

Letter From Alfred

by Bill Torrie Douglas

It was soon after her mother died that Carol found the letter. It was in a locked jewellery box which she had to burst open, as the key was missing. The envelope was barely hanging together but the 'Windsor' postmark of July 1944 and the blue twopence-halfpenny stamp had both survived.

"You have to read this Uncle Charlie, it's really sad." She stumbled over the words, "It's obviously a wartime romance that mum had." Carol blinked a couple of times, "It's signed by someone called Alfred. You don't know who that could have been, do you?" She pulled a tissue from the pocket of her leather jacket.

Charlie smiled gently and shook his head. "No, it's a long time past love. Well before your mum and dad married. Mind you, there were men miles from home during the war, posted her, posted there. It may have been somebody she just met a couple of times."

"Maybe, but she kept his letter long enough, didn't she." Carol filled the kettle. She liked visiting her favourite uncle as he always seemed happy to see her.

Charlie nodded. "Let me have a read please love."

The letter was in a clear legible hand and began, 'My dear Sadie, it seems an age since I left you at the Glasgow platform and I wished you had been coming with me. I seem to be wandering around like a lost soul down here. Each day at one o'clock I turn to the north and raise my glass to your distant figure...'

"He was a real romantic sort right enough," Charlie chuckled. "Mind you, he wasn't doing much fighting if he could raise his galas at one o'clock each day."

Carol ignored his scathing comment. Her eyebrows raised, "It's not like mum you know, she was a very down-to-earth sort of person, wasn't she..." she waited while Charlie read the remainder of the letter, "...although she was very young at the time."

The letter was intensely romantic and Alfred had obviously been very keen on her mother. Carol was curious to know what sort of man he had been. Although easy to read, the lines were a bit uneven as he had written it in a field because, he wrote, he had '...wanted to find a quiet lonely place...'

"he's a right little Romeo, isn't he." Uncle Charlie was clearly amused.

"You can laugh if you want, but I think it's lovely. Especially the bit where he's looked into the sky and whispered her name and suddenly a star's appeared. Nobody's ever written me a letter like that."

"...and you're too old and too married to hope for one now, chuck."

"Thanks very much Uncle Charlie, you've just made my day." Carol made a face and gave him a playful punch.

She had never been close to her dad's brother when she had been growing up, but the deaths of both her parents, one after the other, had turned Uncle Charlie into a surrogate father. She now regretted those younger years when she had barely known him.

"Do you think Auntie Agnes might know who Alfred was?" She referred to her mum's sister.

"You could always ask her but I doubt it. Agnes was a good few years younger than your mum." Charlie placed a plate of biscuits on the coffee table and they sat down to enjoy elevenses.

Carol struck a blank with Aunt Agnes and other priorities pushed the matter from her mind for a few days. It was about a week later, as she was dusting a framed wedding photograph of her parents, that she remembered the letter once more. She supposed that she would never find out who Alfred was; he might even have been killed in the war.

The next day she visited her uncle again. He was tidying up the kitchen so she removed her jacket and dried the dishes for him. She glanced at the upright old man with fondness.

“Aunt Agnes didn’t know who he was either.”

“What?”

“The letter to mum. Aunt Agnes didn’t know who Alfred was. I think I’ll have to forget about my mum’s illicit love affair. What are you having for lunch today then?”

“Why do you call it illicit?” The elderly man frowned. “It must have happened a good couple of years before she met your dad.”

“Yes I suppose so. Maybe a better word is secret.” Carol fingered her wedding ring and helped herself to another biscuit, avoiding the chocolate ones. Her mother used to have a similar fight against temptation. “Anyway, what have you been up to today?”

“Well, I was out for my morning constitutional, brought the paper home for a read and I’m about to start filling in a tax return that I’ve just received. Dashed nuisance!” He nodded towards a brown envelope that was propped up on the mantelpiece. You’d think that they would leave retired guys alone. They must think I’ve got money.”

Carol laughed, her skin creasing at the sides of her eyes. She gave a second glance to the envelope. “Maybe I can help you with it.” She reached over, lifted the envelope and removed the buff-coloured form. She looked at it, her brown eyes focussing on the name. Mr C.A. Simpson. An unbidden thought formed.

“C.A! What’s your middle name Uncle Charlie?”

The old man drew a deep breath, “Alfred. Yes, I’ll admit it, I’m Alfred.” Charlie began to blush but Carol did not notice. She stared at him, uncertain what to think.

“You’ll have to let me explain.”

“Yes, I never thought...” She had difficulty saying what she really felt.

“Your mum and I did have a romantic liaison during the war; you didn’t call them affairs then. It was an innocent thing but I was very much in love with her. And I think she loved me. But life was difficult in wartime. I was in the Navy. We did talk about marriage, but your mum was only seventeen. My ship went down and they all thought I was dead. They even got a letter from the Admiralty. I got stuck up near the Arctic Circle for the rest of the war.”

Carol tried to transport herself back to a time when her mother was a teenager and in love, during a war that filled every day with uncertainty.

“I thought of your mum a lot but I had no way of getting word back. After a time, and quite understandably, your father and Sadie got together and eventually decided to get married. It was quite a shock for all concerned when I turned up after the war.” Charlie paused, “I don’t want you to think that there was anything sordid or underhand in any of this.”

“No...I didn’t think that for a minute...” Carol was trying to absorb this new piece of family history.

“I had too much love for both your mother and your father to want to make things embarrassing. She was as happy as she could be as far as I knew; so was he. And I pretended to be. I had every intention of getting married to some other attractive young woman but she just never turned up.” The old man gathered himself together and continued. “Mind you, I’ve had great joy in watching you grow up in a loving family; so don’t feel sorry for me.”

Carol’s thoughts were a mixture of curiosity and surprise tempered with sadness.

“Did dad know about you and mum?”

“Yes he did. But I kept well out of their way when I came home, especially in the early days. I hardly saw them. So it was a lot easier than you might imagine. Indeed we never spoke about it.”

“Did you ever speak to mum about it?”

“It may seem strange to you, but I didn’t. I rarely saw your mum on her own and I would never have gone behind your dad’s back to have any secret rendezvous with her. Now and again I would catch her eye and she would give me a smile. You smile just like her you know. I contented myself with loving her from afar.”

Carol wiped her eyes with a tissue. She struggled to find something to express what she felt for her uncle.

“Oh Uncle Charlie you are a very special person to me. I didn’t have a clue about all this.”

“I didn’t know that your mum had kept that letter all these years.”

Carol leant across and kissed him on the cheek. She felt even closer to him now that she knew of his concealed love for her mother. She brought the letter from her handbag and read it through again. The last sentence read, ‘...au revoir and dream of me...’

“I’m still going to call you Uncle Charlie but, every so often, I’m going to think of you as Alfred.”