

The Letter by B.P.Smythe

Moira picked up the letter from the door mat. The envelope showed a number of faded crossed out addresses, some redirected, including mail stickers in foreign languages. There was no name, only Moira's address was clearly visible. It looked like someone passing it on had written it in block capitals with a felt tip pen.

She carefully slit open the envelope. It had an Australian stamp. The letter started off with *Dear Twigs*. Moira sat down slowly staring at the date at the top of the page: 1975 in clear handwriting. There was no mistake, the letter had been written seventeen years ago. She took a sip of coffee.

It was a clear April morning and piercing sunrays slanted in through the kitchen window. The smell of bacon still lingered from the morning breakfast that she and her husband had shared earlier. Geoffrey had gone on his morning jog to get the papers; still keeping up his 1992 new years keep-fit resolution.

Geoffrey and Moira were in their late thirties and had both been married before; neither having had children from previous relationships. They had only lived in their six bed house for seven months, since 1991; the year they met and got married after a short whirlwind romance.

It was Geoffrey who persuaded Moira to buy the property because of its ideal location; backing on to Nonsuch park. He'd always lived in the area and had fallen in love with the house. Geoffrey had convinced Moira it was a sound investment, also it oozed success and felt it befitted his status. After ten years he was now a senior partner.

The road was situated within a private gated estate. It was quiet and sophisticated. Manicured. Very much upper middle class with the right sort of cars in the driveways. Aston Martin's, Bentley Continental's, even the odd Rolls'. Symbols of success. Preening

themselves with their walnut and leather interiors.

Now aged 38, Geoffrey felt he had worked hard to get where he was. Moira though, after fifteen years in nursing, had packed up work. He wanted her to. He had firm views on that. She was an executive's wife. His salary comfortably cushioned the loss of a second income. And it gave him pleasure that she socialised with other wives of her financial standing.

They had a housekeeper and a gardener. So Moira's days were filled with the social whirl of the health club. Bridge in the afternoon. Ladies four at golf. Manicures and hairdressers; the odd lunch with the girls at the Royal Automobile Club. And of course, her favourite of all: oil painting. She even had a bedroom upstairs converted to a studio.

Like Moira loved to paint, Geoffrey loved his wild life. Their recent holidays were spent on Safari. Home movies of Kruger National Park filled the drawing room sideboard; while two huge elephant tusks mounted on a thick mahogany base stood proudly in their large hall next to a Leopard skin rug. Moira never stepped on the rug. She felt it would demean such a proud animal. Her opinion was it would have looked better on the original owner than on their expensive marble flooring.

She poured another coffee and wiped her glasses. The steam from the drink misting up the lenses. The handwriting in the letter was clear and legible. Young looking, perhaps educated.

It congratulated the person it was addressed to on winning the poem competition. The letter referred to the 1975 Ewell College prize giving ceremony and the book tokens *Twigs* had won on coming first. Near the end of the first page the writer highlighted that she had worked it out from the poem where it was hidden in her bedroom; she had sussed it from the poems last paragraph.

The last sentence began, *You clever girl Twigs, I bet you've hidden it in...*

Moira continued to the next page. But it didn't make sense. Then she realised it was page three, the last page. At the bottom it was signed *regards Jennifer*. Moira looked again in the envelope but found nothing. Page two was missing. Perhaps left out by mistake on its re-directed journey around the world.

Many hands had tampered with the envelope over the years. Young hands. Old hands. Forgetful thinking hands? *But what was hidden?* She thought. *What did it mean?* Moira glanced at the sound of the front door opening.

"It's only me! I got you a *Woman's Own*". Geoffrey came into the kitchen slightly out of breath with a clutch of newspapers under his arm. "Good news or bad?" Eyeing his wife with the letter.

"Neither really," she said, handing it to Geoffrey. "I don't understand, the postman delivered it while you were out. Can you believe, it was posted in 1975?"

"You're joking?" He put on his glasses and studied the letter. Moira waited patiently with her eyes on Geoffrey's face.

He looked pale and his hand slightly shook while holding the page. Probably still recovering from his jog to the newsagents, she thought. Also long hours at the office. Even bringing work home had made him look tired recently. But he wouldn't listen to easing up. Geoffrey was a dyed in the wool company man.

"So, who was *Twigs*?" He said looking up. "Where's the other page? Why was it addressed here?"

Moira just shrugged.

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In 1975 Annabel had just celebrated her eighteenth birthday. One of her presents had been a large leather bound diary. Annabel was a diary person. Always had been; wrote in one religiously every day. To Annabel a diary was important, she never went anywhere without

one. She either carried it under her arm or it was always in her shoulder bag. With exception, on walks, she let Zita carry it in her mouth. Her pet Golden Labrador.

Annabel put everything in her diary. Her thoughts. Ideas. Feelings. All food for a budding poet. She loved poetry. It captivated her. She would read Shakespeare, Milton, Blake, Byron, Tennyson, Browning. Greek poetry. First world war or contemporary poetry. It was all consumed with a ravenous hunger. It was her life blood.

As a student it was Annabel's chosen career to teach literature, with a burning ambition to write a book of poems and get published. She had done well in her 'O' Levels and gone to Ewell college to study 'A' Level poetry and literature.

Her older sister was away at nursing college in Bristol. So the parents only got to see *her* at odd weekends or holidays. With Annabel they were pleased she had chosen to study locally.

Earlier in the year Annabel had won first prize in the Ewell college poetry competition. The theme of the poem had to be about something you cherish and up to 500 words. She'd thought of her diary straight away. At that moment it was her most cherished possession. It was her confidant, best friend, big sister, second mum, a substitute boyfriend. All these things rolled into one.

Annabel had called her poem *My Secret Place*. As a little twist, she told close friends she had left clues in the verse that describe where her diary was kept hidden.

How all this secrecy came about was due to her mum. While she was at college Annabel's mother had gotten to visiting her bedroom. After reading too many tabloids and watching too much television her mother had got it in her head that every female student was a cannabis smoking, alcohol swigging, pill popping nymphomaniac; and her worry boarded on the hysteria.

Looking for drugs, contraceptives, booze or even cigarettes? She rummaged through

drawers, searched in the wardrobe, under the mattress; but found nothing. Of course her mother meant well; but Annabel, like all teenagers when they reach a certain age, wanted her privacy.

Annabel used to set little traps for her, so she always knew when her mother had been nosey. Clear Sellotape was very effective when discreetly laid across doors and drawers. The problem was hiding the bulky diary. Although nearly always with her, there were times when she had to put her trust in God and keep it covered up in her bedroom. Then, at last she had a brain wave, the perfect hiding place was found. Her mother would never dream of looking there.

Annabel was slim and petite with red hair from her mother's side. At 5ft 4ins she had the figure for shorts. Annabel knew she looked good. A girl gets to know from the glances. At this moment in time there wasn't a boyfriend; although her interest had increased since she started college.

On Saturday afternoon, wearing the latest fashionable hot-pants and a skimpy top, Annabel walked down her back garden path carrying a small fold up chair with her shoulder bag swinging from the hip. Her dog padded ahead with the diary in its mouth.

The weather forecast for August 1975 was warm and sunny. So, after chasing sticks and her favourite ball for an hour, Zita was quite happy to lay at Annabel's feet.

Annabel had parked herself in her favourite spot surrounded by dense Hawthorn and Juniper trees, just out of sight from her parents back gate on the south east side of Nonsuch park. It was a quiet place, away from the steady drone of traffic. Only broken by the chatter of finches and magpies. Being well away from the path no one ventured here. Now she was in one of her creative moods, full of inspiration and ideas.

It had just turned 4:30pm. The sun was still high. It's rays making short shadows on this hot afternoon. Perspiration was already forming on Annabel's forehead as she sat busily

making notes in her diary. The smell of wood and dry earth filling the senses.

A lone cricket buzzed behind. It's back legs grinding together like a motor constantly revving up. Annabel's mouth was dry. Reaching for the bag she pulled out a Coca-Cola. The cap hissed off as her thirst was quenched with a satisfied smile. Her dog lifted its head nonchalantly then lowered it again.

A plane faintly droned overhead leaving its fluffy trail.

She looked up. *The summer heat. The quiet. It had gradually become claustrophobic. Surrounded in the distance by tall Oak and Beech trees. It was like they were whispering overhead. Their secrets contained in a majestic stillness, constantly exchanging what they had seen, witnessed over the long years.*

Suddenly, voices. Zita's ears pricked up. Then some movement. Annabel's hand froze around the ball point pen. Her head jerked to the muffled cry and panting from behind. The dense bushes that partially cocooned gave no indication of what it was.

Annabel slowly rose. Her dog was on all fours already in anticipation looking up, wagging its tail. She quietly folded the canvas chair. Wincing as the ground crunched under her feet she tiptoed in the direction of the sounds. Annabel wiped her forehead, the perspiration now running down her cheeks.

Thoughts flashed to a war poem she had read, set in Burma. About a British Tommy seized by fear when he heard the voices of Japs in the jungle. The odour of earth and grass had become nauseating. Heavy and thick with the humidity.

The panting and moaning grew louder. She crouched down and carefully parted the Hawthorn bramble; temporally pulling back as it scratched her arms and wrist. It was two men, half naked. One lying on top of the other one with their trousers down by their ankles.

Annabel recognised the young man on top. He'd been a former college student. An old boyfriend of one of her best mates called Jennifer, who recently emigrated with her

parents to Australia. Jennifer had wanted to be a fashion photographer and always called Annabel, *Twiggs*, after the famous model Twiggy.

Annabel scribbled away furiously in her diary what was happening before her eyes. She couldn't help herself even though she was scared.

Now to get away, she thought. Mustn't let them see me.

Annabel turned to go but too late. Her dog started barking. She cried out, "shoosh Zita!" Then, in horror, she saw the face. The face she recognised. It was peering at her through the hedge, and, he had a look now like a sky which could spawn a tornado any moment. He'd recognised Annabel as well. Her father was his boss, a senior partner in the law firm he'd just joined.

Annabel dropped the diary and started to run, her legs heavy with fear. Zita was ahead of her, barking. The young man stooped and picked up the diary. He saw her last entry naming him and what he was doing. Buggering, she had written. The dog seeing this turned back and attacked him; snatching the diary in its mouth, knowing that it belonged to its master. Zita hung on growling shaking her head. And then, all of a sudden the diary ripped in two. The man fell back holding the wrong half. He cursed as he got up. He looked around and was glad his male friend had done a runner in panic. It didn't matter. They had only met an hour ago in the park toilets. Nothing had been exchanged only a mutual consent.

With the incriminating half of the diary in her mouth Zita scurried back to catch up with Annabel who was running in blind panic. Annabel ran until her temples pounded, ran until her eyes pulsed in their sockets, ran until she had a hot stitch in her left side - from the bottom of her ribs up to her armpits; ran until she could taste blood and something like metal shavings in the back of her throat. Then she tripped and fell sprawling, twisting her ankle. She got up. Zita came back, but she yelled at the dog to run on. The dog faltered, not wanting to leave her; still with the diary in its mouth.

Annabel started again, limping badly this time. The smell of dry earth thick in her brain. Then the crunching of earth and twigs with heavy panting behind her. Someone shouting, “come here you bitch!”

She started to scream, “*Help me someone?...please!...*” She looked over her shoulder. The sound of running getting nearer.

Her back gate now in sight. If only she could reach it in time. Annabel was in excruciating pain dragging her left foot. *Must get to the back gate. Oh God!! Please let me make it.*

Fumbling frantically for the latch, the gate swung open with Annabel falling through onto the concrete grazing her knees. Faithful Zita still with her, dropping the diary, licking her hand. Then picking it up, waiting for the next command.

Annabel looked behind. Still no one in sight. With Zita ahead she limped up the garden path to the kitchen door.

Now inside she turned the key, listening to the lock snap in.

Annabel leant with her back against the half glazed door. Her chest moving up and down rapidly. Breathing in snatches. Zita looked up at her. She patted the dog. “Good dog,” she said. Then stiffly bent and kissed Zita fondly on the head. Annabel took the diary from Zita and patted her again. “Well done Zeet,” she said, “at least you got the half with all my work in.”

She looked into the garden through the glass. It was all clear. The house was quiet. Empty. Her parents were out shopping. *Get up to your bedroom,* she thought. *Lock your self in till dad gets back.*

He was at the rear of the house. Panting hard from the running. Already knowing where Annabel lived. He’d just seen them disappear behind the kitchen door; the dog still with the diary in its mouth. Also he remembered he’d been to this house a couple of years

before, to a party with Jennifer, an old college flame.

The garage doors were open. There was no car. Hopefully the parents were out. At the side entrance of the large detached house was a builders skip sheltered by a high fence. The skip was filled with old paint tins, carpets and a three piece suite. It looked like they had the decorators in.

The sound of breaking glass made Annabel look up from her diary. A nervous tick fluttered her cheek. She pressed her ear against the bedroom door. Straining? Listening?

“Ring the Police. That’s it,” mumbling nervously Annabel picked up the extension. Hand shaking, the finger misdialled. “Shit,” under her breath. This time 999. A slight pause. Then a voice. “Emergency Services.”

“Police! Get me the police?” she shouted. *“I’m being.....”* Annabel heard a click. Then nothing. Just silence. She tapped the receiver bar frantically. Only her own breathing could be heard.

He stood at the bottom of the stairs. His hand clutched the pulled telephone wire. Then he called her, “Oh Annabel. I know you’re up there. I just want to talk. Explain things? It would be awkward if your dad found out, you know, my little preferences. Your father being a senior partner and all that. His company paying for my law school fees. A promising career ahead of me. You know what I mean. Come on Annabel? Don’t make me come up there.”

Then he heard the sound of something dragging. *Probably the bed? She was barricading the door with her bed.* He bounded up the stairs and kicked the closed door. Annabel started screaming. She tried pushing up the large sash window in desperation. The noise jerked him into panic, he couldn’t afford her shouting out, attracting someone. Using his shoulder he took a flying barge and the door caved in. He went sprawling headlong onto the floor. Annabel screamed, as she stepped over him he grabbed her leg and pulled her to the

floor. She wrestled with him and raked his face with her nails. He shouted at her, '*you fucking bitch!*' wincing with the pain.

With her foot she shoved him back down and ran from the bedroom. Zita was in a barking frenzy ahead of her. Annabel reached the stairs then tripped over her dog. She screamed as she somersaulted over and over down the marble steps, crashing into the right angled wall leaving a bloody smear, then bouncing down the remaining flight. The brittle snap of her neck as she hit the bottom echoed through the quiet hall. There was silence. He came out on to the balcony and looked down the stairs. Zita was by the side of Annabel. She began to whine, wagging her tale. Not understanding the staring eyes, the twisted head at right angles. She licked the blood from the ear and nose, affectionately, hoping to waken her.

He had to act fast. Parents may be back soon. That fucking diary was somewhere. Too late to look now.

There were two things he had to do, and quickly. Torch the house and hope the diary went with it. Then get rid of the body. Forensics, his hairs, his scratches, her fingernails with his skin. He was a dead man if anybody found *her* or the diary.

The dog was still pining. He shouted at it to shut up. He needed a clear head. And then he muttered, "yes of course."

Protected by the high fence he made his way out the back door to the side entrance. He looked into the skip and saw a big rolled up carpet. Then, he heard the noise of an engine at the front of the house. At that moment a big truck with chains clunking had pulled up to collect the skip.

"Shit!...shit!...shit!" His fist banged in desperation against the steel container. But the driver didn't get out his cabin. Instead, he decided to take his afternoon tea break. The driver opened his lunch box and started reading the newspaper. His luck was in, he couldn't believe it. It was now or never. He pulled out the old carpet and unrolled it behind the skip. Then he

went back for Annabel's body. With some heaving he eventually got the carpet back in place.

Ten minutes later he watched from a side window as the skip was lowered onto the truck. After it had pulled away he knew he had to finish the business.

The dog was gone. It had run after the truck; still faithful to the end.

The decorators had left a gallon can of white spirit. He started up stairs shaking the fluid from room to room. Then took one last look and flicked a match.

Annabel's parents had come home from shopping to see the fire brigade tackling the upstairs inferno. After a brief search they had reassured the hysterical mother nobody was in the house.

The police found the kitchen door had been forced open including down stairs drawers ransacked and furniture kicked over. Initially it looked like a robbery or vandalism, or both.

After Annabel had failed to return, the C.I.D. came to Ewell College and set up an interview room. All her known friends and acquaintances were called in one by one. With no leads the police turned their attention to forty-eight year old Reginald Stanton. A local man with a previous record of robbery with violence. He'd been released several months ago after serving a seven year jail term. Annabel's parents had hired decorators shortly before her disappearance. Company records showed one of the men to be Reginald Stanton.

A neighbour had placed this man at the scene on the afternoon in question. He was picked out instantly in an identification parade. When arrested the police had searched his flat and found stolen items from Annabel's house. With Annabel still missing and scratches on his hands he couldn't properly account for, the case very quickly became a murder enquiry.

Eventually the jury at the Old Bailey had taken six hours to convict him of murder. In sentencing Reginald Stanton to life imprisonment, his lordship, Justice Anthony Farquason Q.C. had called him a wicked and depraved man for taking such a young life away from a

loving family.

Amongst emotional scenes from the gallery with many relatives in tears, Reginald Stanton was led away, forcibly restrained, shouting, protesting his innocence, to start his life sentence.

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The mansion was haunting and empty. Only the tick of a large grandfather clock permeated through the rooms. It's pendulum, swinging doom like an axe in hell.

The naked virgin tied down to the altar. Wrestling with the ropes as her screams were drowned by religious chanting. The curved steel blade swishing above her. Backwards and forwards. Dropping closer and closer.

Then the chimes. Euphoric music from the gods. The hooded priest crossing himself as her flesh parted away. Blood splashed him with each rhythmical motion of the arc. The organ music building to a crescendo.

Geoffrey's hand reached the television and pressed the *off* button to the Hammer horror. It was late, but a good time. Smells of polish and fresh air spray still lingered in the room. The remains of their housekeeper visit. Tuesday was her day.

Curtains flickered with silent lightning as a late summer storm was brooding. A twelve year old Malt splashed into Waterford crystal. Geoffrey's head went back, then came forward with a wince as the whisky found its way.

Moira had gone to bed early with warm milk and a couple of Paracetamol's. She'd been sniffing all day with a cold.

Geoffrey watched the computer screen glow into life. With the mouse, his hand searched the Internet for Ewell College. Then, from the current 1992 year he listed back to the 1975 Year Book--Prize Giving Section--Classifications--Poetry--Winners List of Names--Annabel Mcpherson--Entry Title--My Secret Place.

One hand scrolled down to the last paragraph of the poem. While Geoffrey's other hand slightly shook holding the letter. His lips mumbled, "She said the last paragraph. I've sussed it from your last paragraph."

Geoffrey's head leant closer to the screen and started to read:

My bedroom, quiet, like the sanctity of a church.

I tiptoe and see guilt. Jealousy. Love. Hate. Even sins of self-adulation.

High at the rail of judgement, the grill of a confession box awaits.

A Priests ear the other side.

My secrets forever entombed in his mind.

Eventually decaying with him underneath the crinoline.

He switched off the computer then drained the last of the Malt. His footsteps mounted the stairs. Softly, but purposeful. The storm was overhead. Thunder rattled across the roof of the house. The hall lit up briefly with flickering white flashes. Rain sheeted against the windows in blustery gusts.

Geoffrey's hand turned the bedroom door knob. It was now used as Moira's studio for her oil painting. The room smelt of lacquer and turpentine. Canvasses were propped against walls. An easel stood on sentry by the window. Hung paintings danced into life as white lightning strobed them into movement.

Closing the bedroom door carefully now, holding the torch. It's beam accidentally silhouetting his face. Highlighting it, looking like he was planning a conspiracy in hell. The pencilled spotlight searched the walls, moving up above the original picture rail. Then across the top of the bookcase until it finally rested on the wire mesh of an air vent. "The grill of a confession box," he mumbled.

Using a small set of steps and a palette knife, he reached up and levered off the cover. The hand clawed at nothing inside the cavity. Geoffrey poked and prodded, whining to

himself like a caged animal in panic, searching more feverishly, cursing at the same time.

At that moment, on cue with a tremendous thunderclap, the bedroom illuminated with Moira's hand on the light switch. He spun round in shock.

"Is this what your looking for Geoffrey? It's all *in here*. How she saw you in the bushes. How you chased her. She named *you*, Geoffrey. All her secrets in that wall, and nobody knew." Moira held up the torn diary.

Geoffrey reached into his pocket for the letter. "Before that letter arrived. Before that bloody letter came, everything was fine." The veins in his neck bulged with anger as he started tearing it up. Ripping it into shreds symbolically, holding her gaze with a viscous sneer.

"We can work this out Moira? No one has to know?" He stepped down from the ladder and advanced slowly. She stepped back clutching the diary. "I had too much to lose Moira? The scandal? My parents? My career? I couldn't have it all ruined by some stupid snooping college girl? Give me the diary Moira?" Geoffrey edged nearer brandishing the palette knife.

She backed out the door onto the hall landing. It was dark. Her back rested on the balcony rail. Geoffrey slowly approached. *One little push* he thought, *and then I'm free. With her life insurance I can retire. I'll be set up, no more worries.* He moved quickly to the side to cut off the stairs. She was trapped. The other end of the balcony was a walled dead end.

Geoffrey's lips were pulled back into a sickly grin. Spit shone on his teeth as his face lit up momentarily in time with a roll of thunder. Like a Zombie in an old horror movie, he came steadily nearer with the palette knife raised.

Moira screamed and lunged at him, grabbing his arm. Both her arms now wrestling for the palette knife. At that moment it became daylight. With a massive explosion the huge tree outside, struck by a lightning bolt, came crashing through the landing window coming to

rest on the balcony rail amongst brick and rubble.

Geoffrey froze, spellbound. Staring in disbelief. Then the rail gave way under the weight. He lost his balance, skidding on the slippery leaves. His arms were waving, flailing, trying to grab a hold of something, anything to save himself. Just in time he clutched one of the balustrades. He screamed, *“Moira! Help me. Please Moira?”* His body dangled over the edge of the balcony. He was beginning to lose his grip. *“Please Moira! Lets forget all about this. Pretend it never happened. Just help me up. Please darling?”*

She picked up a piece of broken wood. He knew what she was going to do. Geoffrey looked up at her. “Please God Moira. Don’t! I beg you. I love you Moira.” She raised the splintered balustrade and smashed it down. He screamed and then he was gone. A dull thud echoed quickly followed below by another muffled scream.

She walked slowly down the stairs, as if in a trance. Not even feeling the broken glass cutting into her feet. Her face was white, death like. The hall lit up with faint pulsating flashes; as if illuminated from a dieing neon sign. The storm was moving away.

Geoffrey was still moving. He was impaled on one of the elephant tusks. Twitching in spasms like a maggot on a hook. It had gone through his backbone. His mouth was open, bloody, with the grin of a dead carp.

Moira knelt and stroked Geoffrey’s forehead thoughtfully. *She’d always had that nagging doubt about him. Fortunately he’d never recognised her. The dating agency for busy professionals had worked; that’s where she spotted him. And then he was so insistent to buy the house. There had to be a reason. She might have waited for years. But then the letter.*

Moira nonchalantly picked up the remains of Annabel’s diary and flicked through the pages. Then she said to no one, “She may have been a snooping college girl but she happened to be *my* sister.”

