



THE VASE



Story Compiled By
Belfast u3a Creative Writing Group Members
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Foreword

“The Vase,” is the end product of a project undertaken by members of the Monday Creative Writing Group.

Task Set

Members were presented with a photograph – in this instance a vase. The photo was intended as a means of inspiration for an evolving story. The first person set the scene with an opening short piece. This was then emailed to the next member of the group who added a piece. As each piece was added the story as it progressed was emailed to the next person and so the story evolved to its completion.

In order to explain the nature of the project and capture the interest of how the story flowed, each member’s excerpt is indicated. Each person’s talent is not defined by the number of words, but rather by the imagination expressed, making it either easier or more challenging for the next person!

Lena (Convenor)

Ps I hope if any of my family members log on to Belfast u3a website and read this story, it will not cause a similar family feud as to why I am in possession of this family heirloom!

‘Hello Kathleen,’ Mary said, recognising her sister’s number as she lifted the receiver.

“Were you watching “The Antiques Roadshow?”

“No” replied Mary, I’m watching a film on Channel 4, but I have it recorded”

“Watch it straight away and forget your film and then phone me back.”

“What’s up sister? What’s the panic?”

"Our Mother's missing vase – the one that went missing at her funeral, I would recognise it anywhere and so will you when you see it. You remember, it was a wedding present and one of the few she had left after all those years? Everybody admired it and when it went missing after the funeral, we presumed that it been accidentally broken by one of the grandchildren and they were afraid to own up." **(Lena)**

"And did they say what it was worth?"

"They are just about to. Turn over to BBC1 immediately and you'll see it!"

Mary grabbed the remote control and clicked Channel 1 at once. There, right enough was the vase, a sober looking man who had brought it and an antique expert in ceramics called Millicent. She turned the vase upside down.

"You see this mark, Martin" she said. "That indicates it is a limited edition of a well known Mediterranean pottery of the 19th century. It's genuine all right. This is a collector's piece now and would be rare in this country. Where did you get it Martin? Is it a family heirloom?"

"Oh no, my wife bought it in a charity shop last month. We didn't know anything about antique pottery, but a friend of ours said it might be worth something and why didn't we get it valued"

"Well, I think your friend was right. I would say it could fetch £20,000 - £25,000. It's a very popular period and is in good order."

Mary was stunned but, realising she was still on the phone to Kathleen, she collected her wits and pronounced "We should go round the charity shops in Martin's area and try to find out where it came from. Where did you say the programme was from?"

"Mount Stewart" replied Kathleen. "Did you not recognize Martin?"

(Felicity)

" No I dont think so, should I ? said Mary

“ Well, I think he came to Mothers Wake. Do you not remember he came with Barbara Blake? Thats what piqued my interest. I wondered if she had got a new man, but turns out they just arrived at the door at the same time.”

“How can you be sure ? interjected Mary.

“For a start, it’s the same suit. Also,I would recognise those eyes anywhere. Sure one is a different colour from the other and look at the tattoo on his neck.”

“ Gosh but you are very observant ”said Mary .

“Thats my former PSNI training” replied her sister .

“Heavens, I was so upset and at sixes and sevens that day that it was all a blur. ”

“I will tell you something else – not only did he say all the right things, but he had sweaty hands. I thought he was smarmy and I don’t trust a man with sweaty palms. ” pronounced Kathleen .

(Fionnuala)

Chapter 2

“You’ve always been like that, from when you were little, not trusting anyone, I mean”, said Mary. “But I can’t believe that he could have taken our vase; I mean how could he have managed it, the house was full of people all that afternoon and the vase is not exactly little. **And**, he looks so.....so, respectable”

“Yes, and so did the Great Train Robbers. I’m telling you, it was him; I can feel it in my bones, and in my water.”

Mary inwardly sighed; from the tone of her voice, she knew that Kathleen was in a determined mood. She had always been like this, from when she was very little; once she had made up her mind, there was no shifting her. Kathleen tired her out at times, she just wished that she could get back to crocheting the wee baby blanket that she was making for a friend, and to finishing her cup of tea.

“And I’ll tell you something else....”, added Kathleen - “Oh, no” thought Mary, “she’s still prattling on” – “my police “nose” tells me that hussy Barbara Blake is in on it as well”.

"But, but how can you even think that?", spluttered Mary, not quite believing where this conversation was heading.

"Take it from me, she's involved somehow or other; that story about them meeting on the doorstep? - was just that, a story. But I know you'll be glad to hear there is good news, Mary, it won't take me....I mean us, very long to solve this case andget back our mother's vase."

"Well, I'm very glad to hear that, I would like to get it back - just for old time's sake", said Mary.

Down the phone, Mary could hear Kathleen trying to resist laughing. "I just want it back because it's worth twenty thousand", she said, "Sammy and I have always wanted to go on a cruise. "

"Really, Kathleen, have you no thought for family tradition?" said a shocked and disappointed Mary, "And what makes you think we can solve this case", she said in a demanding sort of voice.

Kathleen laughed again,"Well, just consider, anyone who wears the same suit, with the same tattoo and those unusual eyes, either doesn't care or is a wee bit stupid, personally...I think it's the latter."

Mary knew it was time to give in. "Alright she said, what do we do now? The programme was probably recorded weeks ago. He - and she - could be anywhere by now."

"No", said Kathleen, "the BBC is trying something new. The "Antiques Roadshow" is going out live, which means that it is still going on. Its time for us to put on our deerstalkers and get down to Mount Stewart"

"Right said Kathleen throwing on her coat, "I'll meet you at the crossroads in fifteen minutes. Bring your camera.? **(Jim)**

Mary was parked in the lay by when her sister drove up "Good timing" she said.

"I have a plan, we'll go directly to Mount Stewart and I will seek out Millicent, the expert, to find out what advice and information she has given to the so called owner about selling the vase."

"What about me? What will I be doing " Mary asked "You will mingle with the crowd and take photos of Martin and Barbara Blake if you see them. Don't arouse their suspicions whatever you do....and keep your phone handy, we might have to move quickly ".

Mary nodded agreement as her sister added that they would need to inform the authorities at Mount Stewart and possibly the police.

Although they had wasted no time the Fair was drawing to a close and cars and vans were straggling out through the gates.

Mary adjusted her long distance spectacles , but she recognised no one. No surprise she thought. I'm not sure who I'm looking for.

Kathleen soon found a guide who directed her towards a brightly coloured tent where the experts were having refreshments and chatting. It all appeared relaxed and elegant. She drew a deep breath and stated loudly and in her best accent "I wish to speak to Millicent, the ceramics expert," adding, "I have reason to believe she was examining stolen goods". **(Sheila)**

There was a gasp from the small group as they turned to see who was making such a statement.

Millicent set down her glass as she slowly approached Kathleen.

"That is a very serious statement you just made. I will speak with you in the quiet ceramics inspection chalet. Follow me."

"Stolen goods indeed", said Millicent . "What makes you think that?"

Kathleen explained about the vase that she saw in the programme that had just ended It had belonged to her mother and she wanted it returned to her family.

We need information on the person who brought it to you--his name, address and his phone number if you have it.

"Oh! do you indeed?" said Millicent, sharply " We do not divulge information on anyone who brings items to us. I would advise you to go to the police. My role is as a presenter. I am unable to discuss this further. The gates will be closing soon. I will show you the way out."

"Lets get out of here." Kathleen felt deflated as she and Mary got into the car. "We didn't get a chance to put our case. We could have given that woman the history of the vase, but the so-called expert showed no interest whatsoever."

Kathleen decided that their next move had to be a visit to Sir Francis Miller.

"Who on earth is Sir Francis Miller when he's at home?" asked Mary open mouthed.

"He is a retired antiques expert, for Sotheby's in London. Remember, this used to be my area when I was in the job. We'll be better informed after a chat with him. His house is on the way home, so it is not out of our way."

"This is a bit daring," said Mary "you're not in the job now you know." Mary just wanted to go home, but she nodded her head in agreement then sat back and let her bossy sister take the lead.

Kathleen rang the bell and they could hear its echo. "Nobody at home, maybe he's in the garden," said Mary as she peered through the large drawing room window..

"Kathleen, Kathleen come and have a look at this" "Oh what a beautiful room. I love the way the colours blend together. You could get some ideas for your own house here. Those curtains! Exquisite, specially made. No Harry Corry here!

Yes, yes I know, but look at the mantelpiece!

They were staring at their Mother's vase.

Kathleen couldn't believe her eyes. She screamed, shaking with rage and exclaiming that this vase should be in her house or her sister's, not in the house of this thief. This was becoming more and more mysterious. Could there possibly be 2 vases? Or was

Sir Francis Miller somehow involved with Martin in obtaining the vase either legally or illegally.

Kathleen knew now that she had been right. The vase had been stolen and now it was in Sir Francis Miller's drawing room.

"We'll have to get it back however we plan to do it. But now we need to get out of here" said Kathleen.

What in the name of God is this? roared Sir Francis as he came around the corner to find the 2 women looking in his drawing room window. He was furious. He told them they were trespassing and shouted about getting the police. Taking his phone from his pocket he pressed one key. There was an immediate answer.

"We'll be right there, Sir", they heard.

Kathleen and Mary were shaking with fear, trying unconvincingly, to explain about their Mother's stolen vase which they wanted back.

"What! Are you accusing me of something?" demanded Sir Francis.

When the police arrived Sir Francis explained that these 2 women were trespassers; that they were making accusations about a stolen vase.

"Is this right?" one of the policemen asked the sisters.

Kathleen still appeared furious and somewhat agitated claiming that the vase was their Mother's and had been stolen.. Speaking very calmly and deliberately, Sir Francis stated that he bought the vase from two people after the Antiques Roadshow. A young man by the name of Martin and his partner, Barbara.

The police asked the two sisters to come with them to the police station to make a statement. Reluctantly, the sisters agreed, protesting vehemently, that they were not criminals. **(Eithne)**

Mary also complained about being arrested proclaiming, "We are both innocent and the original owners of the vase."

When they both got to the station, the police wanted to interview Mary and Kathleen straight away, but Kathleen insisted upon legal representation, before either of them gave a statement.

They had to wait four hours until their solicitor, Paul Edmundson, arrived. He told them to be as honest as possible about the whole affair.

Mary and Kathleen went into great detail about how Martin and Barbara had come to their Mother's wake and the vase went missing at the funeral. Kathleen had spotted Martin on the 'Antiques Road Show' from Mount Stewart and phoned her sister Kathleen right away. Both of them decided to go to the National Trust House right away to see if they could get it back.

The police believed their story and told them that if the two women could provide photographic evidence and insurance details then they would look into the case. **(Claire)**

"Kathleen where are we going to get photographic evidence? We didn't report the vase missing to the police at the time, because we were so sure that our niece Lily's badly behaved twins had broken it. They were grabbing at ornaments that were on display in the sitting room and pulling them out of each other's hands. She totally ignored their antics, but everyone else at the wake was dying to reprimand them. Now unfortunately, we haven't got a crime number for the theft and the house has been sold so there's no insurance cover".

"I've already realised that, Mary. Our only hope is to find that scoundrel Martin and his sidekick. Kathleen, why did you call Barbara a hussy earlier? She was very well presented and polite at the funeral."

"Oh don't be deceived! She was in my class at school but I was never in her clique, though I secretly admired them. They broke all the rules. Barbara dyed her hair jet black and had her belly button pierced. She would never have taken me under her notice- that's why I was so surprised when she turned up at

Mother's wake. I thought she had turned into a really nice person. When I opened the door and Martin and she were standing on the doorstep side by side, I just presumed they were together.

Do you know Mary ,the more I think about Martin's strange eyes the more an old memory keeps resurfacing. I remember in the course of my work having to go to a house up the Antrim Road.....(**Oonagh**)

" It was one of those three storey houses that had been split into flats. The ground floor flat had been broken into. We never did get the perpetrator. But we interviewed the people living in the other flats and Martin was one them. I remember him clearly. He was half naked when he answered the door, Barbara Blake was probably lurking in the back, and then there's those eyes."

"I wish you'd stop fixating on his eyes," sighed Mary. "Other people do have different coloured eyes, Sally's brother Peter and David Bowie to name two."

"Well, I don't remember either of them at the Wake," snapped Kathleen. "Anyway, it's too much of a coincidence. He's a crook, I can feel it in my bones. He may have got away with it the last time, but I'm going to make sure he pays for his crime this time."

Mary sighed again. Kathleen was exhausting when she got the bit between her teeth.

"Don't you think we should leave it to the police," Mary asked hopefully.

"Ha, don't make me laugh," Kathleen sneered. "PC Plod! What sort of priority do you think they're going to give to the theft of our vase?"

Considering Kathleen had been a police officer herself, Mary thought she was being unduly harsh. She suspected Kathleen was enjoying sleuthing and was in for the long haul. Mary desperately wanted to get back to her own life. She remembered

she'd seen Lily talking at length to Martin at the Wake. She decided to ring her to see if he had said why he was there.

"Lovely chap Martin, has his own gardening business," Lily told her. "He's a good friend of your brother, Brian. I'm surprised you've never met him before."

Mary relayed this to Kathleen.

"I might have known he was one of Brian's cronies," Kathleen grumbled. "We'll head round to his house straight away and see what else he can tell us about Martin"..... **(Shelley)**

They left immediately to see Brian. He lived thirty miles away. Mary chose to drive. Kathleen, in the mood she was in, was not a safe option. They were lucky to find him at home.

He listened carefully to the whole story.

The rush to Mountstewart, the presumption on Kathleen's part that Martin and his supposed partner-in- crime Barbara Blake were guilty of the theft of their late mother's vase. He tut tutted at the rush to Sir Francis Millar's and their subsequent removal by the police.

"Now girls" he said, he could be very patronising, "It has been a long day for you both, chasing round the countryside, trespassing on people's property and twiddling your thumbs in the police station for hours."

"I will get my whiteboard and we shall set out all the facts and a list of possible suspects." Was there a crime at all?

Is it mother's vase?

If so ,who else could have possibly taken it at the wake?

It is a large object that would be difficult to remove unobserved! The vase at Mount Stewart was allegedly bought at a charity shop by Martin's wife Sarah.

They are both known to me and I find the idea that they would steal it rather unlikely.

I would also be shocked if Martin had a romantic or criminal liaison with a hussy named Barbara. He would also be rather stupid to sell stolen goods after an assessment of it's value on a show watched by millions.

The idea that my daughter Lily's two little demons broke it as you had originally assumed is entirely possible - I have just this morning saved the dog from a haircut by that pair."

We have to have irrefutable proof that the vase was mother's and the suspect or suspects had motive and opportunity. We need to investigate the local charity shops and discreetly enquire among friends and relations who attended the wake if they saw anything suspicious involving a large vase." "The investigation will proceed tomorrow we meet at noon!" "A final point dear sisters - if it proves to be mother's vase it is not just yours, but, I believe, the property of all her children!"

(Maura)

The next day, the sisters visited Brian. 'Can you find out diplomatically which charity shop Sarah got the vase in, Brian?' suggested Kathleen. 'I mean without telling Martin why you want to know. Then we can ask about it at the shop and find out where they got it'

'I can indeed. Said Brian. 'I'll tell Martin I saw him on the Antiques Roadshow and chat to him about how well he did. Just naturally like. I'll wait till I see him at the football or the pub. He's a great one for flattery Martin. He'll want to tell me all about it! And I'll do better than that.' He added 'I have photos of the two of them and I'll produce one for you to take to the charity shop for them to identify Sarah or even Martin if he was there too.'

'That will be useful evidence' Kathleen responded 'And make sure you don't tell him any more. It's possible he may hear you're looking for the vase to get it back, but don't give him any more information so he doesn't know we suspect him.'

It was a few weeks till Brian bumped into Martin at a match. He suggested they have a drink in the pub afterwards and got chatting. Martin passed on his condolences again on the death

of Brian's mother and said how glad he was he managed to be at the funeral and the wake. Brian held back a bit, as he didn't want to move straight from the wake to the vase. But he got his chance later when they were talking about Sunday evening TV programmes.

'Talking about Sunday evenings, I saw you on the Antiques Road Show.' He said laughing. 'Didn't you do well? How do you get on to that? Sometimes there seems to be a big long queue of people. You did well to get to an expert.'

'Oh Aye! Martin responded 'It's just my luck! I seem to always be lucky at these things. First of all, Sarah finding a rare piece at a charity shop and then me getting in near the front of the queue. And they hadn't much ceramics that week. I heard the producer saying that. He said they like to have a mix of items and there was a lot of jewellery and paintings that time. So he moved me up the queue.'

'Where on earth did Sarah get the item? A charity shop you say? I thought all the charity shops sold stuff on eBay these days and you didn't get much dear stuff in the shop.' The minute he said it, he knew it was a mistake. If it wasn't from a charity shop, Martin would be guarded about this now.

Brian gabled on to try and recover. 'But it is amazing what you can get in charity shops. We got a complete dinner table and chairs when we moved house and Mary buys all her glasses and utensils and things down in Action Cancer.'

'I think it was there Sarah got the vase. But it could have been Oxfam on Ormeau Road. She's goes to both when she's at her mother's. I forget where she said she got it.'

This was not going well but Brian didn't want to push it any further. The girls would have to try a few shops on Sarah's usual beat. He went on to talk about other things and they left to go home after a few beers.

He rang Kathleen and told her what he had found out.

'Well, that's something to go on' she said 'There are only a few charity shops on Ormeau Road so we can try them all. Have you the photo for us?'

'I have and I found one of us all at Mammy's last Christmas in front of the fireplace and it gives a good view of the vase. Do you want that too? You can establish if they ever had it and whether Sarah bought it all in one go. But be careful. If she goes there regularly they probably know her and will tell her when she comes in. You should go on your own and Mary should go to the next one.'

Neither of the two shops had seen the vase. They were careful to ask for the manager who would be there nearly every day and not a casual volunteer who could have missed it. They didn't show Sarah's photo. There was no need if they hadn't sold the vase. And it was best not to alert her.

Kathleen thought they should try the other 2 charity shops on the road but they hadn't seen it either but one of the volunteers broke into the conversation. 'Is that the one was on the Antiques Road Show at Mountstewart?' she asked

'It is' said Mary 'Did you see it?'

'I was amazed that a charity shop wouldn't have had somebody who could tell a valuable antique from a bit of old pottery.' Continued the volunteer who had a label that said Julie. 'We've had a few things in here that the boss has sold on line to make more than you do in a shop like this. I wondered what she paid for it? I know that man and his wife. She comes in here every Monday. I must ask her.'

Mary waited for a chance to talk to Julie on her own and asked if she would find out where Sarah got the vase but not tell her somebody was asking. Mary would then return and see what she had discovered. 'I need to know who brought it in' she explained and Julie was satisfied with that explanation.

Next week, Julie had asked Sarah about the vase in a chatty way. Starting with 'I saw your husband on the Antiques Road show'

and following on from that. Sarah said she hadn't bought the vase at all. Martin had bought it on his way home from a funeral. But he didn't want to say that on TV. He thought it sounded better if she had bought it without knowing it was valuable. 'He didn't want to look stupid but he didn't mind if I did!' Sarah had explained.

The plot thickened. The three siblings got together again to see what should be the next move.

'We should go back to the police with the photos and the statement from the charity shop volunteer.'

'Maybe they can get fingerprints from the vase if Sir Francis will let them.' So the trio followed up the officers who had interviewed the girls and gave them the evidence. He rang Sir Francis on the spot and arranged to pick up the vase. Mary was surprised he agreed so readily but Kathleen said it was police procedure and he would have known that. He also took their fingerprints for elimination.

The next week the inspector turned up at Kathleen's house.

'I am glad to say we have recovered your vase' he said. We had Martin's fingerprints on record. He has a criminal record you know. Not surprisingly, there were your family's and his on the vase and one other women. After your tip-off, we questioned Barbara Blake and identified her fingerprints too. She broke down and confessed she had taken the vase but knew she would be recognised by you on the TV and Martin agreed to take the vase to be valued. He said he would wear dark glasses but it got cloudy so he had to take them off. They just hoped you wouldn't be watching. Martin is a bit of a second hand dealer. He had sold stuff to Sir Francis before. He'll have to pay back the money he got for the vase. And he and Barbara Blake will be charged with theft and disposing of stolen goods, but it might be some time before it comes to court. Sign here and you can take away the vase. They thanked the inspector and he left.

'Meantime I will avoid Martin and pretend it was all your doing' said Brian. 'And make sure I get my share of the vase money after all the help I've been.'

' I tell you what, little brother, why don't you treat us to fish and chips to celebrate and we'll think about it' said Mary.

'All's well that ends well!' was the reply (**Felicity**)