

### A Visit From Ann Browne

*The following conversation is fictional. Total imagination deriving from what seemed an actual middle of the night appearance from my former mother-in-law, Ann Browne. This gentle intrusion seemed real but was obviously illusory, a dream.*

On occasion, in a public place, a restaurant, a convenience store or the post office, I would notice a youthful woman looking my way; not staring but glancing, looking away and then quickly returning her eyes to me and looking away again. Her hair is a faded orange color. She is slender and has a freckled face. Am I imagining her? The same face in multiple places? Aging, tricks of the mind? I begin to ignore the ever-present woman, just barely more than a girl.

Was she Ann Browne?

I suspected the young woman making appearances was a much younger version of my former mother-in-law, Ann Browne. How was that possible? She'd passed more than forty years ago. Being spiritual and able to add two numbers that make four, I believe in an afterlife, frequent events that others describe as *miracles*.

Yes, spiritual but infused with more than a hint of realism. A well thought out belief that all that is humanity cannot be *accidental*. Eyesight alone warrants belief! And all necessary organs needed for a functioning human body *did not* emerge from the sea.

I am spiritual but the realism of death suggests a greater mystery beyond this earth.

Ann Browne! Unfinished business. Words left unsaid and a question not yet answered.

Was it a dream or harsh reality?

No, it was a dream.... I believe it was .... maybe....

There was no mistaking who she was when she appeared that night, waking me from a sound sleep. Her presence at the end of my bed was well-defined. As always during the years that I was married to her daughter, she was a commanding presence.

With great respect I called Ann Browne the *General*. She was a strong, in control, somewhat bossy woman. Two words described her, 'no nonsense'.

In my youthful idiocy, it was inevitable that I would test her edict of *no nonsense*.

Young, immature, insecure, I had married a beautiful barely grown eighteen-year-old Charlene Browne, Ann and Charles Browne's only child.

With every reason to be happily married to the perfect woman, in just a few months I knew that I was not ready; I was seriously flawed and felt *caged*. No fault of Charlene's. All me!

Disconnected, not whole, unworthy, tortured, anguished.

Eleven turbulent years! Young and immensely insecure.

I could describe myself as being awash in stark confusion, awash in constant attempts to understand *why*? With everything in place for total happiness; both of us smart, easily seen to others as having all that is needed to enjoy a great middle-class life—what was wrong, what was askew, why was the male part of the duo a mess?

I had been the mess, the young married guy who loved his wife but felt *caged*! Not because of her, she allowed me immense freedom through all of that decade as she and I had searched for answers. Years went by thinking, believing that gradually I would settle, adjust; after eleven years we knew, adjustment was some distance into an unknown future.

Chemistry? The way I was raised? Who knew?

I recalled a question heard somewhere that was poetically related to my young being, 'What if you don't know *you're not ready*? If one question can encapsulate a huge dilemma, it would be that question of eight words. 'What if you don't know you're not ready?

I was not *ready*!

I remember the young Charlene as a quiet goddess...virtually as perfect in looks and personality as a youthful woman can be. My discomfort was mental and emotional and it was an individual issue. Had that problem not been within, I could never have found a woman to be happier with; the only problem Charlene had was marrying someone *who* didn't know he was not ready for marital commitment.

I remembered the words I'd said to myself so many times during that decade, "I need to be mature now, I need experience and the hardening that experience brings *now*, not twenty years from now, not thirty years from now." I was twenty-two, then twenty-three and after another year happened, twenty-four, not only married to Ann Browne's daughter Charlene, I was soon the father of Kari, a cherished gift from heaven. And I was desperately unhappy.

And thus, yes again, the visit from my former mother-in-law. The young woman looking my way in random places was Ann Browne and, after having *passed* more than forty years before, she had returned for a nocturnal conversation. But was it real?

### The Visit

She appeared not as the young girl I'd seen so many times in random places where people gather. She was matronly as I had known her. Early fifties, hair more orange than red, faded freckles, taciturn in manner. She still had that *General* demeanor but I had learned over many years that underneath her forbidding exterior lurked a caring, sensitive soul. Exacting, no nonsense but not *hard*, not callous. She cared deeply about her husband, her daughter, her granddaughter and, though I had stretched her patience over the years and hurt those she loved, I believe she cared about me as well. Sadly, I didn't know it then, all those years ago.

That is where Ann Browne was standing, at the foot of my bed. I was in limbo, not asleep, not awake, but aware. I was not conscious enough to discern whether I expected this to be a pleasant experience. Or unpleasant! What I did believe is it would be *fleeting*. That I would wake up. And if I didn't wake up, then I must not be dreaming.

Ann said, quietly, "Hello Gary. Don't be alarmed. Just here for a few minutes and a short chat."

Just a hint of a smile. A subtle suggestion that she had not appeared to crucify me for the dreadful error of *not being ready*.

"First I want to talk about Kari. I have watched her for all of the decades since I left the physical world. She is wonderful, so accomplished, combining the strengths of her mother with some of the good things that were so apparent within you! I am immensely proud of my granddaughter. I am not with her physically but our bond is great, priceless. That bond is treasured just as much in the afterlife as it was on earth."

I was startled yes, but a gradual calm was coming over me. No *General*, no forbidding sternness, but instead gentle, quiet, smiling.

She went on, "And Mark, What a joy! A blessing to everyone. Bright, great sense of humor, sterling character but, like you've said, he is a male Zimmer and each, from your father down, has his flaws.

You and Charlene have been fortunate. Kari and Mark both reflect the character that is esteemed, held in high regard from circumspect observers from above. And while earthly beings are beset with disease, criminal tendencies, greed, disdain of fellow humans, Kari and Mark have been fortunate. They are not obsessed with guns. They love animals. Gary, if Charlie and I could have chosen our grandchildren from this *celestial level* our choice could not have been better than Kari and Mark! Charlie and I are proud of them! Some of our pride in them comes from you.

And that brings me to the reason I am here.

Our awareness, our perception where we are now is acute, for lack of a better word, heightened. We have been where you are. We have listened to your words regarding our daughter. Though all of those eleven years were fraught with your personal angst, in following years, whenever marriage was spoken of, we know that you had only good things to say about Charlene. You spoke highly of her while taking full responsibility for the failure of your marriage.

Now, Gary, let's be forthright, honest! Someone reading this would believe that it is written to assuage the guilt of a heavily burdened man, a man knowing that he'd caused pain and now wants release from his guilt. To answer, we know that you've said, if given the opportunity to again make those decisions, they would be the same. Those are not the words of a guilt-ridden man.

So, Gary, this visit is not about your decision from those days. It is about caring, love, unspoken love but real from you (yes, we know) for myself and Charlie. We know you cared for us those eleven years and afterwards as well. And we cared for you . . . flawed though you were, we understand how hard you tried for all those eleven years. There were no good people and bad people in the equation of your marriage to Charlene. You can rest easy."

My uncertainty was evident. My surprise even more evident. Another emotion came over me, also a surprise. Seeing her either in reality or in a dream was a good feeling, warm. I had cared for them. And I do to this day.

I smiled. The smile was a surprise, unbidden but welcome, comfortable.

She continued. "You were and are a good father to your children. When the time arrived, when the dust had settled, when, in later years you became ready, when you found a woman much like our Charlene, you became a good husband.

Your children love you; Charlene carries no ill feelings toward you! And Charlie and I have always loved you. And we always knew that you loved us! Again, be at peace. You're in the fourth quarter, the last inning...be at peace!

Once again, aloud, "Am I dreaming," I asked?

"No, this is real, Gary. However, I would advise you not to tell others about my visit. You are now *of that age* you know, *dementia*." A low chortle surprised me. Ann Browne was not easily amused. But this was a slightly different Ann Browne.

And our short chat was over except for one last request before turning to leave.

"One last thing Gary, it would be really great if you dropped the 'General' when describing me!"

And she was gone!

Was this a real visit from this charming and gracious woman?

I believe it was . . .