

BEHIND THE LOCKED DOOR

My grandfather told me never to go beyond that door at the top of the stairs.

“Why?” I always asked every week as an inquisitive six year old boy.

“Because...” he would reply, flattening my curiosity with one sharp word.

“But...”

“No *buts*,” he would say firmly as he turned the key in the lock and looked down into the eyes of his only grandson. “Now come on mate,” his voice would lift, “whad’ya say about having a glass of *Tiddly?*” referring to his potent home made dandelion wine that bubbled away in the garden shed.

“Yeah,” I’d agreed eagerly, knowing that I’d get a thimble sized drop of the golden liquid, which would make me feel warm and glowing inside, just like a dose of that pink kiddies medicine I used to gulp down when I was ill.

With my hand encased by his banana sized fingers and stuck within his vice like grip, we’d then trot down to the back shed, across the overgrown path in order for him to misdirect my thoughts about the forbidden room.

As the weeks of the summer slipped by, my Gramps, who was a retired post man, though to this day I can’t recall him ever going to work, nor seeing him with a battered satchel, only a smart looking briefcase, my Gramps would regularly put the word out on the street and summon his friends for a *family reunion*, he would call it.

And as I would sit with my legs dangling over the side of the chintz armchair with a slice of chunky toast dripping with butter and a cup of tea on my lap whilst Hector’s House played on the television, I would often over hear my Gramps mutter in the hallway as he got ready to greet his friends.

“Leave it out woman,” he would playfully bark as his shot of black skunk-like hair that streaked through his silver grey barnet was combed back with a dollop of Brylcreem by my Gran, who incidentally never had a hair out of place, though it changed colours on a regular basis.

“Come ‘ere luv. I want yer lookin’ yer best,” her cockney accent bounced about the flocked paper lined hall.

Having so many strangers coming and going all the time, all suited and booted in their Sunday best, it never occurred to me why an ordinary postman would have so many fancy friends. I mean, why would Gramps associate with these slick haired men that lined the street with their fleet of black shiny cars? Why did he usher them into the secret room, only to be followed by my Gran with a doily covered tray laden with tea? And why wasn’t I allowed to join in? I liked tea too!

Thinking about it now, it seemed so obvious what was going on. But not then. Not to a six year old. And especially when *the family* gave me a handful of pennies to put in my piggy bank for being *such a good boy*. A bit

hypocritical at the time, but I never complained. What did I know?

As soon as I received the money, I would run to the local ice cream parlour with the coins indenting the Queen's head into my grubby little hand, peer over the shiny lamented counter and order a blackcurrant ice cream soda.

The family, I previously mentioned, were Gramps' friends. And some friends they were! With a scratch here and a scar there across their weathered faces, they seemed like a mob of monsters that had just jumped out of one of my story books. They were scary. Really scary.

I can remember on many occasions standing outside, listening to the hushed voices that echoed around the room as my nosy ear was suctioned against the peeling door. But I never heard anything out of the ordinary. Occasionally there'd be a thump on a table, the odd laugh or two. But nothing else. Nothing that you could call sinister.

Looking back at that last glorious summer holiday before me and my folks packed our belongings and schlepped all the way to Australia to live, I sometimes wish that I had stayed in Bethnal Green with my Gramps. Good job I didn't though, as I would have got myself into in all sorts of trouble. Even now, I could be staying at one of the Queen's hotels. My Gramps was lucky. He had a lot of people looking after him. He was special. One of a kind.

And now as my grieving parents sort out the family heirlooms, I wander around Gramps' mausoleum of a house that remained in its original state since Gran died a few years previously, and reminiscence over the good times I spent there.

With his impregnated aura still visible around the dusty furniture and as the smell of elderflower, Old Spice and brewing tea still lingers in the air, I bend down and pick up a crumpled photograph of my Gramps in his youth. He was dashing. Big, brave and strong. Though to some, he was the complete opposite. Bad, ugly and dangerous.

I don't care what he did when he was younger. A vicious villain he may have been, a gangster and a crook, but to me he was still my Gramps. He was still my hero.

He never hurt me. He loved me and I loved him. Still do. Though I miss him, terribly. But I'm glad that I was there for him in the end, with one last glass of *Tiddly* sitting on the battered silver tray beside his bed.

Taking one last look at the photo before I carefully place it in my pocket, a tear appeared from my eye and landed on my hand.

"Goodbye Gramps," I whisper as his image faded into darkness within the protective home of my jacket. "Love ya."

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