

The Third Envelope

fiction - by Rob Davis

the conclusion to "Snow" and "the Second Envelope"

When his phone chirruped with an incoming text message, Billy roused himself from his half-awake state and, checking his wristwatch, saw that the message had arrived at more or less exactly the expected time. Retracting the footrest, he pulled himself out of the easy chair and made his way to the kitchen.

Joanna always stopped for a break from driving just before she came off the motorway, but with still some sixty miles to go afterwards, it made sense to pause at the service station, conveniently situated a couple of miles before her exit. Billy checked that he had a light supper ready and switched on the outside lights. Jo had her own security fob for the electric gates as well as a set of house keys, and now that she had made the journey half a dozen times, he knew that she was quite confident on the route, although she would always have the satnav operating, just in case of having to follow any unexpected diversions.

After her husband Dan's untimely accidental death five years ago, Billy and Joanna has tentatively re-connected, first by social media, then by personal email and finally by telephone. Having agreed to meet in a neutral location midway between her home in the Midlands and Billy's house on the Northumberland coast near Robin Hood's Bay, they had found that the affection they had shared many years before was capable of revitalisation.

Joanna's daughter, Crystal - in actual fact hers and Billy's but always regarded as hers and Dan's, had been carefully kept out of the situation. Billy had been delighted to learn that she was now, some 25 years on, a successful, experienced and highly-qualified forensic scientist, increasingly in demand by both Government agencies and legal organisations. Still single, she did not know that Dan was not her natural father. Billy had made no attempt to intrude on her life, and was content to watch and admire from a distance, fed with snippets of information and the occasional photo from Joanna.

Having moved to the north-east after selling his IT consultancy business and taking early retirement, Billy - also unmarried - had found peace and solitude in the rugged and sometimes bleak geography of Northumberland, the coastal paths providing him with long picturesque walks and healthy outdoor exercise. He was still developing Joanna's pleasure in this, and on her last few visits they had found mutual delight in being together on the wandering cliff tops.

The hot July Friday afternoon had faded to a warm summer evening and going upstairs, he left the master bedroom's windows ajar, feeling with pleasure the Northumberland sea air breathe its way into the room; they both slept better with that kind of ventilation. A look out of the windows gave a view in which the next stop would have been Denmark.

He resumed his seat by the TV and watched a mindless quiz show, until again once only half-awake he heard the house alarm system's bleep as the entrance gate was activated, followed by the sound of her car as she made her way along the driveway towards the house. Waiting in the hall, very happy and content, he thought of the pleasure of spending the weekend with the woman he had, again, come to love. The automatic porch light flicked on and the front door opened, revealing Joanna with her keys in one hand and a suitcase in the other.

"Jo ... it's wonderful to see you." He moved forward to both embrace her and take the case, but she gave a huge smile and motioned for him to stay away.

"No, you naughty man, go back into the living room, I've a surprise for you but I have to fetch it from the car."

"Yes ma'am," he replied, overly formally and, curious but obedient, retreated back into the living room. After a short interval Joanna came in and they embraced, kissing as if they had been apart for years rather than a mere couple of months.

"Now then, I want you to shut your eyes and come with me, and don't you dare open them until I tell you." She gave him a serious look.

"How mysterious, and it's not even my birthday. Ok, well, go on then, I'll not look until you give me the green light."

"Clever trick, that, eh? If you have your eyes shut you won't see the green light."

"I'm sure you'll find some way of giving me the right signal."

Joanna took his hand and steered him into the hallway, where she stopped him half way towards the front door. "Hold out your hands, but don't look yet," she said, and releasing his hands, moved a little further aside. Intensely curious, but knowing that she liked these kind of apparently mysterious actions, he kept his eyes closed and held out his hands, together and palms up, as if expecting to feel some large or possibly weighty object placed in them.

There was a slight draught of air movement, and a pair of hands slid into his.

"I've so wanted to meet you," said Crystal.

Joanna's gentle laugh sounded. "This is your present, Billy. You can open your eyes now."

Billy's throat constricted. "No, no, no. If I open my eyes I will wake up, and this dream is one I don't want to lose." Suddenly overcome, the tears streamed down his face and one of the hands holding his detached, coming quickly back with a handkerchief or tissue.

Crystal wiped his eyes. "Look now, Billy, please, I want us to see each other."

Joanna moved very close to him and whispered quietly, "She knows, Billy."

He opened his eyes, blinking away the tears which still wet his cheeks. Crystal was standing close, and when she threw herself into his arms, both their tears mixed as their cheeks touched.

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"It was all down to DNA," explained Crystal as they all sat around coffee and biscuits later that evening. "It's my bread-and-butter work, as you probably know, as Mum will have told you." Billy nodded. "Well, somehow I was always wrapped up in other people's DNA testings and never got round to doing my own. Then, one day about six months ago, the boss at the laboratory where I send some of my samples rang me to say that they were developing a new process they wanted to trial, and if I could send them some spare samples, it would help them out with the testing and results procedures. So as well as some which I chose at random, I included my own."

"And of course," Billy smiled, "Yours didn't come back with the results you expected."

"Not by a long chalk!" Crystal drew an envelope from her handbag and passed it over. On opening it, Billy saw a map of Europe, colour coded to the geographical origination of her ancestry, and he nodded, seeing that the results of her DNA testing were perfectly clear.

"I knew from Mum and Dad that his ancestry was from Northern Ireland and Western Scotland, and a result showing Eastern European origination seemed to be too weird an anomaly, even for a new trial testing procedure. A hundred and eighty degrees out of phase, as you might say."

"And when she showed me the results," Joanna added, "I couldn't not tell her the truth. How and why she was conceived, and everything which happened after that."

"Mum told me everything. Even where it all happened. I could tell from what Mum said and especially how she said it, that you were in love, and that it wasn't a fling or some casual affair."

Billy nodded again. "I still own the cottage. I can show you, take you there."

"We'd both like that", Joanna said, enthusiastically, and Crystal's face split in to a huge smile.

Billy stood up and, walking to a sideboard, brought over a leather folder, extracting and showing them the contents as he explained. "It's straightforward enough. My father was a pilot in the Polish Air Force - this is him when he first joined up - and he with some of his fellow countrymen fled Poland when the Germans invaded in summer 1939. They had quite an astonishing series of adventures before they finally arrived in England, and after being trained, he flew fighters - Spitfires and later, Typhoons - with the Polish Squadrons which were hosted by the Royal Air Force. Here he is when he was training, and here again with one of his fighter aircraft, and his Squadron chums."

"There's rather more to it than that," Joanna added, taking Billy's hand. "He was twice decorated for his actions, commissioned as an Officer, and survived the war intact. I've seen the medal, but show us again, please, Billy."

Crystal's eyes misted as she held the Distinguished Flying Cross in her hands.

"Post war," went on Billy, "although many of his countrymen emigrated to Canada, he liked it here, had made friends, and with his wartime record he had no trouble with being granted United Kingdom citizenship. You see, he was able to find out that having no surviving relatives in Poland, there was nothing to go back to. He Anglicised his name from *Janicki* to *Jenson*. He qualified as a draughtsman, and worked for a firm of Architects, gaining professional accreditations and eventually becoming their head designer. He and my mother married in 1952."

"That makes sense," said Crystal. "So the new testing process definitely works well, anyway that's what I reported back to the lab boss, once I'd persuaded Mum to tell me the truth. Was that why you joined the Royal Air Force yourself? Mum told me about that."

"Yes, it seemed to be a natural choice for me to fly. I'm afraid your grandfather passed away - peacefully - only a few years ago. But your grandmother is still alive, although she doesn't know about you."

Joanna squeezed Billy's hand. "I had to tell her the truth, Billy. There was no other way that the DNA results could be explained."

"I completely understand," said Billy, returning Joanna's hand pressure, but looking at Crystal. "In a way, I'm glad, because perhaps now I don't have to just admire you from a distance, and wonder what you'd be like to get to know. And I'd like ... to ... learn ... to love you."

Crystal looked at him, their eyes meeting. She knew immediately that what he had said had come from his heart.

"If that's ... all right ... with you?"

"That's very all right with me."

Crystal stood up and, moving to the sofa, sat between them. Spontaneously Billy and Joanna put their arms around her, and the three of them were, as they had once been at her conception, as one.

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The next day they set off along the cliff top, heading towards the small harbour. The North Sea air teased them as they approached the top of the steep path leading down to the village, which nestled at the foot of the cliffs. Billy stopped at the bench and small concreted semi-circle and railings, which afforded a fine view over the harbour area.

He sat down. Joanna, taking Crystal's arm, drew her a short distance away.

"He always stops and sits down here. I guess now we'll be coming here quite regularly, and I expect you might even want to come on your own. So I'd better explain why he always stops here."

"Is it the harbour? It's a fine view, and there's always something going on in a place like that; a boat arriving or departing, someone working on one. He likes boats and so on?"

"He likes the sea, although he doesn't have any great desire to be on it, he's doesn't go sailing or anything. But yes, he likes the harbour."

"What is it, then, some other tie with the sea?"

"It's to do with his father's wartime service. When his father was flying, his Squadron often engaged enemy aircraft over coastal areas, not so much here, far more down towards the south and south-east coasts; Kent, Sussex, Hampshire."

"Was that during the Battle of Britain? We've had to do some DNA tests in the past, for casualties found in aircraft wrecks, from that era."

"No, his father was training - and learning English - until the end of 1940 but from early 1941 onwards they were often fighting over the Channel and North Sea. He told me that his father had many fellow airmen who were shot down and disappeared over the sea, and of course there were those on the other side who suffered the same fate. He looks now at the sea to remind himself not to forget what his father and their comrades did."

Crystal's face showed her immediate understanding. "Remember not to forget. I like that. It seems to me to be exactly the right thing to do."

Joanna nodded. "I'm so glad that you see it that way. He won't say much about it. But I'll give you a clue. When you see him stand up, it means he's remembered not to forget. Just go over and take his hand, and he'll know then that I've explained this to you. You see, that's what I do when we're here in this place, when he's ready to carry on with the walk." She paused. "There are other things you'll need to know, about his family and RAF service, but that will all wait until another time."

A minute later Crystal joined Billy as he stood up, his eyes bright. She took his hand and without a word, or even looking at him, they began the walk together down the steep path towards the harbour. Feeling her hand firmly in his, she found a powerful contentment in returning the pressure.

Although the connection was invisible, Joanna could clearly sense the empathy between the man she loved and their daughter. She smiled. "Time for a pint," she said, and followed them down the path to the harbourside pub.