

HARM

A SHORT STORY

BY

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The swallow dives into the weed-filled pond.

Years back, I had watched another bird skim across the water, rising into the air, fish dropping from its beak. I'd screamed and my mother had come running.

Even a little boy notices when his mother is quite dressed up. In the hallway, were three white suitcases and loosely thrown over them was what my mother called her 'thousand-bunnies' fur coat. Even at that age, I sort of knew a coat would not need that many rabbits. Talking quietly, my mother led me by the hand into the dark living room where I'm sure the curtains were still drawn and sat me down on the baby grand, before twisting away from me, her hands covering her eyes. Then in a hoarse voice said that she must run back upstairs. Why, I don't know. The only thing I am positive about, after all these years, was her whispering: 'Wait 'till Christmas.'

I never saw my mother again.

But she left treasure trove. Her letters for me to find. My girlfriend who does 'voice-overs' found the last one. It was under the dusty old grandfather clock which had been broken for years. I still keep the letters in my old school-binder. At the top of each letter, I had scribbled my age '4' and the place I had found them; to the most recent, '37'. The early ones had the instruction: *Find me on your birthday once a year and no cheating!* My mother knew that I would discover the easy ones quickly and then as I got older, the longer and more detailed ones would be hidden away in much harder places. In one, she had written: 'I imagine when you find this letter you'll be well into your teens...' She was exactly right.

I loved watching her dress for big occasions, all those on and off decisions, throwing discard after discard onto the bed. Lots of sharp frowns asking me what suited. Playful slaps for all the wrong answers. I soon sensed what the wrong answer might be; what would irritate her. I enjoyed those fingertip slaps. I used to say: 'Daddy know. Ask him.' She pulled one of her pretty screwed up faces, and put both hands to her lips feigning horror, saying: 'Because he knows just *everything*, it wouldn't be a surprise, would it? So we won't need him because my little boy is just so clever. Now, what's it to be, Artie? Slinky red? The peasant look? Or this little black number of a poor little waif who's not eaten for three days? Here she pulled her tragic face and I'll swear there were tears as well... 'Artie, I've made up her mind. I think today's 'dippy' day!' And I would shout: 'Custard, custard, custard!' Or whatever colour I could think of, which weren't many. A lot of skirts, blouses and dresses ended up as custard.

Not long before she left, she asked: 'Would you like a special present for your birthday or would you like a present all life long?' I'd answered: 'Mummy, no present last always!' And she had cuddled me, whispering: 'Well, my little custardy cream, your mummy says - just wait and see.'

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My father did his best but the garden went to ruin. He once had a lady stay for a few weeks and she planted all sorts of vegetables but I suppose she left because she could not stand my father's passivity. My mother used say to him: 'You bought a garden not a house. The pond's bigger than my kitchen!'

Dad died last Spring – oddly enough in the garden. He had put out a deckchair and perhaps the effort of doing this finished him off. Jessica now lives in the house with me and of course she would have to go and find that 'file' of letters. So I told her the story and she was quite moved. In bed that night, she wouldn't leave the subject alone. 'You reckon you've found *all* the letters... but how do you know?'

'Well... think! It was *your* discovery. Remember you wanted to repair the grandfather clock and you soon found out that it was slightly off balance and *there* was the letter underneath. It was almost like my mother knew that neither Dad nor me would bother with repairing the clock and that the only person who might find that letter would be a complete stranger.'

'That's a bit creepy,' Jessica said. I could see that she was still dubious that we had found the last letter.

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I hoped Jessica's obsession with my mother might dissipate. Every night, Horlicks by the bedside table, would find her pouring over the scribbled letters. 'Artie, this one is so, so Freudian!' 'Then thrusting a mud stained letter into my face: 'Have you actually read through this one?' Or the evening would go: 'How did your mother speak? Can you remember the exact tone of her voice?' Excited: 'I could record all her letters!'

Then we went on holiday to France and everything was fine until the last day in a small hotel by the port, the owner confided to us that she thought we were a cute couple with *dazzle*.' We laughed at the owner's words that night. '*Vous etes mignons ensemble!*' Jessica mimicked. 'But the very last, *last* thing we've got is *dazzle*!' She, punched me playfully in the ribs. 'I wonder what she *really* meant?'