The Love Letter- by Jack Finney

The Love Letter

I've heard of secret drawers in old desks, of course--who hasn't?
But the day I bought my desk, I wasn't thinking of secret drawers, and I know very well I didn't have any least premonition or feel of mystery about it.

I spotted it in the window of the secondhand store near my apartment, went in to look it over, and the proprietor told me where he got it.It came from one of the last of the big, old, mid-Victorian houses in Brooklyn; they were tearing it down over on Brock place a few blocks away.

He'd bought the desk along with some other furniture, dishes, glassware, light fixtures, and so on.
But it didn't stir my imagination particularly; I never wondered or cared who might have used it long ago.

I bought it and lugged it home because it was cheap and because it was small. It was a legless little wall desk that I fastened to my living-room wall with heavy screws directly into the studding.
I'm twenty-four years old, tall and thin, and I live in Brooklyn to save money, and work in Manhattan to make it. When you're twenty-four and a bachelor, you usually figure you'll be married before much longer, and since they tell me that takes money. I'm reasonably ambitious and bring work home from the office every once in a while. And maybe every couple weeks or so I write a letter to my folks in Florida. So I'd been needing a desk; there's no table in my phone-booth kitchenette, and I'd been trying to work at a wobbly little end table I couldn't get my knees under.

So I bought the desk one Saturday afternoon, and spent an hour or more fastening it to the wall. It was after six when I finished. I had a date that night, and so I had time to stand and admire it for only a minute or so. It was made of heavy wood, with a slant top like a kid's school desk, and with the same sort of space underneath to put things into. But the back of it rose a good two feet above the desk top, and was full of pigeonholes like an old style roll-top desk.
Underneath the pigeonholes was a row of three brass-knob bed little drawers. It was all pretty ornate; the drawer ends carved, some fancy scroll work extending up over the back and out from the sides to help brace it against the wall.
I dragged a chair up, sat down at the desk to try it for height, then got showered, shaved and dressed and went over to Manhattan to pick up my date.

I'm trying to be honest about what happened, and I'm convinced that includes the way I felt when I got home around two or two-thirty that morning; I'm certain that what happened wouldn't have happened at all if I'd felt any other way. I'd had a good-enough time that evening; we'd gone to an early movie that wasn't too bad, then had dinner, a drink or so and some dancing afterward. And the girl,
Roberta Haig, is pretty nice — bright, pleasant, good-looking.
But walking home from the subway, the Brooklyn streets quiet and deserted, it occurred to me that while I'd probably see her again,- I didn't really care whether I did or not.
And I wondered, as I often had lately, whether there was something wrong with me; whether I'd ever meet a girl I desperately wanted to be with — the only way a man can get married, it seems to me.

So when I stepped into my apartment I knew I wasn't going to feel like sleep for a while. I was restless, half-irritated for no good reason, and I took off my coat and yanked down my tie, wondering whether I wanted a drink or some coffee. Then — I'd half forgotten about it — I saw the desk I'd bought that afternoon, and I walked over and sat down at it, thoroughly examining it for the first time.

I lifted the top, and stared down into the empty space underneath it. Lowering the top, I reached into one of the pigeonholes, and my hand and shirt cuff came out streaked with old dust; the holes were a good foot deep. I pulled open one of the little brass-knobbed drawers, and there was a shred of paper in one of its corners, nothing else. I pulled the drawer all the way out and studied its construction, turning it in my hands; it was a solidly made, beautifully mortised little thing. Then I pushed my hand into the drawer opening; it went in to about the middle of my hand before my finger tips touched the back; there was nothing in there.

For a few moments I just sat at the desk, thinking vaguely that I could write a letter to my folks.
And then it suddenly occurred to me that the little drawer in my hand was only half a foot long, while the pigeonholes just above the drawer extended a good foot back.
Shoving my hand into the opening again, exploring with my finger tips, I found a tiny grooved indentation and pulled out the secret drawer which lay in back of the first. For an instant I was excited at the glimpse of papers inside it. Then I felt a stab of disappointment as I saw what they were. There was a little sheaf of folded writing paper, plain white, but yellowed with age at the edges, and the sheets were all blank. There were three or four blank envelopes to match, and underneath them a small, round, glass bottle of ink; and because it had been upside down, the cork remaining moist and tight in the bottle mouth, a good third of the ink had remained evaporated still. Beside the bottle lay a plain, black wooden pen holder, the pen point reddish-black with old ink. There was nothing else in the drawer. And then, putting the things back into the drawer, I felt the slight extra thickness of one blank envelope, saw that it was sealed, and I ripped it open to find the letter inside. The folded paper opened stiffly, the crease permanent with age, and even before I saw the date I knew this letter was old. The handwriting was obviously feminine, and beautifully clear — it's called Spencerian, isn't it? — the letters perfectly formed and very ornate, the capitals especially being a whirl of dainty curlicues. The ink was rust-black, the date at the top of the page was May 14, 1882, and reading it, I saw that it was a love letter. It began:

("Dearest! Papa, Mamma, Willy and Cook are long retired and to sleep. Now, the night far advanced, the house silent, I alone remain awake, at last free to speak to you as I choose. Yes, I am willing to say it! Heart of mine, I crave your bold glance, I long for the tender warmth of your look; I welcome your ardency, and prize it; for what else should these be taken but sweet tribute to me?")

I smiled a little; it was hard to believe that people had once expressed themselves in elaborate phrasings of this kind, but they had. The letter continued, and I wondered why it had never been sent

("Dear one: Do not ever change your ways. Never address me other than with what consideration my utterances should deserve. If I be foolish and whimsical, deride me sweetly if you will. But if I speak with seriousness, respond always with what care you deem my thoughts worthy. For, oh my beloved, I am sick to death of the indulgent smile and tolerant glance with which a woman's fancies are met. As I am repelled by the false gentleness and nicety of manner which too often ill conceal the wantonness they attempt to mask. I speak of the man I am to marry; if you could but save me from that!
But you cannot. You are everything I prize; warmly and honestly ardent, respectful in heart as well as in manner, true and loving. You are as I wish you to be — for you exist only in my mind. But figment though you are, and though I shall never see your like, you are more dear to me than he to whom I am betrothed.
I think of you constantly. I dream of you. I speak with you, in my mind and heart; would you existed outside them! Sweetheart, good night; dream of me, too.")

With all my love,
I am,
your HELEN.

At the bottom of the page, as I'm sure she'd been taught in school, was written, “Miss Helen Elizabeth Worley, Brooklyn, New York,” and as I stared down at it now I was no longer smiling at this cry from the heart in the middle of a long-ago night. The night is a strange time when you're alone in it, the rest of your world asleep. If I'd found that letter in the daytime, I'd have smiled and shown it to a few friends, then forgotten it.
But alone here now, a window partly open, a cool late-at-night freshness stirring the quiet air— it was impossible to think of the girl who had written this letter as a very old lady, or maybe long since dead. As I read her words, she seemed real and alive to me, sitting — or so I pictured her — pen in hand at this desk, in a long, white, old-fashioned dress, her young hair piled on top of her head, in the dead of a night like this, here in Brooklyn almost in sight of where I now sat. And my heart went out to her as I stared down at her secret, hopeless appeal against the world and time she lived in. I am trying to explain why I answered that letter.
There in the silence of a timeless spring night it seemed natural enough to uncork that old bottle, pick up the pen beside it, and then, spreading a sheet of yellowing old notepaper on the desk top, to begin to write. I felt that I was communicating with a still-living young woman when
I wrote:

("Helen: I have just read the letter in the secret drawer of your desk, and I wish I knew how I could possibly help you. I can't tell what you might think of me if there were a way I could reach you. But you are someone I am certain I would like to know. I hope you are beautiful, but you needn't be; you're a girl I could like, and maybe ardently, and if I did I promise you I'd be true and loving. Do the best you can, Helen Elizabeth Worley, in the time and place you are; I can't reach you or help you. But I'll think of you. And maybe I'll dream of you, too.")

Yours,
JAKE BELKNAP

I was grinning a little sheepishly as I signed my name, knowing I'd read through what I'd written, then crumple the old sheet and throw it away. But I was glad I'd written it — and I didn't throw it away. Still caught in the feeling of the warm, silent night, it suddenly seemed to me that throwing my letter away would turn the writing of it into a meaningless and foolish thing; though maybe what I did seems more foolish still. I folded the paper, put it into one of the envelopes and sealed it. Then I dipped the pen into the old ink, and wrote “Miss Helen Worley” on the face of the envelope.

I suppose this can't be explained. You'd have to have been where I was and felt as I did to understand it; but I wanted to mail that letter. I simply quit examining my feelings and quit trying to be rational; I was suddenly determined to complete what I'd begun, just as far as I was able to go.

My parents sold their old home in New Jersey when my father retired two years ago, and now they live in Florida and enjoy it. And when my mother cleared out the old house I grew up in, she packed up and mailed me a huge package of useless things I was glad to have. There were class photographs dating from grammar school through college, old books I'd read as a kid, Boy Scout pins; a mass of junk of that sort. Including a stamp collection I'd had in grade school. Now I found these things on my hall-closet shelf, in the box they'd come in, and I found my old stamp album.

It's funny how things can stick in your mind over the years; standing at the open closet door, I turned the pages of that beat-up old album directly to the stamps I remembered buying from another kid with seventy-five cents I'd earned cutting grass. There they lay, lightly fastened to the page with a little gummed-paper hinge; a pair of two, mint condition two-cent United States stamps, issued in 1869. And standing there in the hallway looking down at them, I once again got something of the thrill I'd had as a kid when I acquired them. It's a handsome stamp, square in shape, with an ornate border and a tiny engraving in the center; a rider on a galloping post horse. And for all I knew they might have been worth a fair amount of money by now, especially an unseparated pair of two stamps. But back at the desk I pulled one of them loose, tearing carefully through the perforation, licked the back and fastened it to the faintly yellowing old envelope.
I'd thought no further than that; by now, I suppose, I was in almost a kind of trance. I shoved the old ink bottle and pen into a hip pocket, picked up my letter and walked out of my apartment.
Brock Place, three blocks away, was deserted when I reached it; the parked cars motionless at the curbs, the high, late moonlight softening the lines of the big concrete-block supermarket at the corner. Then, as I walked on, my letter in my hand, there stood the old house, just past a little shoe-repair shop. It stood far back from the broken cast-iron fence in the center of its wide weed-grown lot, blacketched in the moonlight, and I stopped on the walk and stood staring up at it.
The high-windowed old roof was gone, the interior nearly gutted, the yard strewn with splintered boards and great chunks of torn plaster. The windows and doors were all removed, the openings hollow in the clear wash of light. But the high old walls, last of all to go, still stood, tall and dignified in their old-fashioned strength and outmoded charm. Then I walked through the opening where a gate had once hung, up the cracked and weed-grown brick pavement toward the wide old porch. And there on one of the ornate fluted posts, I saw the house number deeply and elaborately carved into the old wood. At the wide flat porch rail leading down to the walk, I brought out my ink and pen, and copied the number carefully onto my envelope;
972 I printed under the name of the girl who had once lived here,
BROCK PLACE, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK. Then I turned toward the street again,
my envelope in my hand.
There was a mailbox at the next corner, and I stopped beside it. But to drop this letter into that box, knowing in advance that it could go only to the dead-letter office, would again, I couldn't help feeling, turn the writing of it into an empty, meaningless act; and after a moment I walked on past the box, crossed the street and turned right, suddenly knowing exactly where I was going.
I walked four blocks through the night, passing a hack stand with a single cab, its driver asleep with his arms and head cradled on the wheel; passing a night watchman sitting on a standpipe protruding from the building wall, smoking a pipe; he nodded as I passed, and I nodded in response. I turned left at the next corner, walked half a block more, then turned up onto the worn stone steps of the Wister postal substation. Built, I suppose, not much later than during the decade following the Civil War. And I can't imagine that the inside has changed much at all. The floor is marble; the ceiling high; the woodwork dark and carved. The outer lobby is open at all times, as are post-office lobbies everywhere, and as I pushed through the old swinging doors I saw that it was deserted. Somewhere behind the opaque blind windows a light burned dimly far in the rear of the post office, and I had an impression of subdued activity back there. But the lobby itself was dim and silent, and as I walked across the worn stone of its floor, I knew I was seeing all around me precisely what Brooklynites had seen for no telling how many generations long dead.

The Post Office has always seemed an institution of vague mystery to me; an ancient and worn but still functioning mechanism that is not operated, but only tended by each succeeding generation of men to come along. It is a place where occasionally plainly addressed letters with clearly written return addresses go astray and are lost, to end up no one knows where and for reasons impossible to discover, as the postal employee from whom you inquire will tell you. And its vague air of mystery, for me, is made up of stories — well, you've read them, too, from time to time; the odd little stories in your newspaper. A letter bearing a postmark of 1906 written half a century ago, is delivered today — simply because inexplicably it arrived at some post office along with the other mail, with no explanation from anyone now alive. Or sometimes it's a postcard of greeting — from the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, maybe. And once, tragically, as I remember reading, it was an acceptance of a proposal of marriage offered in 1901— and received today, a lifetime too late, by the man who made it and who married someone else and is now a grandfather.
I pushed the worn brass plate open, dropped my letter into the silent blackness of the slot and it disappeared forever with no sound.
Then I turned and left to walk home; with a feeling of fulfillment; of having done, at least, everything I possibly could in response to the silent cry for help I'd found in the secrecy of the old desk.

Next morning I felt the way almost anyone might. Standing at the bathroom mirror shaving, remembering what I'd done the night before, I grinned, feeling foolish but at the same time secretly pleased with myself. I was glad I'd written and solemnly mailed that letter, and now I realized why I'd put no return address on the envelope. I didn't want it to come forlornly back to me with No SUCH PERSON, or whatever the phrase is,
stamped on the envelope. There's once been such a girl, and last night she still existed for me. And I didn't want to see my letter to her — rubber-stamped, scribbled on and unopened — to prove that there no longer was.

I was terrifically busy all the next week. I work for a wholesale-grocery concern; we got a big new account, a chain of supermarkets, and that meant extra work for everyone. More often than not I had lunch at my desk in the office and worked several evenings besides. I had dates the two evenings I was free. On Friday afternoon I was at the main public library in Manhattan, at Fifth Avenue and Forty-second, copying statistics from half a dozen trade publications for a memorandum I'd been assigned to write over the weekend on the new account.

Late in the afternoon the man sitting beside me at the big reading-room table closed his book, stowed away his glasses, picked up his hat from the table and left. I sat back in my chair, glancing at my watch
then I looked over at the book he'd left on the table. It was a big one-volume pictorial history of New York put out by Columbia University, and I dragged it over, and began leafing through it.
I skimmed over the first sections on colonial and precolonial New York pretty quickly, but when the old sketches and drawings began giving way to actual photographs, I turned the pages more slowly. I leafed past the first photos, taken around the mid-century, and then past those of the Civil War period. But when I reached the first photograph of the 1870's — it was a view of Fifth Avenue in 1871 — I began reading the captions under each one.

I knew it would be too much to hope to find a photograph of Brock Place, in Helen Worley's time especially, and of course I didn't. But I knew there'd surely be photographs taken in Brooklyn during the 1880's, and a few pages farther on I found what I'd hoped I might. In clear, sharp detail and beautifully reproduced lay a big half-page photograph of a street less than a quarter mile from Brock Place; and staring down at it, there in the library, I knew that Helen Worley must often have walked along this very sidewalk. “Varney Street, 1881,” the caption said; “A typical Brooklyn residential street of the period. ”Varney Street today — I walk two blocks of it every night coming home from work — is a wasteland.
I pass four cinderpacked used-car lots; a shabby concrete garage, the dead earth in front of it littered with rusting car parts and old tires; and a half dozen or so nearly paintless boarding houses, one with a soiled card in its window, reading MASSAGE. It's a nondescript joyless street, and it's impossible to believe that there has ever been a tree on its entire length.
But there has been.
There in sharp black-and-white, in the book on the table before me, lay Varney Street, 1881, and from the wide grass-covered parkways between the cut-stone curb and sidewalks, the thick old long-gone trees rose high on both sides to meet, intertwine and roof the wide street with green. The photograph had been taken, apparently, from the street — it had been possible to do that then, in a day of occasional slow-trotting horses and buggies — and the camera was aimed at an angle to one side, toward the sidewalk and the big houses beyond it, looking down the walk for several hundred feet.

The old walk, there in the foreground under the great trees, appeared to be at least six feet wide; spacious enough easily for a family to walk down it four or five abreast — as families did, in those times walk together down the sidewalks under the trees. And beyond the walk, widely separated and set far back across the fine old lawns, rose the great houses, the ten-, twelve- and fourteen-room family houses, two or more stories high, and with attics above them for children to play in and discover the relics of childhood's before them. Their windows were tall, and they were framed on the outside with ornamented wood. And in the solid construction of every one of those lost houses in that ancient photograph there had been left over the time, skill, money and inclination to decorate their eaves with scrollwork; to finish a job with craftsmanship and pride. And time, too, to build huge wide porches on which families sat on summer evenings with palm-leaf fans.
Far down that lovely tree-sheltered street — out of focus and indistinct — walked the retreating figure of a long-skirted puff-sleeved woman, her summer parasol open at her back. Of the thousands of long-dead girls it might have been,
I knew this could not be Helen Worley. Yet it wasn't completely impossible, I told myself; this was a street, precisely as I saw it now, down which she must often have walked; and I let myself think that yes, this was she. Maybe I live in what is for me the wrong time, and I was filled now with the most desperate yearning to be there, on that peaceful street — to walk off, past the edges of the scene on the printed page before me, into the old and beautiful Brooklyn of long ago. And to draw near and overtake that bobbing parasol in the distance; and then turn and look into the face of the girl who held it.

I worked that evening at home, sitting at my desk, with a can of beer on the floor beside me; but once more now Helen Elizabeth Worley was in my mind.
I worked steadily all evening, and it was around twelve-thirty when I finished; eleven handwritten pages which I'd get typed at the office on Monday. Then I opened the little center desk drawer into which I'd put a supply of rubber bands and paper clips, took out a clip and fastened the pages together, and sat back in my chair, taking a swallow of beer. The little center desk drawer stood half open as I'd left it, and then, as my eye fell on it, I realized suddenly that of course it, too, must have another secret drawer behind it.

I hadn't thought of that. It simply hadn't occurred to me the week before, in my interest and excitement over the letter I'd found behind the first drawer of the row; and I'd been too busy all week to think of it since. But now I set down my beer, pulled the center drawer all the way out, reached behind it and found the little groove in the smooth wood I touched. Then I brought out the second secret little drawer.

I'll tell you what I think, what I'm certain of, though I don't claim to be speaking scientifically;
I don't think science has a thing to do with it. The night is a strange time; things are different at night, as every human being knows somewhere deep inside him. And I think this: Brooklyn has changed over seven decades; it is no longer the same place at all. But here and there, still, are little islands — isolated remnants of the way things once were. And the Wister postal substation is one of them; it has changed really not at all... And I think that at night — late at night, the world asleep, when the sounds of things as they are now are nearly silent, and the sight of things as they are now is vague in the darkness — the boundary between here and then wavers. At certain moments and places it fades. I think that there in the dimness of the old Wister post office, in the dead of night, lifting my letter to Helen Worley toward the old brass door of the letter drop — I think that I stood on one side of that slot in the year 1959, and that I dropped my letter, properly stamped, written and addressed in the ink and on the very paper of Helen Worley's youth, into the Brooklyn of 1882 on the other side of that worn old slot.
I believe that — I'm not even interested in proving it — but I believe it.
Because now, from that second secret little drawer, I brought out the paper I found in it, opened it, and in rust-black ink on yellowing old paper
I read:

("Please, oh, please — who are you? Where can I reach you? Your letter arrived today in the second morning post, and I have wandered the house and garden ever since in an agony of excitement. I cannot conceive how you saw my letter in its secret place, but since you did, perhaps you will see this one too. Oh, tell me your letter is no hoax or cruel joke! Willy, if it is you; if you have discovered my letter and think to deceive your sister with a prank, I pray you to tell me! But if it is not —— if I now address someone who has truly responded to my most secret hopes — do not longer keep me ignorant of who and where you are. For I, too — and I confess it willingly — long to see you! And I, too, feel and am most certain of it, that if I could know you, I would love you. It is impossible for me to think otherwise.
I must hear from you again; I shall not rest until I do.")

I remain, most sincerely,
HELEN ELIZABETH WORLEY

After a long time, I opened the first little drawer of the old desk and took out the pen and ink I'd found there, and a sheet of the note paper. For minutes then, the pen in my hand, I sat there in the night staring down at the empty paper on the desk top; finally, then, I dipped the pen into the old ink and wrote:

("Helen, my dear: I don't know how to say this so it will seem even comprehensible to you. But I do exist, here in Brooklyn, less than three blocks from where you now read this — in the year 1959. We are separated not by space, but by the years which lie between us. Now I own the desk which you once had, and at which you wrote the note I found in it. Helen, all I can tell you is that I answered that note, mailed it late at night at the old Wister station, and that somehow it reached you, as I hope this will too. This is no hoax! Can you imagine anyone playing a joke that cruel? I live in a Brooklyn, within sight of your house, that you cannot imagine. It is a city whose streets are now crowded with wheeled vehicles propelled by engines. And it is a city extending far beyond the limits you know, with a population of millions, so crowded there is hardly room any longer for trees. From my window as I write I can see — across Brooklyn Bridge, which is hardly changed from the way you, too, can see it now — Manhattan Island, and rising from it are the lighted silhouettes of stone-and-steel buildings more than one thousand feet high.
You must believe me. I live, I exist, seventy-seven years after you read this; and with the feeling that I have fallen in love with you.")

I sat for some moments staring at the wall, trying to figure out how to explain something I was certain was true. Then I wrote:

("Helen: there are three secret drawers in our desk. Into the first you put only the letter I found. You cannot now add something to that drawer and hope that it will reach me. For I have already opened that drawer and found only the letter you put there. Nothing else can now come down through the years to me in that drawer, for you cannot now alter what you have already done.
Into the second drawer, in 1882, you put the note which lies before me, which I found when I opened that drawer a few minutes ago. You put nothing else into it. and now that, too, cannot be changed. But I haven't opened the third drawer, Helen. Not yet! It is the last way you can still reach me, and the last time. I will mail this as I did before, then wait. In a week I will open the last drawer.")

JAKE BELKNAP

It was a long week. I worked, I kept busy daytimes, but at night I thought of hardly anything but the third secret drawer in my desk. I was terribly tempted to open it earlier,
telling myself that whatever might lie in it had been put there decades before and must be there now, but I wasn't sure, and I waited. Then, late at night, a week to the hour after I'd mailed my second letter at the old Wister post office, I pulled out the third drawer, reached in and brought out the last little secret drawer which lay behind it. hand was actually shaking, and for a moment I couldn't bear to look directly — something lay in the drawer — and I turned my head away. Then I looked. I'd expected a long letter; very long, of many pages, her last communication with me, and full of everything she wanted to say. But there was no letter at all.

It was a photograph, about three inches square, a faded sepia in color, mounted on heavy stiff cardboard, and with the photographer's name in tiny gold script down in the corner: Brunner & Holland, Parisian Photography, Brooklyn, N. Y.

The photograph showed the head and shoulders of a girl in a high-necked dark dress with a cameo brooch at the collar. Her dark hair was swept tightly back, covering the ears, in a style which no longer suits our ideas of beauty. But the stark severity of that dress and hair style couldn't spoil the beauty of the face that smiled out at me from that old photograph. It wasn't beautiful in any classic sense, I suppose. The brows were unplucked and somewhat heavier than we are used to. But it is the soft warm smile of her lips, and her eyes — large and serene as she looks out at me over the years — that make Helen Elizabeth Worley a beautiful woman. Across the bottom of her photograph she had written,
“I will never forget.” And as I sat there at the old desk, staring at what she had written,
I understood that, of course, that was all there was to say — what else? — on this, the last time, as she knew, that she'd ever be able to reach me.

It wasn't the last time, though.
There was one final way for Helen Worley to communicate with me over the years,
and it took me a long time, as it must have taken her, to realize it.

Only a week ago, on my fourth day of searching, I finally found it. It was late in the evening, and the sun was almost gone,

when I found the old headstone among all the others stretching off in rows under the quiet trees. And then...

I read the inscription etched in the weathered old stone:
HELEN ELIZABETH WORLEY — 1861-1934.
Under this were the words, I NEVER FORGOT.

And neither will I