

Sue Stokes

The Package

It was just sitting there - an insignificant looking package. I'd never been in Lena's wardrobe before. I was looking for the navy court shoes she'd worn to our Stephen's wedding, to go with the whole "mother of the groom" outfit. It was only when I moved the candlewick bedspread that the package was revealed.

It was lighter than I expected when I put it on the bed. Lena had been in charge of Christmas and birthday presents but you don't wrap a present in brown paper and tie it with string.

Turning the package over I saw the envelope. Lena had written my name "George" and the instruction "Open the package before you read this." I'd seen many envelopes with Lena's handwriting on. It was in one of those precious letters that she told me I was a dad - our Stephen was born whilst I was serving in Germany after the war.

It had been hard for Lena, coping with a newborn and deciding to move house. Apparently, her Aunt Clara had asked Lena to help take care of her in exchange for accommodation. Well, Lena jumped at the chance to move out of our lodgings next to the railway sidings and move to the coast.

I looked again at the package in front of me. I got Lena's nail scissors from her bedside drawer. It felt as if I was invading her privacy but she wasn't here anymore to take offence.

The brown paper wrapping revealed an old shirt box and a blue blanket with a pair of white booties and a romper suit with a boat embroidered on the front inside. Had these been Stephen's? I'd missed his first 6 months so he may have outgrown them before I meet him.

The shirt box contained newspaper cuttings. I spread them out over the bed, trying to work out why Lena had them. The headlines reported a missing baby boy.

My head was spinning. Why was this of interest to Lena? I don't remember her telling me about a baby going missing in any of her letters.

I read what looked like a front-page article. It mentioned the address of the missing baby which was across town from our lodgings. The pages in the envelope were filled with Len's handwriting, front and back.

"I'm sorry George."

Those were the first words. What did she have to be sorry about? She'd been a good wife, a lovely mother to Stephen and then Jeannie.

"If you've read the newspaper cuttings you might have guessed what I'm going to tell you. I'm not proud of what I did. You were away and I was carrying our baby. I'd got steady cleaning work and then Aunt Clara got in touch to ask me to go to take care of her. I wrote back to say it was a lovely idea, especially for a new baby."

It all happened so quickly. The pains started when I got home from work one day. I knew it was too early for the baby to come. I didn't get chance to call anyone for help. The baby came with no sound, no movement. The cord was around it's neck. It was a little boy – our boy; the boy we had longed for.

I wrapped him in my cardigan. I sat there for hours, cradling our beautiful boy. I couldn't let you down; I couldn't write and tell you our precious baby was gone. He had been born, and died, about 7pm on Saturday 12th October.

Early the next morning, I put him in a pillowcase wrapped in my cardigan. It was still dark when I placed him deep in the ground on the other side of the fence behind our yard, on the slope down to the railway tracks.

The next day I went to work as usual, with a pillow instead of our baby. I couldn't bear the idea of explaining what had happened. I told my ladies that I was moving to have the baby at my aunt's.

I'd heard a baby crying before in the garden next to Mrs Simpson's. It was crying that afternoon. He had on a lovely romper suit with a boat embroidered on the front. I wrapped him in his blue blanket, cradled him to me and he slept.

I wasn't thinking. I just took him and laid him in the bottom of my shopping basket. I got my wages from Mrs Simpson, said my goodbyes and walked home with my precious package.

When I arrived at Aunt Clara's she was surprised to see me, especially with a baby, but she was relieved to have someone to look after her. It was clear she wasn't well at all and that she wasn't going to get better. We got into a routine and Aunt Clara loved cuddling Stephen.

I felt bad for his mother but the baby was our baby - Stephen. You were so thrilled when you finally got to meet him. We were a family, we were happy. When Aunt Clara died, and left us the house, I knew everything was going to be alright.

Please don't hate me. I pray I am not around when you find this letter and the package.

I have always loved you George."

I couldn't grasp what Lena had written – the secret she had kept. Questions were racing through my mind. Do I tell Stephen? If I tell him, do I tell the police? Can I carry Lena's secret, knowing another mother has been denied the truth about her missing son?

I carefully folded the pages and put them back into the envelope. The newspaper cuttings went back into the shirt box and the booties and romper suit into the blanket.

Tomorrow, I'll take the navy court shoes and her wedding outfit to the undertakers and ask them to put the package with her in the coffin.