

# Dear Friend...

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Ben decides to follow through a seemingly spam email asking for money. Is it real?

<https://www.storiesspace.com/stories/drama/-dear-friend-.aspx>

The sun's heat was particularly humid in the open plan office, as though the windows were large magnifying glasses, the workers under inspection, the heat rebounding from their computer monitors to bombard them as though they were in an oven.

Benjamin Lowell looked up as a shadow fell over him. Trevor Ingram was standing there, holding out a bacon and egg sandwich and a Styrofoam cup of coffee.

"You're a workaholic, you know that?" said Trevor.

"Doesn't matter," said Ben, taking the food, "I won't be here in two years time, I'll be relaxing in the Canaries, playing as many rounds of golf as its possible to handle".

"Ah, yes, retirement. I've only got fourteen more years to go." Trevor sat at his desk, across the carpeted aisle from Ben and turned on his swivel chair.

"Absolutely roasting," he said, unbuttoning his shirt, then standing up and crossing to the window. He looked down from the fourth floor at people milling around the courtyard.

They worked as accounting technicians for a major bank, and both, in their own unique way, rather enjoyed it. Something about analysing figures and checking invoices brought a certain amount of satisfaction, especially as they knew that although they were cogs in the well-oiled machine, they were cogs that played an important role in its maintenance.

Ben relaxed back in his chair, and checked his personal email. He found he had three new messages. One was from 'Naughty nymphs'. His subscription was due. Another was from his friend at the darts club, reminding him to bring his digital camera on Friday. There was an important game and he wanted photographs of the occasion. Another was from what simply appeared to be spam email.

All it said in the subject line was: 'Dear friend'. He opened it, and skimmed through it, then laughed.

"Hey Trevor," he said, "Listen to this". Trevor wandered over from the window and stood by Ben.

"Dear friend," he said, "You are my only hope. I am turning to you in desperation. My sister is sick and is lying in a coma. I cannot afford her hospital fees, and in order for her to receive treatment, I need to raise a total of £2100. If you would be so kind as to contribute towards it I would be very grateful, or perhaps you could donate by please sending me your bank details, and I will take only the amount you request. I hope you can help me, and thank you in advance of any contribution you may make.

Yours, Ags".

"Ags," said Trevor, "Who calls themselves that? Anyway, how blatantly obvious is that? They've got the cheek to just ask for your bank details. Normally they ask after a couple of messages. Delete it, don't reply, 'cos they'll know your email account's active. Anyway, back to work". He turned and crossed to his desk. Ben read the email again, and a switch at the back of his mind flicked and he thought: 'What if...?' What if there really is a sick sister who needs help? It just might be genuine. He didn't delete it, but put back up his database, and continued his work.

At home, sat with his wife of 37 years, watching a daily gameshow, the sprouting seed gradually entwined itself into his psyche, and he had visions of a woman lying on a hospital bed, attached to a life-support machine. What if ...? he kept asking himself. What if I'm the only one who can help her? What if she dies, and I could have saved her? It was this thought that sent him into the back room to use his laptop computer.

"What is it dear?" Margaret asked.

"Just something from work I need to check".

She tutted, and rolled her eyes. "A complete workaholic, you really are".

Ben forced a humourless smile, and was soon waiting for his email to appear. When it did, he clicked on 'Dear friend', and began to write a reply:

'As you are probably well aware, there are many cons and scams on the internet, and yours seems like it is no exception. However, in the rare case of this being genuine, I feel you will understand my concern if I asked to see evidence of your sister. If I am convinced that this is real, then I will help

you.

Thank-you.

Benjamin Lowell.'

He turned off the computer and closed the laptop, then sighed, and went back into the front room.

The following morning, the first thing he did in work was check his email, but there was no reply. At midday, he checked again, and a reply had appeared. He felt apprehensive at opening it, not really knowing why, but he did.

'Dear Benjamin' it said. 'I most kindly welcomed your reply, and can guarantee you that this is genuine. I can guarantee it, because I can prove it. My sister's name is Tina Morgan, and she is currently in D-Wing of the Royal Constance medical institution. If you like, you can meet her. Please let me know when the best time would be for you. I thank-you in hopeful anticipation of your trust.

Ags.'

Ben read it again, and again, and the seed that had been planted suddenly grew even more quickly. Royal Constance is five miles away, he thought, and nodded, deciding that he would follow it through. His sceptical mind, however, warned him to still be vigilant. This could all be part of a scam. He nodded again, agreeing with himself, then formulated a reply:

'I am not sure when you will see this message, but the time now is 12:04pm. I am owed time off, and can visit this afternoon.' That was all he wrote, and he kept his email open and minimised while he worked, refreshing it everytime he maximised the screen. A reply came ten minutes later.

'The Constance has a café opposite its reception. I will be sat alone in a corner, or thereabouts, depending how full it is, reading a newspaper. I will meet you at 2pm. I thank-you again'. For the rest of his time at work, Ben could think of nothing else, and conducted his work almost on auto-pilot. On his way out, he bypassed Trevor who looked at him with curiosity.

"You look as if you're going home," he said.

"Yes, the wife's got an appointment and wants me to go with her".

"It must be serious if you've left your desk. You never have time off. You must be owed about six years by now".

"Well...yes, see you tomorrow," Ben said, and walked across to the stairs.

It took him two buses, and forty-five minutes to get there. He had two minutes to spare, but saw that Ags was already there, sitting by a window, deep in concentration in a newspaper. Ben was almost reluctant to disturb him, and he stood staring for a few moments, apprehensive, like a nervous teenage boy trying to pluck up courage to approach an attractive girl, but he did, mainly because he realised he was starting to look suspicious, just standing there in a café, watching one of the customers.

Ags looked up and smiled. He wore a wool fawn suit with a grey waistcoat, and sported a neatly trimmed beard that almost, but not quite suited him. He looked to be in his late thirties.

"Benjamin Lowell?" he said. Ben nodded. Ags stood up and they shook hands.

"It's nice to actually see a real person behind these emails," said Ben.

"I'll bet most of them that are fake, you'll never see a person behind them". Gesturing to himself, Ags said, "I'm real. Tina is real. This is all absolutely genuine, and I really do appreciate you coming. Come this way, I'll take you to her". He gestured to the exit, and they both left the café. Ben followed Ags to the second floor. They chatted casually along the way, and Ben came to realise that there was nothing extraordinary about him. He seemed normal enough. Not somebody he would particularly bother about making friends with, but a decent individual with common characteristics.

"...and that's why I don't drink herbal tea. Here we are". They reached the ward and Ags walked to a door and pushed through into a smaller corridor, and to a door on the left which he opened and entered.

Ben found that they were in a small room, containing a bed, a chair that looked to be taken from an outdoor café, a respirator, and drip feeding glucose intravenously to the occupant of the bed. There was a sheet covering most of the person, but Ben could see that it was a woman who he would guess at being around thirty-five to forty.

"That's my sister," said Ags, with a sigh. "She needs a lot of expensive treatment".

"Isn't this the NHS? Isn't this free?" Ben spoke quietly as though he may wake her.

"She doesn't trust authority. Or people who want all sorts of information about her, so she never signed up, never got insured. Always believed in natural cures. Bit of a free spirit is my Tina. A bit of a

hippy really, but now she needs all the help she can get. If she hadn't have got in the car with her now ex-boyfriend who had been drinking in a wine-bar, who then ended up ploughing into the back of a HGV, who incidently, only got away with a broken shinbone, and now has a permanent limp, she wouldn't be lying here now, fighting for her life".

Ben simply stared at her for a while, the regular beep the only sound, telling him she was still alive.

"Alright," he said. "How much is it you need again?"

"The cost could vary. Nothing is certain. I only mentioned £2100 as a rough estimate. If you give me your bank details, I will take only what is needed". Ben nodded.

"Small price to pay," he said.

Two days had passed since Ben had left Ags at the hospital, and despite his trusting of him, he was still apprehensive when he checked his bank account on the computer, especially when there was a two-second blank screen before the total appeared. It was exactly as Ags had said. £2100 had come out.

Should any more be needed, Ags had promised to let Ben know beforehand. So far, there was nothing, and Ben's account was still healthy.

"Working again," said Trevor, appearing behind him, eating a chocolate bar.

"Yes, it never ends. It's got to be done".

"Yes, but, seriously. A man needs a break sometime". He wandered across to the window, looked down at several people milling around at the entrance, smoking, took a bite of his bar, and walked across and sat at his desk, firing up his computer.

A few minutes later, he checked his email.

"Hey, Ben" he said, swivelling on his chair, "I've got an email from that one who sent you a message the other day, sobbing about how he needs our bank details for his sick sister". Ben swivelled and smiled.

"It's real," he said. "I didn't want to tell you, but I might as well. I followed it through. I met Ags, and I saw his sister". There was a few seconds of silence between the men.

"Really?" said Trevor, finishing his bar and putting the wrapper in his waste-bin.

"Yes, you can trust him". Ben told him more of what had happened, and Trevor nodded, saying: "OK, right. I suppose I'll send him my bank details incase he needs anymore. It can't be left just up to you". He turned on his chair and began formulating a reply.

"I wonder how she is, Tina," said Ben. "I'll give the hospital a call to check". Previously, Ben had intended to do just that, and had written down the number of D-wing. He picked up his telephone and dialled. As he did, he minimised his work, and logged into his bank account to check his money again. The phone was answered on the other end.

"Hello," he said, "sorry to bother you, I was wondering if you could please give me an update as to how a Miss Tina Morgan is. The woman in room 2A".

"You mean the woman in the coma?"

"Yes, that's her". The white screen appeared before his account came up.

"A Mrs Bernice Montgomery, she's been there for two months".

His bank account showed zero. His money had been cleared.

"There, I've done it," said Trevor, "I've sent my bank details". He swivelled on his chair.

"Hey," he said, "You know what Ags probably stands for don't you? Another gullible sucker".