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I headed straight home, clutching the parcel to my chest. Being back amongst the street lights, traffic, people going about their evening business, I hoped everything would seem a bit less weird: it didn't. I felt stunned. My brain, never good at staying quiet, leapt from one thing to the other as I walked.

My grandad in his younger days had travelled to Egypt, Turkey, Palestine, to buy copies of ancient relics to sell. Professor Hanawati was a Middle Eastern art expert. So did that mean this professor – this *dead* man – was the old friend Grandad had told me about, who'd got back in touch after all these years? He'd certainly never mentioned him before now. Nor had he ever talked about mistakes from the past.

I didn't want to dwell on strange coincidences. But it was hard not to, when the professor had died in such a peculiar way, and now Grandad was sick, all within the same twenty-four hours.

Back at ours, Mum still hadn't returned from the hospital. Dad was in the kitchen, arguing with the stove that wouldn't light: he didn't hear me come in. I went straight to my bedroom, which was really little more than a cupboard at the end of the hall. But it was mine, and it had a door on it that at times like this was good to shut behind you. Without taking off my coat, I sat on my bed to study the parcel closely. This was Grandad's package, not mine, I warned myself. But the urge to look inside was too strong.

I opened it.

Wrapped in the paper was a rough wooden box. It was about six inches tall and three inches deep, similar to the ones I'd seen Dad bring home at Christmas with a bottle of port inside. At the top was a lid, the clasp and hinges rusty, like it hadn't been opened for years. It opened now, though, smooth as anything – almost, rather creepily, as if it was willing me to look inside.

The box was full of musty-smelling straw. Digging my hand in, I could feel something cold and smooth. At first glance, it looked like a metal jar or vase of some sort. I took it out, holding it to the light. My breath caught. It was, without doubt, the most incredible thing I'd ever seen.

The jar had a stopper in its neck that wouldn't shift. It was fascinating, that stopper, shaped like an animal's head, with the long pointy snout and stand-up ears of Anubis, the Egyptian god who guided souls to the underworld. I recognised it from pictures Grandad had showed me, and our many visits to museums. The lid didn't want to come off, though. I tried pulling it, turning it. I even held the whole jar upside down and gave it a little shake. There were no signs that it was meant to open: no latch or clasp, yet it sounded hollow, and though I might've been imagining it, when I shook it, something moved inside.

Now, I'd been in Grandad's shop enough to know a nice piece when I saw one, but this jar was seriously old-looking – and the things Grandad collected generally weren't. They were fakes – copies of lovely old things at affordable prices. You could buy them in the street in Egypt, apparently.

This jar was in a whole different league. It was covered all over in little pictures of animals and birds and squiggly lines: hieroglyphics. Though the jar was grimy with dirt, you could see it was made out of gold. To be honest, it was so beautiful, it made me a bit afraid. The only place I'd ever seen things half as magnificent was in cabinets at the British Museum. I couldn't

think why my grandad had been sent something quite so extraordinary.

Question after question bubbled up in my head, and there was no Grandad there to answer them, which was mightily frustrating. The only thing for it was to go and see him. Not to take him flowers or grapes or whatever people did when they visited hospitals, but to give him the parcel. He'd know what to do with it. What it was all about. I only hoped he wasn't too horribly ill to see me.

Out in the hallway, the front door slammed. Wet things were being hung up, the rattle of an umbrella returned to its stand: signs that Mum was home. My heart thumped uncomfortably as I heard her say something to Dad in a low voice. Then she called to me: 'Lil? You there?'

'Coming!' I answered.

Tucking the jar back inside the box, I hid it under my covers and, though I was dreading it, went to hear the news from the hospital.

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What Mum told me was worrying to say the least: Grandad had a consumption in his lungs. He had a

fever, too, and other strange symptoms that the doctors thought were malaria.

'Malaria?' I didn't understand. How could you get malaria in North London?

'He got it years ago on his travels. A flare-up of an old illness, the doctor said – and what with his lungs ...' Mum started to cry. Quietly. Miserably.

It made me teary too. I hated it when she got upset. Mostly, it was over much smaller things than this, the stuff a smile or a pat on the arm would make better. But this was serious, and called for tea. I gave Mum hers with extra sugar, which usually did the trick when she was low.

'How will he ever pay for the hospital?' Mum sighed, teacup in hand.

Dad stared broodily at the fire. 'We can hardly manage our own bills, love. Don't ask me to start helping your father now.'

Revived a bit, Mum then started fretting over me: 'You're not to visit him, Lil, I'm warning you, he's infectious.' And Dad chipped in with: 'She'll be at school, not hanging around hospital wards.'

So I nodded and tried to look sensible, though my mind was already made up: I *was* going to see him tomorrow, and they couldn't stop me. I stayed tight-lipped about the strange business with the parcel too.

Mum already had enough to worry about, and Dad, a stickler for doing things properly, would probably make me take it to the police.

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That night I couldn't sleep for toffee. Worrying about Grandad was bad enough, but I'd not counted on the jar disturbing me like it did. I'd left the box on my chair, but every time I nearly nodded off, my eyes would ping open and I'd find myself staring at it again. Eventually, I put the light on. Then my mind started playing tricks: was the parcel moving? What was that rustling sound? Was the package *unwrapping* itself?

It was stupid, thinking like this. But in the end I only felt better once the parcel was out of sight under my bed. My room became familiar again too: the chair heaped with clothes, a rag rug on the bare floor, thin curtains at the window that always let in a draught.

'We could make it look nicer, couldn't we, eh?' Mum said when we first came to live here. 'A bit of lace, a few dried flowers?'

I'd pulled a face and she sighed. 'Oh, Lil! You're so plain and practical. Sometimes I think you'd rather have been born a boy!'

Actually, she had a point. Yet as soon as she'd said it, she kissed the top of my head and insisted she didn't mean it.

Even now the only decoration was on the wall above my bed, where I'd stuck a postcard Grandad bought me on our last visit to the British Museum. It was of the Rosetta Stone, that big grey slab covered in ancient writing that meant the rest of the world could translate hieroglyphics.

Turning out my bedside lamp, I hoped I'd finally go to sleep. But instead, the darkness swirled with ancient symbols. When I tried to think of something else, I kept coming back to Egypt, only this time it was today's other news story, the one about Howard Carter and Tutankhamun's tomb.

Despite what Grandad thought of Mr Carter, people *were* fascinated by the story. There was something about it – a brave explorer searching for unknown treasures – that captured the imagination like a good old-fashioned adventure tale, the sort Dad would've read as a boy. I devoured them myself too sometimes, when my Latin homework got too dull.

For years archaeologists had been digging in the place they called the Valley of the Kings. They'd discovered plenty of royal tombs – those of Thutmose

and Rameses II being two of the famous ones – yet no one had ever found the pharaoh Tutankhamun. They'd given up looking, all except for one man: Howard Carter. Obsessed with the missing tomb, he was back in Egypt for one last search.

Dad said the story captured people's hearts because Tutankhamun had died young, which made us think of all our soldiers whose war graves were also lost. But I reckoned it had just as much to do with treasure, because we knew how the Egyptians buried their kings with loads of gold. It was a hopeful story too, in a way that the other one about human feet definitely wasn't.

The worst news of all, though, was Grandad's. The business with his lungs I'd perhaps seen coming, but *malaria*? I didn't know you could get that again once you'd had it. Funny how something from all those years ago had come back to make trouble now.