



THE LETTERS

Mabel, Episode One: The Letters. In which nothing becomes clear.

[INTRO:]

MABEL: Hi, you've reached Mabel Martin. I'm not here to take your call right now, so please leave a message after the beep. Thanks!

[BEEP]

ANNA: She said "I'm going into the ground for you", she – god damn it.

[BEEP]

Hi, Miss Martin. My name is Anna Limon, with Kings County Home Help? For the past six months I've been your grandmother's live-in carer. I got your – this, I know this is a little bit unorthodox, but I got your number from a friend of a friend, or an acquaintance of a friend, I guess, I don't – that's not really important, that doesn't really matter. I'm calling because – it's regarding your grandmother. She's fine, I mean, she's as well as can be expected, given the circumstances. This isn't one of those calls. I'd just – I'd appreciate it if you could give me a call back on this number. I'm available every day from two 'til five, or after nine p.m. Thanks. Thank you very much. Okay, bye.

[BEEP]

Hi, uh, this is Anna Limon – I called three days ago, and I haven't – I haven't heard back, so I thought I'd just try again, in case you didn't receive my last message. And then I was thinking that maybe my phone's on private or something, and you didn't have my number to call me back – it's [CENSORED]. Or maybe you tried to call, but it didn't go through – reception can be weird out here in the hills – and maybe I didn't have my voicemail set up, and you couldn't even leave me a message. So I checked all that. It's all working now. If you could give me a call back at some point, that would be great. This is Anna Limon, did I say that already? Your grandmother's carer. It's – yeah. It's not a matter of life-or-death or anything, but I'd like to speak to you. Thanks, uh, thanks again, yeah. Bye.

[BEEP]

[muffled] What's that? No, it's fine. It's fine, I'll just – oh, crap.

[BEEP]

[pause, clears throat] This is Anna Limon. Again. I think that – I hope you haven't gotten my last two messages. Or, I hope there's a good reason why you haven't gotten my last two messages. Like maybe you're on a tour of Europe or something, not like I hope you're dead in a ditch somewhere, or – oh god, that's weird, I'm sorry. Shit, I'm sorry. I just mean, I've gotten to know your grandmother pretty well over the past six months, and I'd like to think you're not the kind of person who'd just ignore someone. I'd like to think you're the kind of person who does things for a reason. And if you have a reason not to want to talk to me, that's fine, I get it! Family is – family is crazy, yeah, I get that. But if you could just – if you could even send me a text, maybe, and say so, I'd be really, really grateful. I'd shut up about it, I swear. Okay. That's it. Bye.

[BEEP]

It's me again. I mean, it's Anna. Just. Trying again to reach you. Whatever. Forget it.

[BEEP]

Okay, so, here's the thing. Your grandmother Sally, I've spent a lot of time around her, and she likes to talk. We both do, I guess. She's lucid a lot more

than you'd expect, maybe – she has good days and bad days, but she's sharp, she remembers. And like I said, she likes to talk, and one of her favourite topics is you. So this is kind of strange, right? Because I know a lot about you, you're like – like a character in a book, almost, because everything I know I know second-hand, through the narrative your grandmother tells. And so calling you, it's kind of like calling – Jane Eyre, or Henry Winter, or Roland Deschain, or something. But even stranger than that, because I can hear your voice, I hear it every time I call you in your voicemail message. I know you're real, you're right there – only you aren't, you're not even close. Isn't that funny? I think it's kind of funny. Most of all it's like I'm talking into a wishing well. Just – water, and silence.

It's lonely out here. I don't think I even meant to say that, but it's true, so screw it. I know you've been here. Sally keeps photographs of you on her mantelpiece, and now that she's in the chair it's my job to keep them dusted. I see you all the time: eight or maybe ten years old, sitting out in the tree swing. You've got your hair in pigtails and this funny expression on your face, like you're waiting for something important to happen just beyond the line of sight. I'm standing in the kitchen, looking out the window at it right now. In the picture it's – I don't know, it's pretty, like something from a hundred years ago. A little bit dreamy, a little bit romantic. Now the rope's green and frayed and the swing-seat is cracked and the tree's covered in ivy. It's still pretty, but it's different. A little bit darker. Spookier, maybe.

The whole house is spooky.

That's kind of why I wanted to talk to you. Not because I'm scared of the house or because it's spooky or whatever. But because – because your grandmother has – what *is* that?

[BEEP]

I just wanted to know about the letters. That's *all*.

[BEEP]

Hi, it's –

I'm sorry. I'm being – I don't know what I'm being. Pushy, or rude, or just crazy. I like my job, you know? I like people, I like helping them. I chose this, no one forced me into it – but it's a strange way to live, too. In someone else's house, waiting for them to die so you can move on to another house,

another dying person. Living in flux, in stasis, which isn't really living, not really. And the older people, they go to bed early, long before the overnight carer gets here, so there are all these hours of dark – of being alone in a place that doesn't belong to you. Even when the night carer comes and you're off duty, you're never really off duty. You can't go out to a bar and drink a couple beers and bring someone home with you. You can't even play your music loud and dance around your bedroom naked. It's like being a cross between an infant and a senior citizen. Your life isn't really something that belongs to you.

I'm not complaining. Or, no, I'm complaining, but it's not because I'm unhappy, deep down. Like I said, I like my job. And Sally's great. She's wonderful. She listens to me, and she likes telling stories, and she's kind, she goes out of her way to be kind. But she has secrets.

[MUFFLED NOISES]

Sorry, I thought I heard something.

This is a big house. Before I came here I don't think I'd ever set foot in a house so big. Last year I worked for a lady who had three different doors, a front door and a side door and a back door, and I thought that was the most decadent thing in the whole world, until I came here. You must have had the best time as a kid, running around and poking into all these rooms and cubbies and closets and attics.

That was what I wanted to tell you. The attic.

Last week, maybe Monday or Tuesday, Sally told me to go get down the box of Christmas decorations from the attic. She wanted to sort through them, see which ones she could have me bring into the Goodwill in town, which ones she wanted to put up. The attics are like – well, you probably remember what they're like. They're *huge*, bigger than any house I've ever lived in, and full of these insane labyrinth twists and turns – someone put up walls, but only here and there, bizarre dividing lines that turn the whole place into – the inside of a brain, all looped on itself and grey and buzzing. The boiler is what buzzes, it's like a cat purring endlessly. You can feel it vibrate through the floor, through the walls. It's like being inside something alive. Like being inside a heart.

Sally said the Christmas decorations were right by the stairway door, in a box marked '1986'.

Well, I found the box. I dusted it off, brought it downstairs, put it on Sally's wheelchair table for her. But when she opened it up, she started screaming. Not just crying, *screaming*, like a fox, something inhuman. I've seen my fair share of dementia, I've seen panic attacks and heart attacks and strokes and death and nothing much that the human body can do really scares me anymore, but Sally scared me. I don't think I've ever been so scared. I took the box away, just threw it in the other room, and tried to calm her down. She stopped screaming, at last. At last she let me touch her. She looked up at me and said, "I'm going into the ground for you," and then she said it again, and again and again, I'm going into the ground for you, like that, like it meant something else. Something important.

It took a long, long time for her to calm down. All day, maybe. The relief carer was sick, so I didn't have a break until Sally went to bed that night.

And then it was just me and the box.

What would you do? I went straight for it. I was never not going to go straight for it.

Inside –

Inside there were letters, hundreds of them, maybe thousands, bundled into packets and tied with red and white butchers' twine. All of them had the same envelope with a navy blue stripe across the top, all the same scribbled, uneven handwriting. All of them, every single one, stamped with a red stamp that read *Returned to Sender*. Not one of them opened. Each one addressed to Sally Martin, at this house, at this address. All of them sealed with a single red lipstick kiss.

If you could just call me back. If you could just let me know that you hear this, not a conversation but *something*, so I'm not talking into a hole in the ground. I just want –

[BEEP]

[CONTINUED BEEPING]

AUTOMATED FEMALE VOICE: The voicemail inbox for [Mabel Martin] is full. Please call again later.

[DIAL TONE]

[OUTRO:]

Mabel is written and produced by Becca De La Rosa. The voice of Mabel Martin is [CENSORED]. The voice of Anna Limon is Becca De La Rosa. The music in this episode was by Ars Sonor, LJ Cruzer, Mathieu Lamontagne and Emmanuel Toledo, Chris Zabriskie, AVOIDANT, and (morse), and all of it is available to download on the Free Music Archive at freemusicarchive.org. For more information about Mabel, including a full tracklist for each episode, visit us online at mabelpodcast.com, or on Twitter, @podcastmabel.