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Answer When You Can

When the mysterious envelope arrived in my mailbox, I had just turned twenty-six, for me an age of painful doubt and questioning. My address then was on Broad Street in Hartford, Connecticut, the middle-floor apartment of a three-story house. I'd lived there just more than a year and most of that with a girlfriend, badly: a time of tumultuous silences and stomach-churning recriminations. She'd recently taken her name off the mailbox and left me without a television or cookware, and with a rent I couldn't afford on my salary as an entry-level sportswriter. I ate a lot of rice cakes.

Into this backdrop came the envelope. It arrived in late October of 1990 or early November–gray days of wind and chilly rain. Business size. Only a few sheets of five-by-eight-inch paper inside.

So flimsy, so modest an artifact. I could not then foresee how, decades later, it would lead me to unfamiliar towns, the doorstep of strangers, and to long-ago friends.

My name and address were handwritten using haphazard capitalization that might be called whimsical. "MichaeL" was my name. "HarTford" was my city. My address was "BroadsTreeT." Whoever prepared the envelope was precise yet careless. The sender left off a zip code but used my middle initial: "MichaeL G. Downs." Formal and odd, given that back then most people knew me as Mike. The pen had rolled herky-jerky, leaving glops of black where the stroke changed direction. Stranger still, the envelope bore no return address—though the postmark, dated October 24, told me it had been sent from Tucson, Arizona. Tucson was where I'd previously lived and where I'd met the girlfriend who'd now gone away.

I opened the envelope. The letter inside began:

"Dear Jon: Sorry Ive waited so long to ans But I missplaced your address But I found it."

The letter continued for three handwritten pages, though in a script different from that which addressed the envelope. This penmanship was cramped. The letter's author had also used a different cheap pen than the person who addressed the

envelope. This one smudged and leaked blue dots. The letter was signed:

All my love
Grandma Russell.

I did not know a Grandma Russell or anyone surnamed Russell. Did I know a Jon from high school or college or any other aspect of the thirteen years I'd lived in Tucson? None I could recall. The envelope held no note to explain why someone had sent me this letter. Nothing. Grandma Russell mentioned West Virginia, but I'd never lived in West Virginia and didn't know anyone from there. Her letter's heading noted the date when she wrote it—"Oct. 3, 1990," just a few weeks earlier than the postmark on the envelope. The heading also listed a town, Millfield—though the accompanying state appeared as a couple of loopy lines that I couldn't make out. Maybe Iowa or Illinois?

In her letter, Grandma Russell wrote of her cataract surgery and her worsening arthritis ("but I take medication & use a lot of Rub Cream"). She told of disappointments: a poorly attended family reunion and her new automatic washing machine, meant to replace the wringer washer. The new one still needed a drain. "It isn't doing much."

"Again, I better close," she scribbled toward the end. "Love to see you. You was Grandpa's favorite one."

For several days I puzzled over the letter. Why would someone target me like this—with this? And why now? Could some prankster who knew the girlfriend have mailed it?

Still, I kept the letter. You might say the reporter in me wanted to tease out answers where none seemed apparent. Or that I was delighted to find myself a character in some adventure yarn awaiting the next twist, the ring of a telephone on a dark and stormy night. But I think my reason was this: for all that troubled me about Grandma Russell's unexplained letter, she wrote with tenderness, and that's what I needed then—even a collateral tenderness.

So I refolded the pages, placed them again inside the envelope, and added that to a box of keepsakes.

Then one day, in the basement of a house distant by miles and by more than thirty years, I opened that box.

Given the pandemic, my homebound wife, Sheri, assessed the spaces in our small house in Baltimore, said, "clutter," then "purge." So there I sat in our half-finished

basement, tossing a high school yearbook, a ticket stub, the ID tag from the collar of a childhood pet. This was difficult. I'm not given to nostalgia, but I appreciate now and then revisiting the markers of how rich my life has been. It is always a fresh surprise and a reminder to feel grateful.

Then I came to my name on an envelope bearing no return address. Vaguely, the memory of its mystery pricked me. Oh, yes. This. Still unexplained. I reread the letter. More than once, I returned to the ending, struck thirty years later by its sweet sadness.

> You was Grandpa's favorite one. I miss him something terrible. I have my crying spells. I know that wont bring him back, but it Helps me some. To let it out. being alone is terrible but this is my home. I feel close to him here. Take care dear boy & maybe I will get to see you over Thanksgiving if you come home.
>
> All My Love
> Grandma Russell

And then the coda:
"ans when you can"

So long ago, when I'd first opened the envelope, I gave myself to the unnerving puzzle: Who'd aimed this letter at me, and why? Now, more settled, I read the letter as an anonymous gift, the sharing of something intimate and precious: a woman's rock-shard griefs and the consolation of beloved kin.

A gift, because a person wrote my name. A person touched tongue to glue and sealed the envelope, or sponged it shut. A person affixed the twenty five-cent stamp, a United States flag. A person with intention, a person with reasons. A person who chose me.

Likely, by now, Grandma Russell would be dead. But Jon, I thought: How wonderful it would be to find him; I could return this token of his grandmother's love, which I'd kept safe for so long. The gift received becoming a gift to give. Mystery become purpose.

And now, unlike when the letter arrived, our world included search engines. So I opened my laptop, typed "Millfield" and "Russell." There: a small town in southeastern Ohio where generations of Russells had lived, near the West Virginia border.

I began to send e-mails, make phone calls.

* * *

Part of a township rather than a town itself, Millfield lies along a snippet of Ohio's state Route 13, cradled by the bend of a creek called Sunday. These days the area claims about 325 residents, though five times that lived here when Millfield was a thriving coal town. Now it's mostly remembered as the site of Ohio's worst mining disaster, an underground explosion that in 1930 killed eighty-two men, none of whom were surnamed Russell.

Phone calls and e-mails hadn't yielded much. Preachers around Millfield provided no clues. Neither did the newspaper staff in the nearest city, Athens. I'd sent a scanned copy of the letter to a man named Bill Russell, an elected official who also had been Millfield's postman, but Bill didn't recognize my particular Grandma Russell. Nor did he know a Jon or any of the other names Grandma Russell had mentioned: Richard, Andy, and another neither Bill nor I could make out.

Not my branch of Russells, Bill told me. He'd ask around, though. Call again if you visit.

The mid-March day when Sheri and I drove into Millfield came dense with woolly clouds, chilly and damp. Sun seemed only a shrouded history. We parked next to the post office, careful as we stepped to avoid puddles from last night's rain. Across the road stood Millfield Christian Church, with white siding and cathedral arches framing clear-paned windows. Nothing fussy. Two shrubs served for landscaping. Beside the doors sat a cabinet-style shed full of canned food, and on it this painted word: "Blessin."

The post office would open in a few minutes, at noon, and shortly after we arrived so did the clerk. I showed her the letter, but she had worked in Millfield for only about a year so shook her head. She directed me to a fellow now coming for his mail, whose name was embroidered on his work shirt. Eugene telephoned a Russell he knew, but that person had already talked with Bill and didn't know this Grandma Russell.

So I called Bill. No one in Millfield knows your Grandma Russell, he told me. Then, thinking aloud, he speculated about Russells from long-ago days, saying "might have" and "maybe" and "can't quite recall," word clouds as vague as those overhead.

It surprised me that no one in this small town would remember—even three decades later—a neighbor from down the street. It seemed impossible—even callous—that nary a Millfield soul could recall a family who had made this place home, who had descendants, who wrote letters to distant loved ones. How could Grandma Russell so quickly vanish? Was it that easy for a life to leave no trace?

But what of death's traces? Up at Hilltop Cemetery, Bill told me, lie some Russells that aren't mine. Just inside the gate, he said, to the left. Worth a try.

We parked, as Bill directed, near where a United States flag flapped high against the smudged sky. Ahead, the cemetery road ran between leafless maples, splitting into several roads that spread over unfolding hills, past generations of Millfield dead.

Stone to stone we walked, Sheri that way, me this other. We found Russells but no woman who fit our description, who died after 1990, preceded by her husband. After a half hour or so, Sheri suggested we drive and look among other stones. But there remained one small selection of markers I had yet to explore, nearer the gate. "Let me search here," I called. And that's where I saw a single hunk of polished stone dedicated to two Russells, and etched between their names a Valentine's heart. She had died in 2000, he in 1989.

"I might have found her," I shouted to Sheri. "I hope it's her."

Sheri read the woman's name. "I hope so, too," she said, and I knew we shared the reason why. Because if so, Grandma Russell's first name was wondrous and magical, an incantation.

If this was Grandma Russell, her name was *Redimpha*.

Redimpha S. Russell, to be precise. Here lay our first evidence of a life beyond the letter some person in Tucson had mailed to me. Here lay a first connection across time and distance to whomever had brought me here and for whatever reason. It was a gravestone, yes, but also the first bright, winking coin in a treasure hunt.

Sheri and I stood over the grave, thumbing our phone screens and talking and thumbing some more.

"Dimp," Sheri said, having discovered her nickname in an obituary.

"What friends called her," I said, reading the same on my phone.

"A daughter named Elinor," Sheri continued. "Another named Verree."

Verree! I thought back to the letter and that one indecipherable name. "No wonder I couldn't make that out."

The stone told us Redimpha's birth year, 1911. Also, that she was four years older than her husband, Loren, whom she'd wed on Christmas Day, 1936—that date marked inside the stone's etched heart.

Out of those details, we called up others. Her maiden name had been Reeves. She'd been born in a town that neighbored Millfield. Her given name, with its echoes of redemption, appeared to be hers alone in the whole wide world. She died in a nursing home, buried on a Monday in January. We made a list of survivors

mentioned in her obituary and shaped a Russell family tree, including Redimpha's oldest child, Elinor, who had died from Alzheimer's disease just the year before. From Elinor's obituary, we learned that she raised three sons, including the captain of a Navy submarine.

"The USS *Tucson*?" I said. "Odd."

Also, Elinor had been preceded in death, the obituary told us, "by her loving husband of 59 years" and also by "her son Jon."

Her son, Jon. Grandma Russell's grandson. Dear Jon.

We felt those words more than we read them. What had just moments earlier seemed like an escapade now involved a sadness beyond. As if those clouds overhead had come low, we knew a fresher gloom, a family grief in a family not our own.

Now I would never mail to Jon his grandmother's letter or place it in his hand. He'd never tell or guess or marvel at how it might have come to me. We'd never share in that mystery, never find affinity in the presence of what can't be explained as people do when faced with God or star dust, geologic time, what disappears, what's rediscovered. A shared astonishment, even awe.

Never any of that.

Jon's Internet presence was scant and indeterminate. No obituary seemed to exist. He might have lived out West; we found mentions of Utah and Arizona. How *preceded*, we wondered. Cancer? Opioids? An act of violence?

Then we heard a diesel engine's rumble, a backhoe rolling near. The driver shouted, "You the fella looking for a Russell?" He dropped the machine into a less noisy idle but stayed seated. He wore a prophet's beard, thick salt-and-pepper hair way past his shoulders. A ball cap kept it mostly in place. A pickup followed; its driver stayed put.

"I think we found her," I yelled.

He cut the engine. He'd once taken a phone message I'd left for Bill, the elected official, so he knew our story. His job for the township, he told us, included tending to the cemetery grounds. He and the fellow in the truck meant to tear out a dead cedar. We talked about this and that, and he began to speak of recent burials. So many young people, he said. Suicides, mostly, some from opioids, sure, but despair at the roots of all. He waved toward a shiny new stone. "Set his house on fire," he said, "then shot himself."

That dead cedar turned out to be tricky business, and we stayed to watch the work. Our prophet and his buddy lashed the tree with chains and wire, then

strung the links to the backhoe. The buddy tugged with the tractor while the prophet shoveled around the root ball. They worked by the inch, with a delicacy and care difficult to manage with a backhoe, taking slow pains not to let yanked-up roots disturb any nearby grave. Near the tree lay strangers long dead, but the men worked as if safeguarding the peace of their own kin: tenderness at a remove, distant but true and whole.

In 1990 in Hartford, after the girlfriend moved out, a friend from Tucson contacted me about moving in.

Mark and I had met in junior high, our bond strengthened by comic books, Tolkien, and Dungeons & Dragons. We liked to draw our heroes. Using felt-tipped pens, we created worlds with colors more vivid than those of our shoddy desert suburb, its squat houses, gravel yards, and scabby asphalt roads. Shorter than me by an inch or so, Mark was round and soft, baby-faced, which fit his generally gentle ways but not the shivers of temper that sometimes flared when we rough-housed in his family's backyard pool. When he was angry, his greater strength intimidated me. Though smart, he proved lousy at school, reading sword-and-sorcery books while teachers yabbered.

With few options after graduation, he followed his older brother's lead and joined the Navy. With the sign-up cash, he brought several friends to a record store and offered to buy us each an album. I chose *Learning to Crawl* by The Pretenders because of the grooves and because of Chrissie Hynde's tender, snarling vocals. The lyrics appealed to me, too, what I heard as a sophisticated teeter-totter between despondency and hope, between brutality and the innocence of angel-faced infants.

The last place I'd seen Mark had been Idaho Falls, where he lived while training to work on a nuclear submarine. I'd stopped to visit while taking a postcollege young man's search-for-America trip, just me and a Dodge Dart and a dog I'd picked up for companionship. Four years later, when Mark contacted me in Hartford, he'd served inside one of those nuke subs, spent months in the Pacific's depths. Now, for reasons he kept opaque, he had been transfered to Springfield, Massachusetts, just up the road from Hartford. He needed a place; I needed a roommate.