

Pandora's Trunk

It was three weeks after Dad's funeral.

My mother Christine had passed six months earlier. A massive stroke.

I had been working through their possessions in my former family home in Upper Largo, using a rented van to distribute items to various charity shops around the East Nuek.

I was sleeping at a B&B nearby, eating out at the *Ship Inn* in Ellie.

Now, with both parents gone, leaden grief was bearing down on me. Everything seemed too difficult to face alone. I think it's harder for an only child. If I had had a sibling, we could have supported each other.

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I climbed the drop-down ladder into the attic.

It was dusty and warm, heated by a large, south-facing Velux window.

I opened it and the sound of the sea seeped into the small room, heaving and rolling lazily up the beach a few hundred yards away.

I looked out towards the Isle of May, one of Dad's favourite places.

The small space was dominated by a large, leather bound trunk. There was a folding chair I recognised from my youth when Dad and I went camping and hiking the hills, bird spotting, adding to our tally. Beside the chair was a folding table with an empty mug encrusted with dried out coffee and an ashtray containing spent matches and the scrapings from a pipe.

Dad had smoked a pipe from the age of fourteen, given an expensive Meerschaum and a block of *War Horse* tobacco by his grandfather for his birthday with the words, often repeated, an old family legend:

'Ronnie, give it a go. They say it strengthens your lungs and I would agree. I've smoked a pipe for nearly fifty years and I can still climb Largo Law without breaking stride. And a pipe fair keeps the midges and clegs at bay, eh?'

Sadly, the old myth that smoking was good for us meant the my father died a slow and pain-filled death of lung cancer caused by pipe smoking.

Of course I had tried smoking, cigarettes, but I hated the taste and quickly gave it up, although I did enjoy the second-hand smell of my father's pipe tobacco, a smell which varied over the years then finally settled to *Condor* ready-rubbed.

I sat down and took a swig of coffee from my flask then opened the lid of the trunk.

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It was piled high with books and old vinyl records in various format, 78 rpm, 33 rpm and a few at 45 rpm, EPs (extended play).

On top, inside a clear Ziplock plastic envelope was a book entitled 'Anything Goes'¹.

Beside the book, inside a second Ziplock envelope was a pair of white gloves.

I snapped the front page of the book with my phone and asked *Google* if it was valuable.

'A 1934 edition of *Anything Goes* is so rare it is priceless, provided it is in good condition.'

I looked up *YouTube* and found a version of Cole Porter singing the title song back in the 1930s²

I put in my EarPods, listening humming along, following the lyrics on my phone.

I searched *YouTube* again and found a more modern stage version³.

I put on the gloves and extracted the book. As I scanned through it an envelope dropped to my feet. I replaced the book in the Ziplock and opened the envelope.

It had been typed on a manual typewriter.

It was on letterhead from the *Sunnyside Care Home, Torquay, Devon*, often called the British Riviera because of its mild climate.

¹

A Musical Comedy in Two Acts. Music and Lyrics by Cole Porter.
Book by Guy Bolton and P. G. Wodehouse, revised by Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse (1934)

<https://www.sondheimguide.com/porter/anything.html#:~:text=revised%20by%20Howard%20Lindsay%20and%20Russel%20Crouse>

²

Anything Goes on *YouTube*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IT_ryl9P5ZE
Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Cole-porter-anything-goes-lyrics>

³

National Theatre (2003 cast):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ejg1kpDKRxs&list=PL0q5K8YsDyFP3wjbUjhPj32wSsB6HLInh>

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Ronnie,

Please accept my collection and enjoy it.

Keep our secrets too.

As we agreed at the start, after that first night of 'sin', it is possible to love two partners without spoiling things, without hurting anyone.

I think we did well, don't you? Those RSPB weekends in the Lake District were the highlights of my life.

I'm on my final few weeks and they have been wonderful here, as they were with Derek last year. I so wanted to come to see you but, with my treatment regime, it was impossible.

So, a last farewell.

And remember:

'Anything Goes'.

Marianne

'Aunt' Marriane and 'Uncle' Derek.

They had lived in Edinburgh but had a holiday house in Ellie. The two Lawyers had met in the harbour in Crail where Dad had his lobster boat, his hobby business alongside his Family Law practice. Derek Houseman had been a QC, Corporate Law, a hot-shot. He had a 'gin palace', as dad called his large catamaran.

Their daughter Edwina had been at St Andrews at the same time as me and we had dated on and off for a year until the Right Honourable Dugald Mactaggart caught her eye and I was history.

I stayed on a St Andrews for my PhD then moved to Abertay to teach Computer Science and found a top floor flat in a new development, ground which had been part of the former Dundee Royal Infirmary.

I heard on the grapevine that Edwina and Dugald had married but that it lasted only a few years by which time they had moved to Glasgow. In recent months I heard she was in Manchester, a Director in a media advertising agency.

My watch alarm sounded, time to take Jake for a walk.

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Jake and I went in my CRV to the beach at Ellie. I threw sticks for him as the tide rose. Eventually he flopped at my feet and we moved to a bench overlooking the harbour, watching the sailing club dinghies racing round the buoys.

My eyes scanned over to the far shore as I tried to pick out the large villa which had been the Houseman's holiday home.

On my iPhone I searched for Edwina Houseman then Edwina MacTaggart.

No luck.

Let it go, a small voice told me, immediately countermanded by the opposing thought:

Anything Goes!

I scrolled through the *Perplexity* listings for media advertising agencies in Manchester. Dozens and then a name pinged back from somewhere - *Klondike Ventures*.

I searched their website and there she was:

Edwina Houseman, Regional Director, Scotland.

I delved and found her base in an office complex near Haymarket Railway Station.

My finger hovered over their telephone number.

It was 4:33 pm. A Friday afternoon.

Anything Goes!

I pressed down then held the 'phone to my ear.

'Klondike Ventures, how may I help?'

'Hello, my name is Ralph Brewster, a friend of Edwina Houseman. Would it be possible to speak to her, please.'

'May I say why you are calling?'

I wavered then said:

'It's about a bereavement.'

'Hold please.'

After a series of clicks she returned:

'I'm patching you through to her mobile, it's a bit complicated but just wait, please.'

Then the warm dulcet tone from the past:

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'Ralph Brewster, is that really you?'

'Yes, Edwina. Look, I cheated a bit. My father died about five weeks ago. Mum passed about six months ago. I'm at Largo clearing out the house and your name came up.'

'Are you at the Largo house now?'

'No, I'm at Ellie, looking across at your old holiday house. Where are you?'

'I'm sitting in the garden here at Ellie. I own the old place now but it's in need of some TLC. So, Ralphie, where are you, exactly?'

I explained.

'Got you! I'm using Mum's old binos and there you are plain as day. Is that your black lab at your feet?'

'Jake, yes. Look, fancy joining me at the *Ship Inn* for a bite to eat?'

'Why not? Beats the hell out of another ready meal. See you there in fifteen minutes, okay?'

'Right, I'll get Jake hosed down and dried and see you outside.'

'Ralphie, are you single again?'

'Yes, Deirdre met an Aussie Backpacker. Inherited wealth. His father owned a mining operation. They live in Margaret River. I looked it up online, on *Google Earth*. Their spread is about the size of St Andrews Botanic Gardens. Palatial.'

'**Good!** Excellent! See you soon.'

After our meal we walked and talked. Jake was recovered, almost. He is twelve now, slowing down.

It was fully dark when we reached my CRV.

'Ralphie, fancy a coffee at my place?'

'Sounds good to me.'

Anything Goes!

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We shared a few small whiskies.

I was almost asleep when Edwina tapped gently on the door of the bedroom she had offered.

'Ralphie, there's a horrible gigantic spider in my room. Can I share with you, please?'

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'Yes. Yes please.'

I wondered if I should tell her about my father and her mother.

I wondered if she was the rightful owner of the contents of the trunk in my Dad's attic.

I lifted the duvet and she slipped in, kissed me fiercely and slid her hand down.

'Oh Ralphie, why did I let that brute steal me from you?'

'Aaaw, Ralphie, that's so, so nice.'

Anything Goes!