

## The Old Shoebox

I looked around in disgust at the accumulation of junk dumped in the double garage over a span of twenty years. Back from overseas as a journalist, I'd shifted in with Mum and Dad to look after them as they grew older. Two decades later I was still here and so, thankfully, were they. And so was the junk. It had got to the stage where I could barely fit my tiny car in the garage, and mine was the only vehicle to still use it.

On a cool and comfortable Autumn morning I checked that my parents were comfortable, finished my coffee, and dressed in my oldest clothes, grabbed gloves, broom, insect spray and a couple of large garbage bags, marching purposefully down the stairs of this dear old house ready for the big clean out.

Starting in the nearest corner the hours flew by and the garbage bags were quickly filled. Too much for the rubbish bins, I thought, wondering how many trips to the dump would see the piles of useless items gone. And I'd only done one corner!

As I made lunch for my parents I asked them why they had kept this stuff for so long and shook my head in patient disbelief at their response that you 'never knew when things might be useful.' Oh, boy.

Nibbling on a sandwich I gazed at corner number two, ready for action. I'm just like my father, I thought with amusement. It takes me a long time to get going, but once I start nothing stops me until the job is done. I paused for a moment to think about my Dad. He'd always been my best friend, which made Mum rather jealous at times. Dad and I had so much in common - we shared the same sense of humour, honesty and values. I could talk to him about anything and everything. I loved my Mum too but sometimes I caught her staring at me and wondered what she was thinking about. She always denied that she was staring but it made me feel a bit odd. They were both getting on and I dreaded the day when I'd lose them. But enough of that! Back to work.

I delved through the piles of rubbish, thankful that I was wearing thick gloves as I brushed aside dead spiders, cockroach faeces, scuttling silverfish, cobwebs and dirt. The musty smell was rather overpowering and I coughed as each box revealed unwanted trivia, or at least that's how I regarded it.

The pile to be dumped grew bigger as the sorting accelerated into a mania of checking and chucking, giving scant attention to the contents of each box as I made a decision about its importance. I looked at my watch, ready to call it a day in ten minutes. 'Yet another box in the very back,' I muttered crossly as I bent my aching back towards an old, yellowed shoebox wedged under a support beam.

I tugged at the box, clawing at its corners, grunting with frustration before I finally wrested it from its hideaway and dragged it towards the front. I bent to pick it up and found that I could barely lift it! 'How could all this stuff *ever* be useful?' I growled

into the corner. Dragging the box out I let it drop to the floor, its contents spilling out like a fan.

There before me was a pile of letters and a small photograph album. Intrigued, I pulled up an old chair and decided to investigate. The album drew my attention first, and I was puzzled to see photographs of a beautiful young woman with a man who I'd not seen before. Her face laughed up at him as his eyes gazed tenderly at her. Photo after photo, unnamed and undated, showed the pair, so obviously in love.

There was something about the young woman that drew me to wonder who she was. She reminded me of photographs I'd seen of my mother when she was young, but seeing as the man was not my dad, it couldn't be her.

I opened one of the letters, fragile and faded by the years, the writing barely legible, and started to read, saying the beautiful words of love softly. The letter was written to an Evelyn by someone called Arthur. Evelyn was my mother's name but I still couldn't understand that these letters might be for her because my father's name was Bill.

But then why were they here? I read on. The story unfolded of two lovers, married to other people, who had shied away from divorce that was such a social stigma in the 1950's. Aghast, I read the tragic, shocking story of the lovers, their anguish, their hopelessness, their betrayal. Then I stiffened with shock as I finally realised that I was reading the story of my own mother's betrayal of my beloved father. I was numb. I searched through letter after letter for more evidence. I read that this Arthur was a journalist, like me, and a foreign correspondent during the Korean War.

The letters stopped and I searched through the pile, wondering if there was a death certificate for him. In an envelope bearing the government's logo I found a certificate and opened it, hoping to find out a little more about Arthur.

Instead I was gazing at my own birth certificate, which had never been located despite many searches through the bureau upstairs where all important documents were kept. "Margaret Mary Johnson, born 6 May, 1952, Brisbane General Hospital, mother Evelyn Margaret Johnson, father Arthur Frederick Kidstone." I'd found who Arthur was - he was my father!

I couldn't breathe, I couldn't feel, I could only stare in horror. I felt betrayed by my own mother; I felt my father's betrayal. Did he know? I started to cry, my racking sobs loud in my ears, but I was unable to stop. I didn't hear the footsteps coming down the stairs, and didn't know that my father was by my side until I felt his arm around my shoulders. I tried to cover the birth certificate, the letters and the album but he took them away from me and gently pulled me up from the seat to fold me in his arms.

"Maggie, I've known all these years. Hush, darling, don't cry." He stroked my face and kissed me, then raised my head to look up into his own loving face. "Maggie, you are my daughter, even though you don't bear my genes. It is a very sad story and your mother needed me to help her with the pain of losing the man she really loved.

Over the years, however, she has come to love me, as much as I love her. We have had a good life and best of all we have you. You have been our purpose in life. Thank you, darling."

I looked at him in wonder, at this man with the ability to forgive such a deep hurt. I loved him so much. "You need a medal, dad," I said huskily.

He smiled gently. "No medal needed. Maggie, while I am not the one who gave you life, I have prepared you for life. That is the greatest reward of all."

Together we put the letters, album and certificate in the box and lifted it back to its original hiding place. Nothing needed to be said.

*(Helen Goleby)*