

The Second Envelope

Rob Davis

When Billy looked and listened closely, he began to see more of the Joanna he had known. At first, he looked for the entire person, and found that this was an elusive factor; accordingly, he was disappointed. But gradually, he saw odd flashes of the personality he had known, and as more pieces of the Joanna jigsaw fell into place, he saw that underneath the surface, she had not changed very much. The eyes; the smile; the lilt and inflexions of her voice, what she said, how she said it.

Of course, he was 20 years older; nearing retirement now, and she was married with three teenage children, one of them hers and Billy's, the others, hers and Dan's, but by mutual consent at the eldest's birth, all of them looking to Dan as their father. Prepared to find the opposite, Billy found that he liked her husband, and sensed that whilst Dan had been prepared to dislike him, he too liked the man who had been his wife's lover of 20 years ago, now a successful businessman, property owner, multi-millionaire; Dan the unemployed technician of a dying local industry.

"Jo," said Billy after a long pause, "do you still trust me?" She nodded. "Do you think that you still know me?" She nodded again. "I have here," he continued, reaching inside his leather jacket, "two envelopes. One contains a cheque for £100,000." Registering the surprise on their faces, but before either of them could interrupt, he went on, "The other envelope contains a sheet of paper which contains details of what you will have to do if you accept the first envelope."

Dan made to speak, but Billy waved his sentence away. "There are two conditions, possibly catches, if you care to call them that or interpret them so," he said, "and here they are. Firstly, if you accept the cheque, you are obliged to accept also the conditions contained in the second envelope, without reservation, and sight unseen. That means," he said earnestly, "that you can't examine the contents of the second envelope in advance. Opening the first envelope means that you automatically accept any and all of the conditions identified in the second.

"Secondly – and this establishes whether or not Joanna still really does trust me – only Joanna can tell you, Dan, whether or not to open the first envelope and accept the cheque. And," he said quickly, seeing that Dan was about to interrupt, "you may not confer on the issue. Jo, you will have to decide yourself whether to tell Dan to open the envelope or not – and if you do instruct him to open it, then both of you are bound to the conditions contained in the second envelope.

"Now," he said, sitting back in his chair and carefully observing the pair opposite him, "I can understand what Dan's thinking. You, Dan, think that in the second envelope is a condition that at best, Joanna and I spend the night together. At worst, you think that it directs that she and I go off and leave you." Billy looked carefully at Dan, and saw that his analysis had been correct. "You're working on the theory that as Jo and I were once lovers, and indeed planned to marry, that our love, as it was, can be resurrected and reborn, leaving you alone and the only loser, despite holding a cheque for £100,000.

"So, if we assume for the moment that your train of thought is correct, what have you lost and what have you gained? You've gained £100,000 and lost some or all of your wife. I can see that some men would see that as a fair swap, but I don't think that you will see it that way.

"Your dilemma is of course that you don't have any say in the matter, do you? The condition, the ground rules, dictate that you can only do what Joanna tells you. Even if you did think that £100,000 was a fair swap – which I feel sure that you don't – and even if you felt that you would go along with such a condition – which I feel sure that you wouldn't, if it was your choice – you don't have the decision.

“Now, let’s look at this from your wife’s angle. I can see that she still hold some spark for me, but I expected that, because at the time, we were very intense, and of course our daughter’s life figured strongly in our plans. But that was then and this is now. Again, let’s assume for the moment that your fears about the content of the second envelope are true. Joanna may have arrived at the same conclusion as to its contents, but of course she can’t discuss those thoughts with you, under the terms of the event.

“If she has in fact arrived at the same conclusions, she may be willing or unwilling to accede to those conditions. Perhaps she too sees £100,000 as fair recompense for a night with me, or perhaps she sees £100,000 as fair compensation to you, for me taking her away? You see, there are a series of possibilities here.

“No, don’t speak, either of you. Just tell me this – and you must both agree – do you accept the conditions of this event? You must both answer either yes or no, and please do so when I count to three. Unless I get two simultaneous yesses, then the event will not continue.

“One, two, three.”

“Yes,” they both said together.

Billy nodded. “I predicted that you would, although your motives in replying yes are quite different. So, here are the two envelopes. This one has a cheque payable to Mr Dan Allison for £100,000. It’s already signed and dated and it won’t bounce. The second envelope, here, has a piece of paper which contains the conditions which you both unconditionally accept if the first envelope is opened.

“Dan, you have the first envelope. Jo, the second. So, before we go any further, Jo, does Dan open the first envelope?”

“Yes,” she said, unhesitatingly.

Billy held up his hand. “Yes, I thought you’d say that. Okay, well, I’ll go and wait outside in my car; when you’re ready to fulfil the conditions, I’ll see you outside.”

He held out his hand. “Dan, you’re a good man and I don’t like to see a good man down for no fault of his own. Use the money carefully.

“Jo, I never stopped loving you. That’s all there is to say really. I’ll be outside.”

As the door closed behind him, Dan lay the first envelope on the dining room table and looked at it, smoothing down its edges with the flat of his hand. Suddenly, he ripped it open, and looked surprised when the bank draft fell out. He looked at Joanna. “Damn,” he said, shaking his head. “I’ve changed my mind. Let’s call him back.”

Joanna smiled. “There’s no need,” she said, thinking of the first time that she and Billy had become lovers, at his remote old cottage in Derbyshire. “Don’t bother to open the second envelope, Dan. Just go and pay in the cheque.”

“But we gave our promise –“

“Yes, I know. She smiled, and heard the sound of Billy’s car driving off. “Go on then, if you must,” she went on, watching Dan’s face as his shaking hands held the second envelope. “Open it. I know what it says.” She stood up and went to the open back doorway, thinking not so much of the

old cottage in Derbyshire, but the new house that they could build, just how they wanted it, just where they wanted it.

It was some time before Dan appeared beside her. "He really loved you," he said, his voice trembling, "and he still does in a way. But he realises that then was then and this is now." He held out the contents of the second envelope, a sheet of white A4 paper, folded in half.

"You should read this," he said.

Joanna smiled. "I don't need to," she replied.

"It's blank." There was a pause as the full weight of this discovery fell on him. "He *knew* that you knew it was blank."

"Yes," said Joanna. "I know."