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The Cardboard Box

by Sue Hitchcock

There is a place where the counties of Surrey, Berkshire and Hampshire meet, but it isn't near Leatherhead, Mr. Conan-Doyle. It's a place I know well. The London Road, now called the A30, in Camberley runs westward towards Basingstoke and is crossed at the border next to the river Blackwater by the road to Farnborough and Aldershot to the south and to Woking in the north. The north-west corner is occupied by the Sandhurst Military Academy, convenient for the army barracks at Aldershot. Now the area around is largely commercial development.

In College Town, where Sandhurst adjuncts were housed, my cousin, Brenda lives. As children we spent all our school vacations together and we were taken for twins, she blonde and I brunette, but so similar. Even now, my voice sounds just like hers, and now we seldom meet, but phone on birthdays and Christmas. Her brother, my cousin Laurence Castledine always frightened me a little, being the mad, scientist type, even as a child. He was hyperactive too. The last time I saw him at Brenda's house, he had made a seed cake, caraway seed, having learned to cook, bachelor as he was.

Brenda called me on my last birthday, but she didn't sound right.

"What's up, Brenda?"

She had received by special delivery a cardboard box. She hadn't ordered anything and was loath to open it, as it had come from Seaford. I had lived in Seaford, but that was before Laurence had been admitted to a home there, when his senile dementia became unmanageable. He was a big man and liked to go out to his local, but always he would take with him something of value from home. Sometimes he would give them away to fellow drinkers – a wristwatch, a compass, the sort of thing a scientific fellow might have.

Occasionally he would hide them in the woods by the Basingstoke canal, where he lived. Then he started to wander afield and the Police would have to be called to find him. The home in Seaford was chosen because Brenda's son lived nearby.

All that had happened several years ago and his possessions, what was left of them, had been returned. Brenda was wary about the package, though she was sure it related to her brother, so I agreed to visit the following day. The train journey was so familiar, from Eastbourne through Gatwick and Redhill, from where the slow train edged along the sunny side of the north downs, turning northwards at Ash where Laurence used to live, to meander between the Blackwater river and the Basingstoke canal up to Sandhurst. Brenda's house reminded me why I had resisted a closer friendship with her as we grew up. The garden was awash with bright bedding plants and the lawn was immaculate. The doorbell chimed a little tune, and Brenda opened it, dressed neatly in this year's best from Marks and Spencer. She was so proper. Nevertheless she looked worried.

Tea and homemade cake were offered, but pride of place on the coffee table was commanded by the cardboard box. It was only six inches square and no taller than the china teacups, but we couldn't take our eyes off it. Finally I picked it up and shook it.

"What if it's a grenade?" squealed Brenda.

"Too late! That'll be our lot."

It felt quite heavy, could be a big pebble from Seaford beach.

"Open it, silly! I'll hold your hand."

Brenda was trembling, I noticed, and I wanted to laugh.

"Oh, ...well, it is Laurence's camera. I brought you all this way for nothing."

"Wait a bit, there's a note."

Brenda read in silence and a frown deepened between her eyes.

"Dear Mrs Jackson,

Please forgive my delay in returning your brother's camera. Your married name made you difficult to trace and I did not know your brother well. We had sat chatting at the Tidemills, along the beach from your brother's residence. It could have been on only the third occasion that he insisted I should take his camera as a gift. I planned to return it, but finding it was one of the old-fashioned cameras, which use film, now difficult to obtain or develop, I decided to revive my own skills and develop the film myself. You will find the prints enclosed, but I have taken the liberty of keeping the negatives and ask you to consider what they might be worth to you, or to the Police."

Brenda was shuffling through the photos, hesitating now and then.

"Surely Laurence didn't have any deadly secrets?"

“He might have, when he was working, but why would I pay to preserve his reputation, now he is dead? What this blackmailer doesn’t know is that my son is a policeman. I should have called him first. He’ll track him down.”