

“Morgan St Veterinary Practice. You’re speaking to Mark.”

“Hello. Can you help me? My dog was sick four times last night and I need to bring him in.”

Mark looked at his diary. His day was full—too full really. He couldn’t possibly take another appointment until Wednesday, or maybe even Thursday. “I have a spot on Wednesday at 4pm. Could you bring him in then? What type of dog is he, by the way?”

“Wednesday!” the voice roared down the phone. “I just told you, he needs to see someone today, straight away.”

Mark’s mind raced. Was there any way he could fit the dog in today? He had already booked appointments through his lunch break but maybe, yes surely Mrs Matthews’ cat wouldn’t take too long... “OK, I tell you what. I can squeeze him in at two o’clock. Can you bring him in then?”

“Two o’clock? That’s four hours away. But yes, OK, it will have to do I suppose.”

Mark forced himself to smile. “Thank you, sir. See you at two this afternoon.”

He hung the phone up without delay, flopped into a chair and ran his hand across his forehead. The day had hardly begun and already he felt exhausted.

“Tiffany,” he called.

His eighteen-year-old secretary popped her head around the door. “Yes Mark?”

“Can you write book in a consult for a Mr Hammond at two o’clock today?”

“But you don’t have any space.”

“I know that and you know that, but try explaining it to Mr Hammond. I’ll make it work, somehow. Just note it in the calendar, would you?”

“Of course.”

Mark had a dalmatian and a guinea pig waiting for him in the lab and another four animals, with their owners in the waiting room. He stood up to attend to the dalmatian when his phone rang again.

The caller ID said ‘Mum’ and he contemplated whether or not he should take the call. Conversations with his mother were usually brief so he answered it.

“Mum, I’m run off my feet here. Can we talk tonight?”

“It’s your grandma. She’s had a stroke and has been rushed to hospital. I’ll book the first flight I can get, but you need to go see her Mark. She needs someone with her. If anything were to happen....” His mum’s voice disappeared into the soft sound of sniffs and sobs.

“But I can’t,” Mark said in an exasperated tone of voice. “Things are manic here. I just can’t get away.”

“Of course you can. Get another vet to cover for you and let them deal with it. You’ve done that before, don’t you remember?”

“Of course I remember,” Mark snapped. “But it’s just too hard.”

“This is your grandma, Mark. She’s very sick and she needs family around her right now. You’re only a couple of hours away, but by the time I get a flight it will be, I don’t know, dinner time at the earliest before I arrive.”

Mark felt the guilt kicking in. “OK, look Mum. I’ll ring for a temp and I’ll head over there as soon as I can.”

“Good boy. I knew I could count on you.”

And with that, the conversation ended.

Mark drove along the Western Freeway with his window down and his elbow resting on the door of the car. He felt for Tiffany—he had left her in a pretty awful situation today, but what was he meant to do? He waited around until the replacement vet had arrived, then bolted out the door. Once home, he threw a few toiletries and items of clothing into a bag, locked the house, filled the car with petrol and headed for Ballarat.

This was the last thing he needed. He had spent years studying at university, trying to realise his dream of becoming a vet, and somehow he had done it. But the reality didn’t match up to the dream. He had bills to pay, reports to write and demanding customers to satisfy. He shouldn’t complain really, at least he had plenty of work, but it was all so tiring. Not just tiring, but stressful. Anyway, for better or for worse, he now had the rest of the week off to do what he could for his grandma.

Mark thought back to when he was a little boy. He and his mum also lived in Ballarat in those days. His mum was usually too busy working to spend any quality time with him, so after

school each day he would ride his bike to his grandma's property. She taught him nursery rhymes, read him stories and took him for walks all around Ballarat. Mark wasn't close to his grandfather—Pop was strict and Mark was scared of him. Later, after Pop had passed away, Grandma got a dog named Henry to keep her company. Not that Mark could ever imagine her being too lonely—he went there after school most days, an old man named Jim helped out with odd jobs around the farm and during the day she seemed to have a steady stream of visitors. But Mark loved Henry and whenever he went to visit his grandma, he and Henry were inseparable. Looking back now, Mark realises that his love of animals and his decision to become a vet all started with Henry.

When he arrived in Ballarat, Mark went straight to the hospital. There would be time later to drop his belongings at Grandma's house. "Excuse me," he said to the woman behind the front desk, "I'm here to see Rose-Anne Clifford."

The woman tapped on her keyboard. "Ah yes, here we are. And you're family, are you?"

"Yes. I'm her grandson."

"All right, you can see her. Take the lift up to Level 3 and she's in room 314."

"Thanks." Mark was relieved to see that his grandma had a private room. As he approached the bed he noticed a nurse making some notes on his grandmother's chart.

"Hi, I'm Mark."

"Hello Mark. I'm Catherine."

"How... how is she?"

Mark felt ridiculous. He could see that his grandmother wasn't in good shape—her eyes were closed, her breath was raspy and she looked so small, a fraction of her former self.

"She's doing about as well as we can expect at this stage."

"Was it a stroke?" he asked.

"Yes, but I might get the doctor to explain everything to you. He won't be long." She glanced at her watch. "He should be back over this way in roughly ten minutes. So why don't you settle yourself in, get a drink if you need one and then you can ask Dr Halliway any questions you have when he arrives."

“All right, thanks,” Mark said as he pulled a chair up beside the bed. He reached out and held his grandma’s hand. “So Grandma, are they treating you all right in here? They’d better be, or they’ll have me to answer to.”

He looked at her face. She seemed to be sleeping but for all he knew she could be in a deep coma. Without any warning she squeezed his hand.

Mark sat bolt upright. “Grandma, are you awake? Please wake up. It’s me, Mark.”

She squeezed his hand once more, turned her head from side to side and opened her eyes.

“Grandma! Thank goodness.”

Even though his grandmother was looking straight at him, she showed no signs of recognising who he was.

“It’s OK, Grandma,” Mark said. “The doctor will be here any minute but I’ll press your buzzer so the nurse can see that you’re awake.”

“Your grandfather....cave....flowers,” she said in a raspy voice.

“What was that, Grandma?” Mark asked desperately. “Did you say something about my grandfather?” But it was no good. Her eyes had closed again and she didn’t respond.

Mark let go of her hand and fumbled to find the buzzer. He pulled it out from behind a jug of water and pressed it. Two nurses came running into the room, followed by a tall young man dressed in a white coat, just like what Mark himself wore in the lab.

“Did something happen?” the doctor asked.

Mark nodded.

“Let me introduce myself. I’m Aaron Halliway and I’ve been monitoring Rose-Anne since she was admitted this morning. And you are...?”

Mark offered his hand. “I’m Mark, her grandson. I’ve not long arrived. I was sitting down here, holding her hand, and she opened her eyes and started talking.”

“What did she say?”

“It was difficult to understand, but something about a cave, and my grandfather, I think.”

Mark paused. “Yes, she said, ‘Your grandfather....cave....flowers. I think that’s what she said, anyway.’”

The doctor scratched his head. “It doesn’t make much sense, does it? Occasionally patients in comas will speak or open their eyes but it doesn’t mean that they have really woken up. I suspect those words may relate more to a dream your grandmother might have been having at the time, rather than anything in real life. Did her eyes open?”

“Yes, definitely, but not for long. Probably only about ten seconds.”

“All right, we will continue to monitor her. I’ll come back in half an hour.”

“Hang on,” Mark said. “Can I ask a few questions first?”

“Of course,” Dr Halliway replied.

“So, was it a stroke?”

“Yes, your grandmother suffered an ischemic stroke in the left hemisphere of her brain.”

“And will she get better?” Mark asked.

“Unfortunately it’s too early to say. The longer she stays in the coma, the less likely it is that she will make a full recovery, but the human brain has a mind of its own so I’m not prepared to make any predictions at this stage. I wish I could give you a clearer idea of where we are headed, but for the time being we just have to wait and see.”

Once the doctor left, Mark sat in the chair beside his grandma’s bed and tried to relax. His phone vibrated in his pocket and he pulled it out to find a text from his mum. *Hi Mark, no flights available until tomorrow. I’ve booked the 8am flight out of Perth, then a bus from Melbourne to Ballarat. Any chance you could pick me up from the bus stop at 5:20 tomorrow evening? Thanks, Mum.*

Mark couldn’t understand why his mum didn’t ring. Wasn’t she interested in finding out how her own mother was going? Mark forced his frustration aside and replied, *Sure Mum. I’ll be there. Travel safe.*

Mark went to the cafeteria and bought a sandwich and a Coke. He had hardly eaten all day. He went for a short walk around the hospital grounds, then returned to his grandmother’s bedside and dozed in the chair. Sometime later there was a gentle knock at the door. Mark pulled himself out of the place where he was half asleep and half awake. He recognised the face of the old man but couldn’t quite figure out who he was.

“That’s not you Mark, is it?” the man asked.

Mark stood and shook the man's hand. "Yes, I'm Mark. And you're....?"

"You might remember me from when you were a young lad. I'm Jim. I used to do Rosie's garden for her."

"Jim. Of course. It just took me a moment to get everything straight in my head. I nodded off, you see. It's wonderful to see you."

"You too, my boy. You've grown into quite a handsome young man."

"I don't know about that," Mark said. "Here, would you like a seat? You can have this one and I'll go find another."

"Thanks." Jim hobbled over to the other side of the bed.

"And help yourself to some water. You'll find a couple of clean glasses there."

Mark returned with another chair. "So, how are you Jim? You look well."

Jim chuckled. "Apart from a stiff knee, arthritic fingers and a back ache that comes and goes, I guess I'm doing OK. Not bad for an old bloke, anyway. And how about yourself? How's the practice in Melbourne?"

Mark was stunned that Jim knew so much about him. "It's fine. Crazy busy, but I shouldn't complain about that, should I?"

"S'pose not," Jim replied. "I remember even when you were a little whipper snapper, you wanted to be a vet."

"Yeah, it's what I always wanted. It's hard work but I love the animals."

"And what else do you do with yourself? Got a lady friend?"

Mark coughed and spluttered. "Um, no. Not at the moment."

"Well, don't you worry about it. I'm sure someone special will come along when you least expect it. And listen to me going on. I'm being a bit nosey, aren't I?"

Mark sat back, listening to Jim. He might be a bit direct but his eyes sparkled with kindness.

"Tell me Jim, how did you find out about Grandma so quickly? She only came in this morning."

"I was there. I'm the one who called the ambulance."

“Do you mean you were with her when she had the stroke?”

“I was in the yard weeding the garden. I heard a noise inside and went to see what it was. She was sitting at the kitchen table and had dropped a glass of orange juice on the floor. I found her slumped over the table.”

“Gee, I had know idea you still worked for her. She’s not still running the farm, is she?”

“Oh heavens no,” Jim replied. “She’s too stubborn to sell the land but she gets someone in to keep the two paddocks mowed. I help out in the garden and, you know, whatever odd jobs need to be done. But that could all change now. Have you spoken to the doc at all?”

“I saw him not long ago. He said it’s too early to tell. She’s in a coma so they’re waiting for her to come out of that, then they can assess her further.” Mark considered telling Jim about what his grandmother had said, but thought it would sound silly, so he kept it to himself.

“Well, I won’t hang around too long.” Jim struggled out of his chair, kissed Rose-Anne on the forehead and said goodbye to Mark. “I must say, you’ve grown into a fine young man, Mark. I’m really...what I mean is, I’m sure Rosie is really proud of you.”

“Thanks. Will you come back again?”

“I’ll pop in tomorrow, if that’s OK.”

“Course it is,” Mark said. “I’ll see you then. Are you all right to get out of here?”

“Yes, I’m fine. I’ll take the lift and the ute’s in the carpark. See you again.”

Mark lifted his hand to wave. “Bye.”

Later that afternoon Mark drove to his grandmother’s property. She lived on ten acres on the north side of town. It used to be the very edge of town but over the years, as Ballarat grew, there were two or three estates even further to the north. He found the spare key, went in the front door and dumped his bag in the spare room. The house hadn’t changed a bit. It still had the old carpet and it still smelt like Pine O Cleen. Mark’s mind raced back to when he was a little boy. He remembered sitting at the same table he saw in front of him now, with his grandma, eating scones with jam and cream. He forced these memories from his mind—it was easier to push them away than to consider that he may never speak to his grandma again.

He walked through the backyard and into the paddock that lay beyond it. The place certainly looked neat and tidy. It was clear that someone was helping his grandmother keep it maintained—Jim must come around virtually every day.

Mark tried to make sense of what his grandmother had said. “Your grandfather....caveflowers.”

Mark’s grandfather had been dead for years and Mark couldn’t imagine that he left any secrets or mysteries behind. Then there was the cave. Mark knew exactly where it was, so he headed over that way. And flowers. Could there be a bunch of flowers in the cave? That didn’t seem very likely.

Just near the border of the property there lay a rocky outcrop and behind those rocks there was a cave. It was well hidden—there’s no way anyone would spot it if they were walking by—but Mark had known about it for as long as he could remember. As a boy it was his favourite place to come and play. When he was about six or seven, he would bring his toy soldiers with him to the cave, line them up in two opposing sides and have make-believe battles. Then when he was a bit older, he and Henry would come and sit in the cave together. And after that, well, he grew up and didn’t come here quite as much. Except, of course, for the time when he brought Amy Leonard here. Amy thought it was very romantic and they had their first kiss in the cave.

Mark bent down, scrambled behind the rocks and entered the cave. The air inside was cool and the earthy floor was damp to touch, just as it always had been. Mark couldn’t quite stand up straight in here. The cave was a decent height, but at five foot eleven, Mark had to stoop a little so he wouldn’t hit his head.

Mark sat down and leaned against the wall of the cave. He felt like he had escaped—like he had left the whole world behind. Even though he knew his busy practice was still there, and he knew his grandma was still in hospital, he felt removed from all the goings on of the outside world. He wasn’t a little boy anymore, but he still savoured the feeling of freedom that the cave offered him.

“Your grandfather....cave....flowers.” He still couldn’t make sense of the words. It had felt like this was a message that his grandma really wanted him to understand. Sure, it could have just been the random ramblings of an old lady in a coma, but Mark felt there was more to it

than that. He needed to find the meaning. But the cave wasn't shedding any light on the mystery. The cave was exactly the same as it had always been.

An hour or so passed and Mark figured he needed to get back to the house and find something for dinner. Before leaving, though, he decided to have a good look around in case he found anything. The cave was roughly the same size as a tennis court and at either end the ceiling was so low that Mark had to crawl on his hands and knees. Up the top end, Mark ran his hands along the floor of the cave to see if he could find anything. Everywhere he looked, the floor had the same earthy feel. He then made his way down to the bottom end of the cave. He squatted down on his hands and knees so he could inspect the floor and something fell out of his pocket. It was the key he had used to get into his grandmother's house—he had forgotten to put it back in its hiding place.

As Mark reached out to pick up the key, he realised that the sound it made when it hit the floor of the cave wasn't quite what he would expect it to be. Mark put the key safely back into his pocket but ran his hands over the floor to feel the surface. And his suspicion's were right—right up against the wall there was a small patch that was firmer than the rest of the cave floor. Mark used his fingers to scrape away the dirt on the surface to reveal an object of some kind. He had no idea what it was but it felt hard and smooth.

He dug around it and eventually removed a small box that had been buried in the floor of the cave. He walked towards the entrance so he could have a better look at it in the light. It was a wooden box—perhaps a jewellery box—and it had flowers painted on the lid. Mark's heart started to beat quickly. Surely this wasn't a coincidence. Your grandfather.... cave....flowers. Mark decided to return to the house before opening the box and discovering what it contained.

Mark kicked his shoes off at the back door and went into the bathroom to have a wash. Upon seeing his reflection in the mirror, he realised how filthy he was. Not only were his hands covered with dirt, but so were his trousers and even his face had a few brown smears on it. He quickly washed his face and hands, changed into a pair of shorts and a t-shirt and sat down at the dining table to open the box.

He hesitated, not knowing what he would find inside, and part of his mind searched for a distraction that would enable him to delay lifting the lid. His stomach rumbled and he decided to order a pizza. So he went to his room, picked up his phone and ordered a pizza to be

delivered. They said it would take about 30 to 40 minutes to arrive, so he no longer had any excuses.

He sat at the table once more and carefully opened the box. It contained letters written in an unfamiliar hand, and beneath them he found some black and white photos. The photos were of a young couple who appeared to be very much in love. Mark assumed it was his grandparents, but the photos were taken so long ago that he couldn't be sure. The cave was on their land, so how could the photos be of anybody else? His grandparents had owned this property ever since they married, back in the sixties.

Mark looked at the letters to see if there were any dates but there were none. Each letter began with 'To my dearest Rosie.' They were definitely written to his grandma, Mark was convinced of that. Her name might be Rose-Anne but those close to her all knew her as Rosie. What Mark really needed to know was who they were from. There were two explanations: either the letters were from his grandfather early in their relationship, or his grandmother had a secret love affair. Mark turned the pages to look at the signature at the end of each letter. Each letter was signed off with 'Your loving,' and then a loopy set of initials that Mark was unable to make out. It could have been FC for Frank Clifford, but it could really have been anything at all.

The next morning Mark was awoken by the sound of his phone ringing. Disoriented and confused, he reached over to his phone and answered it.

"Hello."

"Good morning, Mark. This is Dr Halliway calling from Ballarat Base Hospital."

"Yes," Mark managed. "Is...is everything OK?" He looked at the clock radio beside the bed. It said 6:47. It wasn't even seven o'clock in the morning. Surely this wasn't just a standard phonecall.

"I'm sorry to be the one to tell you but your grandmother passed away a few minutes ago."

"Oh, right."

"Her heart simply stopped beating. We believe she slipped away peacefully."

"Was anyone with her at the time?"

“No, she was still unconscious. The monitor sounded as soon as her heart stopped, so a nurse was there within less than a minute and I was in the room just after that.”

“I see. So, do I need to come in?”

“There’s no rush but yes, if you could come in you will be able to sign a couple of papers for us and collect her belongings. Of course, you can also sit with Rose-Anne if you would like to say goodbye.”

“All right, thanks. I’ll be in sometime later this morning.”

“And Mark?”

“Yes?”

“Is there anyone else you’d like me to call?”

“No. I can take care of that. Bye.”

Mark sat on the edge of the bed. She’s dead. Gone. He felt empty. He would never get to see his beautiful grandma again.

Mark quickly showered. He couldn’t face food at a time like this, so he made his way to the hospital much earlier than he expected. He could always get a coffee there. It would probably be terrible but there wasn’t much he could do about that.

Mark sat by his grandma’s bed and held her hand once more. Her skin was cool but at least she didn’t have any tubes coming out of her anymore, or machines beeping in the background. Mark thought back over all the times they had spent together. At times he felt sad, while at other times he felt angry. The person he loved the most in the world had left him. How was he supposed to cope? How was he supposed to go on? He wished he had come to Ballarat more often to visit, but it was now too late to change any of that.

Then he thought about the box. Who was in the photos? How would he ever find out now? His mum would know, surely. He would pick her up later today and she would recognise the faces. But if it was simply old photos of his grandparents, why did his grandma seem so intent to deliver the message? None of it made sense.

Mark had the whole day ahead of him. It was hours before he needed to pick his mum up and he had no idea what to do with himself. He could pack up his grandmother’s belongings, but that felt wrong, she’d hardly even turned cold yet.

Mark bought a strong coffee and a bar of chocolate from the cafeteria and sat in the garden outside, staring into space.

“Is that you, Mark?”

Mark looked up and saw Jim hobbling towards him.

“How’s the old girl today? Any change since yesterday?”

Mark shuffled over to make room on the seat beside him. “Come and sit down, Jim.”

“I don’t want to be any bother. Just wanted to say hi to Rosie. Are you OK? You look like you didn’t get much sleep.”

“I slept OK,” Mark said, “but I need to tell you something. Grandma’s dead. She passed away early this morning.”

Jim bowed his head. “Oh my. Poor Rosie.”

Mark didn’t know what to say. “The doctor said she went peacefully.” He looked over and saw silent tears running down Jim’s cheeks.

“You were good friends with her, weren’t you?”

“Yes, we were good friends. I might as well tell you now, Mark. If Rosie’s gone, there’s no point keeping secrets any longer.”

“You loved her, didn’t you?”

“I did. For many years. Even when I first met Rosie and Frank, their marriage was on the rocks. And I loved Rosie. Simple as that. It might not have been right, seeing as she was married to another fella, but I loved her as true as the sun rises in the east.”

“And she loved you?”

“She did.”

“Well, yesterday I found some old photos of a young couple. I don’t suppose you could have a look at them, could you? Tell me if they’re of the two of you? They were in a box with some love letters.”

“A box with roses on it?”

“Exactly!”

“I painted roses for my Rosie.”

“But I don’t get it,” Mark said. “Your grandfather....cave....flowers.” What has any of this got to do with my grandfather?”

And all of a sudden Mark realised what his grandmother had been trying to say to him. *Jim* was his grandfather. Her secret lover from all those years ago. Her secret lover who never left her side. “You’re....you’re my grandfather?”

“We never knew for sure but the timing fits,” Jim explained. “Of course Sarah, your mother, could have been Frank’s girl, but she could also have been mine. And you—you look just like I did when I was your age, so there’s no doubt in my mind.”

“Grandma knew as well. And she wanted me to know before she died.”

“So, what do we do from here?” Jim asked.

“I don’t know,” Mark answered. “But I know one thing. I want to see as much of you as I can. I should have come to see Grandma more in recent years but life got in the way. Not anymore. This is a second chance. Not for Grandma unfortunately but for me and you. I never really had a dad and I wasn’t close to my grandpa, I mean Grandma’s husband. I’ve got a grandpa now, haven’t I?”

Jim placed his arm around Mark and more tears ran down his cheeks. “You sure have, my boy.”

“So, I want to come and visit. I can come to Ballarat on weekends. Not every weekend, but I’ll come regularly, I promise. And perhaps you can come and visit me in Melbourne. Does that sound OK?”

“It sure does, my boy. It sure does.”