

The Letter

by Judith Horth

It was a relief to get back home, although the place did seem very empty. I missed Mum but boy, was it nice to be able to do what I wanted. I had the bright idea of giving Gran's old room a clear out. It was about time – she'd been dead for years I don't think Mum had been in there since Gran died.

The room smelt of lavender, the bed was made and one of Gran's dresses hung on a hanger outside the wardrobe. It was one she intended to wear on the day she died – she'd fallen in the shower; slipped on a piece of soap, banged her head and that was the end. She never got to wear that dress again. There was something creepy about it hanging there, as if she would walk in at any minute – I had to put it away.

That's when I saw the box. It was full of papers, mostly letters, handwritten and fading, tied in bundles. I tipped them out on the bed, picked up the first bundle and tore off the string that bound them. They were love letters, from my grandfather, George, to Greta. It was a shock to see them. Gran always said that when Grandad died she had got rid of all trace of him – "I couldn't bear to be reminded of him," she had said, "and besides, the past is the past – best forgotten about." It made Mum so sad that she had so few memories of her father.

"My own dear girl," George wrote, and it was so weird to think that Gran had once been a girl, let alone one that anybody could love. "My darling," "My own sweetheart," – they were full of endearments and jokes, but there was something else there too – at times he seemed puzzled or hurt by something she must have done or said. "My darling, I am so grateful you decided to forgive me," one of them said, "and I promise that if you marry me I will try never to upset you in that way again."

There was a bundle of wedding invitation acceptances, newspaper cuttings and postcards, together with a checklist of "Wedding Gifts Received" and "Thank-You Letters Sent". A faded, fragile sheet of newsprint carried details of their wedding and a photograph of the bride and groom as they exited the church. They looked happy.

That clearly didn't last. There were more letters. These began to take on a very different tone – apologetic because of his need to be away on business, hurt, when he had received a less than loving letter from her, angry when she complained that their house was too small and worried when she told him that “Little Marguerite continues to be a wilful and wayward child.”

The last letter, crumpled and torn, read “Dear Greta, I have tried so hard to be the kind of husband you wished for, but I know that I have failed and that our marriage brings you no happiness. Neither does it bring me any joy, which is why I must tell you that I cannot go on any longer with this pretence. Greta, I have found love with another woman – I will not give you any details of who she is, where we met and so on – all that will, no doubt, come out. It must come as no surprise to you that I wish to obtain a divorce...Oh Greta, I have tried and tried to tell you this, but you would not hear it, so I have had to resort to writing it in a letter because paper has more patience than people and even if, at first, you screw this up and throw it away, I know that you will still come back to it and that one day you will read it.”

It made no sense. Gran said that Grandad had died when Mum was five, but the date on this letter didn't match with that at all. Did that mean that he had not died? Had he been alive all through Mum's childhood, and had Gran deliberately kept her daughter from seeing the father she adored? I felt sick.