

LEGACY

It's the art deco sugar bowl that first catches Simon's eye. It's a silver-plated thing of beauty and he must have it, even though it means bidding for the whole box of jumble that comes with it. A small, grey-haired woman standing at the far end of the auction room pushes up the bid, but when the gavel finally falls, the bowl, along with the box, is his.

'What are you going to do with that?' Jules asks as he sets out the bric a brac across the dining table later that afternoon. 'Clean it and put it in the display cabinet?'

Jules looks doubtful but inspects the bowl more closely. 'And the rest?' she eventually asks, eyes dancing over the collection.

'Dump it, I expect.'

Jules turns her back to leave. 'Load of old rubbish,' she mutters as she disappears into the kitchen.

Simon examines each item. A paperweight, a letter opener, a cutting from a newspaper advertising an 'Easiwork Sunshine Kitchen', a moth-eaten lampshade and an assortment of odd plates. But it's a receipt for an engagement ring dated May 1940 and two letters that grab Simon's attention. The letters are from John Clarke, the first to his parents dated 12th July the same year. He reads:

Just a few weeks ago we longed for action. Now, we're in the air virtually every day. Sometimes, we're scrambled and airborne in three minutes. We're shooting down Messerschmitts but it's a savage blow when one of us doesn't come back. You remember Colin Maynard? His plane was shot down over the English Channel yesterday. He was 19 – just a year younger than me.

Simon pauses. John Clarke is the same age as his own son who can barely fend for himself. He continues:

That's just how it is. We must all do our bit even if that costs some of us our lives. We don't have time to be afraid with daily German bombing raids causing so much devastation. I long to see you again, but if that's not to be, know that I love you and am thinking of you. Give my love to Hazel and tell her I'll write soon.

The letter unsettles Simon. John's words speak powerfully and move him, and he finds himself imagining the sleepless nights he and Jules would suffer if their own son were fighting for their very existence. He reaches for the second letter. It's dated 14th July, just two days later and is addressed to Hazel Nethercote. It's a more personal letter; a love letter from a young pilot to his fiancée, cheerfully confirming he has secured a pass for their

wedding the following weekend. He can't wait to see her and call her Mrs Clarke for the very first time.

Simon closes his eyes. What happened to John and Hazel? he wonders. Were they happy? Were they blessed with children, then grandchildren? Perhaps there's someone out there – a descendant, maybe - who might regard these documents as precious? A legacy; the voice of an uncle or cousin, calling to them from eighty years back. How thrilling it would be to return them.

Jules reappears. 'Anything of interest?' she asks. Simon passes her the letters. She reads each in turn. 'You're going to find out more about them, aren't you?' she says. He nods without really knowing where to begin.

It's the local librarian who comes to his rescue, pointing him to the databases and newspaper archives he needs, but Simon is soon downcast when he learns John was shot down in a dogfight above the English Channel the day after his letter to Hazel, and that his body was never recovered. He thinks of John's desperation alone in the cockpit as the plane nose-dives then plunges into the cold sea. Try as he might to uncover further references to the pilot, he soon realises the trail has gone cold, forcing him to conclude John was an only child. It leaves him even more downcast; to give up your child in war must surely be devastating, but to give up your only child? It didn't bear thinking about.

'I think you'll have to face it,' Jules says one evening as they clear away the dishes. 'If there were no siblings, there may be nobody left to whom you can return the letters.'

He thinks for a moment. 'Maybe I can track down Hazel?'

Jules looks at her husband dubiously, but Simon is undeterred. Hazel's surname is unusual. Whilst his efforts lead him down some cul de sacs, he eventually strikes lucky. With every discovery, he delves deeper, returning daily to the library, further immersing himself in the history of John Clarke and his never-to-be-bride Hazel. It becomes an obsession, each new find spurring him on to the next.

Days later, Simon's notes are spread over the dining table. He calls to Jules. 'I found her!' he says triumphantly. 'It looks like she married another RAF pilot later in 1940.'

Jules casts her eye over the papers. 'She found happiness very soon after John,' she muses.

Simon takes no notice and continues. 'She and her husband had two sons, the first born in early 1941, and the second two years later. There were also grandchildren. I'm going to track them down and return the letters,' he says, elated.

'How do you know they'll want them?' Jules asks. 'Not everyone gets as excited by old letters as you. What if you're raking up something from the past that's better laid to rest?'

Simon hesitates. But he is resolute. The return of the letters and the receipt will be met with joy.

A couple of days later, having tracked down Hazel's older son Alan, Simon announces he is going to try phoning. Jules nods with her 'you know best' look.

The telephone conversation is brief. Alan agrees to meet and Simon travels to his house in Reading the following Sunday where his wife ushers him into the living room. 'He'll be down in a moment,' she calls as she scuttles from the room. Simon admires the photographs on the wall. He's particularly struck by the centrepiece – a stunning black and white portrait of a young woman taken some time in the 1950s.

'My mother, Hazel,' a slim eighty-year-old man says as he enters the room. 'I'm Alan,' he says. They shake hands and sit as Alan's wife returns.

'What is it you think you have?' Alan asks when they're all settled. Simon opens his folder and passes him John Clarke's letter to his parents. Alan reads thoughtfully then puts the letter aside. Eventually he speaks, and then only in very measured tones.

'I don't see the connection,' he says. 'I see a John Clarke who knew a Hazel but there's nothing to say this Hazel's my mother.'

Simon passes him John's letter to his fiancée. As he reads, Alan's expression slowly changes from mild curiosity to something bordering on anguish. He puts the letter down and looks away.

Simon leans forward. 'Hazel Nethercote's your mother,' he says gently.

Alan suddenly stands. 'You need to leave.' His voice cracks as he tries to control a tremor.

Simon softly presses again. 'I'm right, aren't I?'

No answer.

He reaches into his jacket pocket. 'I'll leave you my number. Call me whenever you're ready.' He leaves the letters along with the receipt for the ring and Alan's wife shows him out.

The air is cool and fresh as Simon steps into the front garden. He's given back the documents, but it hasn't been the joyous reunion he'd pictured. As he strolls towards the station, he hears the clickety clack of a woman's shoes on the pavement behind him. He turns. It's Alan's wife.

'You were right,' she says, when she catches him. 'Hazel never mentioned John. Not once. Not to Alan, nor his brother nor his father, though Alan says they always suspected there had been a previous romance.'

Simon doesn't know what to say. 'I'm sorry. I should have thought.' He knows it sounds crass.

'He's always wondered,' she says. She's about to say more but seems to think better of it. She reaches into her pocket, removes three sheets of paper and hands them to Simon. 'I think I should return these,' she says. 'John was a brave man. But so was Hazel's husband and whatever happened, he was always Alan's father. Best not to hang on to them.'

Simon nods and takes the papers. 'Call me if Alan changes his mind,' he says, then continues up the street.

If he buries John's papers it would feel like burying John's memory. Maybe he'd just fold them and tuck them away in the art deco sugar bowl now sitting in the living room cabinet.