

Excerpt from “A Letter From Max” – novel by Stuart J. Brown

<https://stuartjbrown.com/a-letter-from-max/>

Chapter 1

“Max,” Linda Thompson called to her son. “Are you ready? Your grandmother will be wondering what happened to us.”

“Do we have to go?” the twelve-year-old asked. “It’s such a nice day. Can’t I stay home and play?”

“Young man, you know we go visit Saturdays,” she replied. “There’ll be plenty of sunshine when we get home later.”

“But why do we always have to go?” the soon-to-be sixth grader complained as he came down the stairs. His mother put her hands on her son’s slumped shoulders. “Because she is family,” she explained. “When your father was...” she paused as tears began to cloud her eyes.

“Mom, don’t,” Max said softly.

“I’m fine,” she half-smiled. “When your father was near the end, I promised him I would look after his mother. Your grandmother. They were very close and she has no one here but you and I. Your Aunt Charlotte’s in Chicago and doesn’t visit much. It was hard for your Grandma after your Dad died.”

“I don’t think Grandma has gotten over Dad’s death,” Max said, sounding a bit more understanding.”

“Maybe,” she said. “But that’s why we go visit her Saturday mornings. The least we can do is spend a few hours a week visiting. It’s only the second weekend in June. Your summer vacation just started. You’ll have plenty of time to hang out with your friends. Alright?”

“Alright,” he replied.

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Max’s father had passed away from cancer two months earlier just as spring was starting. It was called Mantel Cell Lymphoma. Max still remembered the day his father got sick. He wasn’t feeling well as the three of them piled into the car for the weekly Sunday dinner at Roma Pizzeria. “Alan, don’t be so stubborn,” his Mom had told his father. “Just go to the walk-in clinic. It’ll take 30 minutes.”

“I don’t want to ruin pizza night,” he replied.

“It’s okay, Dad. We’ll wait,” Max said.

"Two against one," his wife responded. "You lose."

"Fine. There's one near the restaurant," he said. "I'll meet you at Roma's when I'm done?" But Max and his mother never did see him for pizza.

"Where is your father?" Max's mother asked, looking around. "It's been over an hour." You'd think he would have called," Mrs. Thompson said as she reached into her purse for her cell phone. "Damn!" she exclaimed. "Sorry, Max. I didn't mean to..." Max just nodded that it was okay. He picked up a piece of cheese stuck to a pepper and mushroom that had fallen on his plate and popped it into his mouth. Earlier that day, she had turned off her phone when they were at a matinee performance at the Arena Playhouse, the local New Castle theater company. The only problem was Mrs. Thompson had forgotten to turn her cell phone back on. "Your father left me a message a half hour ago," she said as she punched in her voicemail password. Max took a sip of his Coke and tried to decide if he could eat one more slice. Suddenly, his mother jumped up and ran over to the waitress serving them. Max couldn't hear what his mother was saying, but she had a panicked look on her face. She pushed money into the server's hands and then came back to their corner booth. "C'mon Max, we gotta go."

"But I'm not finished," the young man protested.

"Now! Get your coat." Max reluctantly put down the slice in his hand, took one last sip of his drink, and then quickly followed his mother, who was already out the front door and heading to the car.

"Mom, what's wrong?" he asked.

"Your father had to be taken to the Emergency Room at Hartford Hospital," she replied as she put the car in gear and sped off through the suburban streets towards the downtown of the capital city.

"What? Why? What's wrong?" Max was getting worried.

"The doctor at the clinic took an x-ray and didn't like what he saw so they called an ambulance," she nervously explained. She was gripping the steering wheel very hard. "I'm not sure what's happening, but we'll be there in a few minutes." Max didn't know how to respond so the two of them sat in silence until they pulled up to the hospital entrance. "C'mon, Max, let's step on it," she said. Mrs. Thompson and her son entered the Emergency Room, looked around, and saw Mr. Thompson on a hospital bed in the corner. Max's mother hurried over and hugged him tightly. "What's going on?" she asked. He had an IV tube sticking out of his arm leading up to a plastic bag hung from a pole. There was a clear liquid in the bag. His father was wearing a flimsy hospital gown.

"Hi Dad," Max said, a bit timidly, not sure what to say.

"Hey, Max," he replied. Sorry I missed the pizza. How was it?"

"Great," his son responded. "Dad, what's wrong?"

"Yes," Mom chimed in. "Can you tell me what they found?"

"I told the doctor I was having some pain around here," Mr. Thompson said, pointing to his upper chest. "They took an x-ray, and the doctor didn't like what he saw. The next thing I know, I'm in an ambulance heading to the hospital." That was the beginning. What the doctor didn't like was an inflammation of the lymph nodes. A biopsy confirmed that it was cancer. Over the next few months, his father underwent chemotherapy treatments and even a stem cell transplant. The oncologist, the cancer doctor, explained the procedure as replacing the cancerous stem cells with healthy ones. The hope would be for the good cells to start producing new, healthy blood cells. At first, it seemed like everything the doctors did was working, but within a few weeks, the cancer was back. A short time later he was gone.

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Max and his mother drove the few minutes to 83 Fairfax Road, on the other side of New Castle, where Mrs. Matilda Thompson lived. Inside, to the right of the entranceway, was a living room, which led to the TV room. A modest dining room connected the two spaces. To the left, was the well-worn kitchen. The upstairs was typical of New Castle homes. There was a master bedroom with an attached bathroom, two smaller bedrooms, and another full bathroom.

When Max entered his grandmother's house, there always seemed to be some incredible aroma coming from the kitchen. Today was no different.

"What is that delicious smell?" Max asked. "It's so good."

"That's my strawberry jam," she said. "I haven't made it in such a long time, but it was such a beautiful morning the other day that I decided to go picking. The berries were so big and plump that I thought I'd whip up a batch. Would you like some?"

"Yes ma'am," he replied, really wanting to try the jam.

"A little later when it cools," she answered.

"Why don't you go into the other room for a bit," his mother said. "Your Grandma and I have some things to talk about."

Max wandered aimlessly around the first floor and decided to head upstairs. It had been a while since Max had slept over and explored that part of the house.

Climbing the stairs, Max entered the first bedroom, his father's room when he was growing up. Inside, he picked up a collection of Sherlock Holmes stories, his personal favorite. He flipped through the pages, finding some of the stories

his father had read to him - *The Red-Headed League*, *The Five Orange Pips*, and *The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle*. After a few minutes, he became restless and put the book away.

Max left the room and walked down the hall to the guest bedroom. Among the furniture was a large mirror attached to the back of the bureau. He stared into the polished glass, getting lost in the reflection just as Harry Potter did in *The Sorcerer's Stone*. He then noticed something different. The full-length mirror that had hung across the room on the far wall was now gone and in its place was a door. Max never noticed it before, which was strange because the bedroom already had a closet, but now one had magically appeared. Max walked over and put his hand on the doorknob, but paused before opening the door. What could be behind this unknown doorway? Max's best friend Ben Wagner told him about a bat somehow getting into his house. Taking a deep breath, he carefully turned the doorknob and, after hesitating a few moments, quickly pulled it open. Stairs. This wasn't a closet, but the stairway to the attic. Max looked up, but all he saw was an inky darkness. He quietly waited a few moments, but no bats came flying at him. Max flicked on a light switch, illuminating a single bulb to guide his way. He calmly, but cautiously began to climb. At the top, he saw a large area of what looked like pieces of furniture covered by white sheets and rows of boxes stacked three and four high. He decided to take one down. Inside were dozens of Playbills from Broadway plays and musicals. Max had never been to New York to see a show. He wondered if she knew he was interested in the theater. This upcoming school year, his first at the Crossroads Middle School, he was excited to get involved in the drama club. Max didn't want to be an actor, but to work backstage. He didn't know if he'd have the courage to be in front of an audience and remember his lines.

Max put the boxes of Playbills down and walked over to another stack by the far wall of the attic. Inside were scrapbooks of high school shows from those years. There were dozens of photos taped to pages along with old newspaper clippings. Flipping through one of the albums, a student's name caught his eye - Matilda Robinson. Max realized it was his Grandma's name before she married. She had put together memory books of her theatrical involvement. "I'm going to have to ask Grandma about this," he said to himself.

"Ask me what?" a voice came from behind Max. It was Grandma.

"Grandma," a startled Max replied. "What are you doing here?"

"Remember, I live here," she said, smiling widely.

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?" she asked.

"I didn't mean to go through your boxes," he said.

"Oh, Max. There's no need to apologize. That's why I've kept these old things up here so I can look back and share them with other people. So, what do you think?"

"About what?" Max asked.

"About the scrapbooks," she answered.

"I think they're great," he said. "Were you in all these shows?"

"I sure was," she replied.

"Wow. That's what I'm going to do next year," Max said excitedly.

"Do they have a theater program in the middle school?" his grandmother asked. "When I was your age it was just in the high school."

"It's still just the high school," Max answered. "There's a drama club I'm going to join. I'm thinking of working on the crew. Isn't that what you did?"

"Yes," she responded. "I eventually became the stage manager in my Senior year I even directed a show. Max was somewhat star-struck. Here was someone who had worked on a large number of shows and she was his Grandma.

"Can you tell me what it was like?" Max asked.

"I would love to, but your mother says it's time for the two of you to go home."

"How long have I been up here?" he asked.

"Quite a while," his Grandma replied. "But your mother needs to get back early."

"Do I have to?" Max complained. "There's so much to look at."

"I'm afraid so," she said. "But have your Mom bring you over during the week. We can have lunch, maybe some peanut butter and strawberry jam sandwiches, and then I can bore you with all my high school theater stories." She laughed.

Max put all the scrapbooks in the box and followed his grandmother downstairs.

Chapter 2

"I'm very happy you want to spend more time with your grandmother," Linda Thompson said. She was dropping off Max before heading off to work. "Will you be alright staying with her all day? Remember, she doesn't have wifi."

"I'll be fine," he replied. "We're going to look at her high school scrapbooks from the theater."

"Right, you told me about those," she said. "I was as surprised as you."

"She's also going to teach me some of her cooking secrets," Max continued. They quickly arrived at his grandmother's.

"Come in, come in," she said. "I just started getting all the ingredients ready so we can bake cookies." Max followed his grandmother into the kitchen. "Okay, get your apron on," she said. Mrs. Thompson handed Max an apron she had bought him with the logo of the Food Network's Kid Baking Championship. It was one of his favorite TV programs. Working as a team, they prepped the dough and put it in the refrigerator to chill for a few hours. "There," she announced. "We can roll them out later and make the cookies. How does that sound?"

"Sounds like a plan to me," he replied. The two chefs cleaned up their mess and retired to the living room to look at the scrapbooks. She opened the first volume and let out a short laugh."

"What's so funny?" asked Max.

"Oh, I haven't seen these pictures for a very long time," she replied. "They are bringing back a lot of very happy and funny memories." She flipped through cast pictures and articles from the high school and local newspapers. Once they had gone through the first book, Max went back to the attic to get the other scrapbooks.

The second box of photo albums was heavier than the first and he struggled to lift it. As he headed for the attic entrance the container slipped from his hands, spilling the contents to the floor, and making a loud thud. "Great," he muttered. He bent down to pick up the binders when he accidentally bumped into another stack of cardboard boxes, sending them crashing to the floor. Curiously, the other boxes weren't packed with theater memorabilia, but with small batches of letters, neatly tied together with ribbon. Max picked up one stack of letters, untied the bundle, and examined the top letter. It was addressed to Matilda Robinson in very neat handwriting. As he sorted through the letters he saw that all of them were sent to Matilda Robinson. He was just about to open the first letter when he heard his grandmother calling.

"Are you alright up there?" she yelled. "Why don't you wait with the other boxes? I have some chocolate chip cookie dough ready for the oven."

"Okay," he replied. "Be right down." Max returned the letters and put the box containing his discovery aside. He would investigate more the next time he visited his grandmother's house.

Chapter 3

Max and his best friend Ben were hanging out at the tennis courts in Quaker Park. They had just finished a slugfest of a match.

"So, tell me about these letters you found in your grandmother's attic," Ben said, breaking the silence. "That musta been weird."

"There's not much else to tell," Max replied, finishing his Gatorade. I didn't have a chance to read any of them. There must have been, I don't know, at least fifty of them."

"Who even writes letters?" Ben asked.

"Yeah, but the handwriting was so, what's the word...elegant," Max said. "I wish I knew how to write like that."

"Not me," answered his friend. "Why bother when you can just text?"

"I guess."

"Ya know, you have to go back up there and see what's inside," Ben told his friend.

"I can't go back up there," Max answered. "What do I say, excuse me Grandma, but do you mind if I go back up to your attic and read your personal letters?"

"Of course you can," Ben replied. "Just make some excuse like you want to see what other stuff is up there."

"That's believable, I guess," Max replied.

"And how do ya know they're personal?" he asked. "Maybe she was a government agent or international spy?"

"Give me a break," said Max. "You've been watching too many X-Files reruns."

"Aren't you at all curious?" Ben asked.

"A little," said Max.

"Then go for it," Ben said.

"My Mom and I have our weekly visit tomorrow. I'll see what I can do." Ben thrust his arm in the air.

"Yes!"

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Max and his Mom arrived at his grandmother's house and went inside. Almost immediately, he told them he was going upstairs. "I want to look at Dad's mystery novels," he said. "I need some fun summer reading." With that Max was off to the living room, stopping at the foot of the stairs leading to the second floor. He paused to hear if either of the two women were following him. After a moment, he knew the coast was clear for him to head up to the attic. He entered the guest bedroom and went up the narrow passageway. Max walked over to the box with the unknown letters. He instinctively looked around to see if anyone was looking and untied the pink ribbon, removing the top letter from the pile. Max read over the short note:

My Dearest Matilda:

I'm sorry you haven't been feeling well. I hope your cold isn't too bad. I do miss our walks to and from school. I have no one's books to hold! I told Mr. Clark that you were sick, but you knew the staging and had been helping me rehearse my songs. He wasn't worried since he figured you had already memorized the whole script. I said that was true. He knows he can rely on you to help the other kids who miss a line and need a cue. I have to run. Take care.

*Love,
Lenny*

"Who's Lenny," Max said aloud. He re-read the letter and then noticed the date. "May 10, 1967." Doing some quick calculations, he said, "That's when Grandma was..."

"A Junior in high school." Max whipped his head around and saw his grandmother standing nearby. Once again, she had surprised her grandson, having just entered the attic as Max read over the letter.

"Grandma! You scared me," Max said.

"Sorry, didn't mean to do that," Matilda Thompson said. "Your mother and I couldn't find you. I told her you might be in the attic and I would investigate. I see you found my letters."

"I didn't mean to read them. Honest," he said.

"That's quite okay," she replied. "I almost forgot they were up there."

"What are they?" Max asked. His grandmother sat down and took the letters from him. She looked through the stack, smiling.

"These are letters from your grandfather," she said. "We met our Freshman year in high school during our first musical. We were together from that day until he passed away."

"So, Lenny was Grandpa Len?" he asked.

"One and the same," she replied.

"He wrote you a lot of letters," her grandson said as he gazed at the dozens of neatly bound letters.

"That's the way we communicated back then," she said. "There was no Internet, email, or cell phones," she explained. "Growing up, we only had one telephone in our whole house. I had to share it with my parents and brothers. As the youngest, I was lucky to get five minutes a night."

"Really?" Max said. He couldn't comprehend a world without technology. His mother and father had given him his first cell phone two years earlier and he was on it constantly, playing games, texting, and posting on social media unless, like at his grandmother's house, there was no wifi. "But..." he couldn't think of anything to say, he was so amazed by a world with no cell phone or Internet."

"But what?" she playfully asked.

"I-I-I don't know," he said.

"Matilda? Max? Are you two still up in the attic?" Mrs. Thompson called.

"Linda, we were just coming down," replied her mother-in-law.

"But when are we going to go over the letters?" Max asked his grandmother.

"I have an idea," she said. "I'll tell you about it on the way down."