I do, I need to know something." He paused again to focus on Mary's eyes beneath the gentle frown that had begun to form. "What was your reason for not boarding Titanic? Were you taken ill, or did some other complication crop up suddenly?"

Mary didn't answer immediately. Frail hands fumbled awkwardly in a crocheted bag on her lap until she found what she was looking for. She passed Brendan the envelope. "It was because of this. I didn't know the person who sent it, so I have no idea what possessed her to; and although I was eager to be with Michael as soon as I could, I found myself held back by the predictions in the letter. How she could have known what was to happen I have no idea. I am only glad that I believed her."

Brendan was trying to read through but finding it hard. The writing was Mary's - *his* Mary's! - warning of the impending disaster, quoting two more incidents that would occur beforehand – the coal-miners' strike and the death of Robert Scott's team in the Antarctic. What more proof was needed, Mary asked, for her Titanic prediction to be taken very seriously? Mary Riley's soft voice seeped through the turmoil in his mind: "It has faded now, but the letter retained the scent of Lily of the Valley for years. I shall miss that. It saved my life and gave me a wonderful future with Michael. If ever there was a saint, this Mary was one." She glanced at Brendan to see tears trickling over his cheeks. "You know her, don't you?" The question was rhetorical. "O'Connell," she mused, "I think you said that was your name. Was she a relative, your grandmother, perhaps?" She paused briefly and when no reply was forthcoming said: "No matter. Although she remains a stranger, she was and is someone very special to me. I suppose she has passed away by now which is cause of much regret because I shall never be able to thank her."

Following the meeting with Mary Riley, Brendan was experiencing a sense of emptiness. Will couldn't help but notice. "Don't imagine she's gone, Gran'pa," he said, "Just because this job's finished. It's my guess she'll hang around for a while yet. Why don't you write her and ask?" The boy waited in anticipation.

The old man pondered the suggestion, but only for a moment or two. With a nod, Brendan wandered off in the direction of the lounge room muttering to himself: "She's probably waiting to find out what went on. Not that she doesn't know already, but she'll expect chapter and verse anyway." He hesitated in the doorway and added with a cheeky smirk: "I might even make a couple of deliberate spelling mistakes, just to gee her up a bit."

THE END

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