

Never Too Late

Grandad keeps chickens in a hutch down at the bottom of the garden. There is a wire mesh run that opens directly out of it and the fat hens swarm out, clucking furiously, pecking angrily at the ground. Or at my fingers if I get close enough. Every morning we check for eggs and there are usually five or six: slightly speckled, some brown, some white and all still warm. They're wonderful with toast cut into thick soldiers by Grandad and spread with real butter.

He always has black tea, strained through leaves in a funny sieve. He makes me laugh when he slurps it; I think he does it on purpose as he gets louder and louder, snorting like a pig with his eyes dancing as he watches me. Then Mam tells him off and says he shouldn't share bad habits. Grandad just laughs and calls her a 'wicked witch of the West' then he blows his nose as loud as he can and then we go outside and play catch with the dog.

My Grandad had a stroke last year and he doesn't play anymore. He just sits in his wheelchair and stares. Quite often he cries and I hate this because it makes him seem old and little at the same time. He used to be able to pick both me and my sister up under each arm and run around saying he was going to take us to the troll that lives under the bridge.

Now that he can't speak, with his hair all over the place and his fingers like claws, I think he looks more like the troll that lives under the bridge.

So I make up excuses as to why I can't go and visit. I have to do my homework or I have to practise the keyboard or go for a run. I could do any of these things later or the next day but I make out that I have to do them now and I'm sorry but I just can't go and see Grandad crying in the wheelchair the hospital gave him that doesn't even bloody push straight!

Mam and Dad went out to see him last Saturday but I said I had to watch a documentary for school on I-Player. I heard them start the car and then the engine stopped and the door opened again. I thought at first they must have forgotten something but it wasn't that. My Dad came and sat down next to me and he used his serious voice: the one I have to listen to whether I like it or not.

"I think you should come with us today," he said. "I think you should come with us today because you never know when it'll be too late." I looked up at him and he didn't look away. Suddenly I had a lump in my throat and my chest felt all tight.

So we drove to Grandad's and it didn't smell of toast and warm butter anymore because it smelt of medicine and the toilet instead.

Mam talked to Grandad in a silly voice as though he was a baby. Grandad scowled at her and grunted 'not like him' and he couldn't make words. He still had his pyjamas on. Dad said something to Mam about why 'the nurse hadn't got him dressed'. We had cups of tea with teabags but I just left mine and went outside.

There was a hole in the hutch and the mesh was all rolled up against the fence. There weren't any chickens and the dog was staying with my Uncle now.

I could hear Mam and Dad talking inside; something was wrong because she said 'Oh Dad, you should have told me you needed it. Now we'll have to get you cleaned up.'

Soon after my Dad came to the kitchen door and called for me: 'Can you come in and look after your Grandad whilst me and your Mam get the front room sorted?' So I came and sat at the table and Grandad sat there too but he wasn't looking at anything and he had different pyjamas on.

His neck seemed loose, like it was on a spring, and his lips weren't straight. 'Hi Grandad,' I said. 'I was just looking at where the chickens used to be.' Then I asked him whether he "still saw the troll that lived under the bridge?" but I suppose he didn't.

And I couldn't think of anything else to say.

After a while I remembered there were sometimes sweets in the top cupboard. I had to stand on my chair to reach but I stretched and opened it. There weren't any sweets but there was that funny sieve thing that he used to make tea with and a little jar full of leaves.

I put the leaves in the sieve like he used to do. I packed them down and then poured hot water in. The tea looked the right colour. "Here you go, Grandad," I said. "Thick enough to break the spoon" because that's what he always used to say.

But he didn't look up and some spit fell from his mouth. I felt the lump in my throat again and I nearly went outside but there was some kitchen roll there so I crumpled it up and I wiped the spit away. Then I sipped my tea.

It was too hot so I slurped it a little bit. Maybe Grandad's hand moved a little bit on the table. Mam and Dad were still in the other room so I slurped a bit louder and then I did a really loud one, like a straw sucking up the last dregs, and he moved his hand and he looked up at me.

So I did it again, watching him watching me and his eyes flashed just a little bit. I honked like a warthog and my Grandad laughed a funny laugh that was him and wasn't him and then got a little more like him the more he did it. The kitchen roll was still there so I got three sheets and I put them round my nose and I blew as loud as I could possibly blow. I thought my head would burst and I cried with laughter and Grandad started batting the table with his hand and laughing a funny 'lot like him' laugh. So I did it again and Mam came bursting in with "What in Heaven's name is going on in here?" and Dad was behind her looking confused and I was still laughing and Grandad batted the table again and went 'Wuh wuh...' And we all stopped.

Mam said, "Dad?" and my Dad looked at me in a strange way but he wasn't cross.

And then Grandad said, "Wuck Wuh." His fingers straightened and curled and straightened again. And he said, in a gravelly voice that was the first time he'd sounded like himself in a year, "Wuckd Wutch o'Wust!"

And then he snorted like a pig and we didn't stop laughing for days and I'm going to see my Grandad again tonight because I love him and you never know when it'll be too late.