

THE BOX
By
SUSAN SHAW

Emily was very reluctant to sort the desk out that had belonged to her grandmother. It had taken some doing, going through the rest of the house. Emily had not known about this grandmother until a solicitor had notified her that she had been left a large house and contents. Somehow a desk was very personal. Finally, she plucked up courage and decided to open the bottom drawer first. “Ah, what a pretty box,” she said out aloud, at seeing the vintage wooden box.

It was very strange to see her unknown grandmother’s writing, on a piece of paper in front of her, and the words ‘Dear Emily’, on it. She had to read on to see if her benefactor told her anything of interest about her own life, so she could better understand what had happened.

If you are reading this letter then I will be dead and you’ll be in possession of the house.

No doubt, at this moment in time, you are sorting my desk out. Yom will have wondered, I’m sure, why I left the house to you.

I want to explain myself then you may understand things a lot clearer.

I was the only child of Mildred and George Hartwell. I’d a happy childhood as my parents were very much in love with each other, creating a very caring environment for me to be brought up in.

I wouldn’t say I was particularly close to one or the other of my parents as I loved them both equally. I never went short; there was always plenty of money for the little luxuries of life.

Sadly, when I was fourteen my father was knocked down by one of the motor cars we all had to get used to in our lives.

It was a cruel irony, as he had survived the 1914-1918 war without any injury whatsoever. Mother and I had thought ourselves very lucky to get him back unscathed.

It was a tremendous shock for both of us when he died from his injuries. Mother was beside herself with grief and shut me out of her life.

I went through a spell where I thought she was blaming me somehow for what had happened. I wasn’t old enough to understand it was only part of her grief. But my own life was equally devastated by the loss of my lovely, kind and gentle father. Then on top of that it felt as if I’d also lost my mother in the accident.

I soon learnt it best to keep out of my mother’s way when she was in one of her black moods. It therefore came as a great shock, when eighteen months after my father’s death, she announced she was going to get married to Albert Robertson. It was through the church that they had met.

Albert insisted that I became known as his child, which seemed terrible to me, just casting my memories of my beloved father to one side in that fashion. Actually, he wasn’t half as dreadful as I imagined he would be. But nobody could replace my father. It turned

out Albert was a widower and had one son about my age. His wife had died many years previously when the son was only a young child. One of Albert's sisters had helped him bring up the boy. Looking back, I think she rather resented the marriage and my mother upsetting her life like it did.

Henry - that was my step-brother's name, was a very attractive young man with an equally pleasant nature. By some twist of fate, we seemed thrown together in each other's company as much to my surprise my mother had only eyes for Albert, just as she'd been with my father, but this time leaving me out of their affection. After the love between my mother and father, I never thought she was capable of such love again, but it appears she was.

The next part of my story is difficult to tell and I'm only glad I won't be around to see your reaction. Nobody but Albert, Henry, my mother and obviously I know the secret, but Henry and I became closer than step-brother or sister. There I've said it and no doubt totally shocked you with this statement. But don't think too badly of me, it resulted from the circumstances, although I know I have to also take some blame for what happened. But on the other hand, if you do take after me you may be more liberal in your views than many people even, in this modern day and age. You could well imagine what would have happened had this story got out when I was young. I'm sure I'd have been in a mental institution for the rest of my life.

So yes, we became lovers and your mother was the result of the union. Albert and my mother were appalled that I was pregnant and using very persuasive means, found out who the father of the baby was.

I was quickly despatched to Preston to give birth, then subsequently have the baby adopted. There was no such thing as a single mum. So as far as they were concerned it was better for me to go away, have it adopted and nobody in their locality would be any the wiser.

I must say this was very much against my wishes and Henry's for that matter. In those days a young lady in that situation had no say whatsoever in the matter, and had to be thankful not to be put away in a home for the mentally disturbed for the rest of her life.

I was very sad at the loss of the child - the lovely baby girl I had given birth to - your mother. By the time I arrived back home, Henry had vanished. It was only many years later I found out he had been vanquished to a life on the seas and none of us ever heard anything from him ever again. I often think about him and how he fared, as he was such a lovely, gentle young man. Did he survive the harsh life of a sailor? Who knows? That will never be answered now but I have never forgotten him and our love. I suppose today the way I felt after the birth and handing over of the baby would be described as depression, but at that time my mother and Albert thought I had gone slightly mad. Thankfully, because of what they saw as the shame attached to it, they did keep me at home and nursed me themselves so as to hide the fact of my illness. As I said earlier, they had done everything to keep me out of a mental institution so they didn't want it to happen because of the illness. Thankfully, with peace and quiet, I slowly recovered my senses but never regained enough confidence to enjoy the social circles as I should have in that age.

As mother and Albert grew older both kept poor health so I took it upon myself to nurse them, as I saw it as my punishment for my earlier sinful life. Besides which, they hadn't deserted me in my time of need. By the time they both died, I found out to my shock and horror that all the money my father had left had been used up.

So, I'm afraid I can't leave you much inheritance apart from the house. I've had to sell most things of value to supplement my meagre pension. There are a couple of things I've left you. If you look in the same drawer where you found this letter you will find a small secret compartment.

In there are two pieces of jewellery which I have been led to believe are valuable. They belonged to my mother. I tried my best to hang on to these so I could leave them to you.

Do as you please with them. Don't think because I kept them that you have to. I only wanted to leave them to you so you would have something of worth to sell, should you need to do so, in order to do with the house as you will.

All I ask is that you lead a happier life than I have and you make the house full of fun and laughter as it deserves to be.

Don't think too badly of me after all I have revealed to you.

Your ever-loving grandmother - Elena.

By the time Emily had finished reading the letter, she was sobbing her heart out for the sadness of this old lady and the very unhappy life she'd obviously led. The tears became mingled with tears of sadness for herself.