

The fickle hand of fate

Richard Barr contemplates a sliding doors moment for two Anglo-American romances back in the forties



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When we reached the cemetery, the grave was ready. In a simple ceremony, the coffin was lowered into the ground. Roses from close members of the family were tossed in. Others sprinkled earth from a convenient little box. Then it was over: a life span of 89 years with all its hopes, happiness, and tragedy rounded within it.

We buried Gwen, a favourite aunt of my wife's. Every family has dark secrets, and many people endure tragedy and sadness. It took the funeral for me to find out about Gwen's early life and an odd parallel with the events that brought my own parents together.

The Second World War was ending. Europe was in turmoil and the Americans had stepped in to give the allies a boost to see off the invading German.

One of the side effects was that there were quite large numbers

of American GIs in this country and, despite their suffering the sobriquet 'oversexed, overpaid, and over here', romance frequently flourished, including between Gwen and a soldier called Donald.

Gwen's father had almost as much hostility to American soldiers as to Germans. He banned her from ever seeing Donald. But she was in love, and love has a tendency to find a way. She contrived to stay in touch with him and their love grew. He was to return to combat but they both managed to engineer a night in a hotel before he left. It was to be the last time she ever saw him. However, that night was to produce a lasting memory of him – a little boy born in 1946, the same year that my parents met.

To the narrow mind of Gwen's father, it was bad enough to be dating an American soldier, but to become pregnant by one brought enduring shame on the family. Single mothers were almost always ostracised back then. Gwen was no exception. She suffered being the disgrace of the family. How different things were.

Gwen did not hear again from Donald and feared he had abandoned her. Nonetheless, she cherished her little son and named him after Donald. Months after the baby was born, Donald's friends arrived one day to break the news that he had been killed in action. They handed over his medals (he

received one of the highest awards for bravery).

Gwen (who, incidentally, was reputed to be stunningly beautiful) tried to contact Donald's family, but they did not want anything to do with her. Even so, she sent them the medals. Then, the baby developed leukaemia and, 18 months later, died – thus bringing to an end the last link with Donald. As a further cruel stroke of fate, Donald's parents did contact Gwen later to say that they had had a change of heart and would like to see their grandson, but it was too late: he was already dead.

At the same time, in Germany, another Anglo-American romance was blossoming. A young lawyer sent a pretty American doctor a note (after securing a blind date with her) saying: 'Tonight you are going to meet the man who will become your husband.'

He had been sent out to Germany to help manage breaches of curfew by the locals. She was part of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration programme, helping to repatriate and assist refugees who came under allied control.

The young lawyer's chat-up line worked, and within three weeks they were married. They jubilantly relayed the news to her mother back in Scottsbluff, Nebraska. Instead of a delighted response, they received a

grudging letter from her mother after several weeks, full of descriptions of small-town America activities. At the very end, she noted: 'I got your news. I cannot bring myself to write about it.'

The problem was that several years before these events, an English conman wove his deceit through the state of Nebraska and defrauded several Nebraskans out of thousands of dollars. To her mother, all Englishmen were therefore no-goods.

About a year after these events, I was born.

For the next ten years or more, my grandmother strongly disapproved of her beloved daughter marrying an Englishman. She even sent us regular food parcels as she assumed we were living in poverty.

In contrast to the tragedy that befell Gwen, my parents' Anglo-American romance thrived. They moved to Elm, on the Norfolk-Cambridgeshire border, and lived there for the rest of their lives. But the fickle hand of fate could so easily have reversed the outcomes (if my grandmother had had her way, and Gwen's father had not), bestowing joy on Gwen and condemning each of my parents to a life apart from each other.

Had the outcomes been switched, you would at least have been spared my random jottings on these back pages. **SJ**

