

The Tobacco Tin

Grandad was killed in 1917 in the Great War, leaving Grandma behind with four children. He had been conscripted by ballot the previous year at the age of thirty-one. They never found his body. No doubt it lay buried somewhere in the mud of Passchendaele. Mum said that all Grandma got was a telegram from the War Department, '*We regret to inform you...*'. Mum was the oldest and thirteen at the time, and it was tough going - helping to look after her little brother and sisters. She left home as soon as she could and had me when she was twenty-five. There was a shortage of good husband material.

I've thought of Grandad just about every day of my life. Anzac Day is this Friday and I saw an old biddy selling the red poppies down by Countdown this morning. The poppies aren't the real thing anymore - they're made in China. I have a framed sepia photograph of Grandad in my room upstairs. He's posing in front of a studio backdrop with his hands held behind his back. His uniform is buttoned and belted tightly and he has puttees from his knees to his ankles and a peaked cap. Actually, he looks a bit like me when I was younger.

I first met Grandad on a day when I'd been shut outside for misbehaving. Mum's boyfriend was jealous of me and once he moved in I spent a lot of time outside. I would sit there snivelling and feeling sorry for myself. The yard wasn't much chop either. In those days, Mum rented an old stucco bungalow up near The Carillion on Tasman Street. The ground out the back was concreted, with a rusting clothesline and weeds growing up where the concrete had cracked. The yard always smelled of gas - even before Grandad came. It was situated off the back of the house, with corrugated fencing on three sides and a coal shed in one corner. Only the wash-house had a window that faced the yard, and this had been boarded over. It was pretty bleak out there.

On this occasion, I was sitting on a pile of old boards and scratching away at a crack in the concrete with a stick. I suppose I would have been eight or nine. I could hear Mum and Joe fighting inside. It wouldn't be about me. Mum never stuck up for me. I knew what would happen. He'd hit her a few times, she'd cry, he'd apologise and they'd go into the bedroom. Sometimes they wouldn't remember I was outside until after it was dark. But it must have been summer that first time, as the sun is part of my memory. And my first memory of Grandad is more vivid than any other, except for the final one.

A shadow fell across the ground in front of me, and I looked up. I remember the contrasts of the heat rising up from the ground, the dark shadow blocking out the sun, and a cold feeling that made the hairs stand up on the back of my neck.

"Hello boy", he said, "I'm your Grandad". Just like that. I could have questioned this statement, but I didn't. It just seemed right, somehow.

Grandad asked if he could sit down and before I could answer, settled beside me. He stretched out his legs as if they were stiff, and asked me to reach into the top right-hand pocket of his coat for his tobacco tin. He then asked me to open it. Inside was shredded tobacco and a small folder of papers. He rested the tin on his thighs and to my wonder, adeptly rolled a cigarette with only his left hand. The sun shone brightly on his trousers, and as he snapped the lid shut, the tobacco tin lid reflected a bright dash of light.

We sat there for ages on that first day. I don't even remember what we talked about, but it felt good. It was so much better to have company than to sit there alone, worrying about Mum.

Despite dying, Grandad was a huge part of my childhood. From then on, he would visit frequently, always when I had been shut in the yard, and always staying until just before Mum called me in. He wore a khaki uniform, which smelled a bit funny and had only one proper arm. I asked him about the smell once, and he said it came from lying in a pool of mustard gas after he'd died. The other arm, the right one, was just an empty sleeve, charred and tattered at the shoulder.

I used to prefer him to sit with his right side away from me, as the worst smell came that gaping hole. And from under his cap. And he only had one boot, but he didn't seem to mind.

Grandad tended to be on the serious side but liked to sit outside in the sun as he was always cold.. Sometimes he was shivering so much he couldn't even roll his smokes. A few times we dozed off together for a bit, but this made me even colder and I'd lie in bed for ages afterwards before I started to warm up.

We would talk about this and that. Me about the minor pleasures and irritations of my young life and Grandad of the war and the friends he had lost, of how he missed Grandma and the children, of barbed wire and chlorine gas, of the mud and exhaustion of Passchendaele, and most frequently, of the New Zealand Division's attack on Gravenstafel Spur in October 1917. I didn't understand a lot of it at the time, but his words have stayed with me. I could see the war through his eyes.

Joe started beating Mum up worse and worse, and of course, that meant me as well. On the day of Grandad's final visit, I had bruises all over my arms and legs, and a swollen lip. We could hear Mum wailing from the bathroom. Grandad took one long hard look at me, before saying, "That's enough". The smell from his rotten shoulder and from under his cap suddenly seemed stronger and I flinched. I couldn't imagine what Grandad could possibly do with only one arm and a missing boot. But I was only a kid, of course.

For the last time, he sat down beside me and went through the ritual of rolling his cigarette. He lit up and sucked the smoke in, releasing a long white stream into the miserable back yard air. After a pause, he broke the news to me that he had to go away and that I wouldn't see him again for a very long time. I felt empty. I had no concept then of what a 'long time' might mean, but I'm now going on eighty-five and I still haven't seen him.

When he'd finished smoking, he drew himself up and gave his one arm a bit of a shake. Sort of to loosen it, I thought. He tucked his tobacco tin into his pocket, fastening the button with one hand, before standing to attention and saluting me formally. His face was grave. He then walked over and kicked the back door, hard.

It was Joe who opened up and I can still see the expression on his face. He thought he was about to give me a good clip on the ear, but instead, was faced with Grandad. Joe was tall and muscly, but seemed the least substantial of the two. I watched as he brought his right forearm up to cover his nose, shielding his eyes with his left hand.

For the first time, Grandad removed his cap, whereupon a yellow-grey swirling mist drifted out of his smashed cranium. I saw tendrils of gas being drawn into Joe's nostrils. Already he was gasping hoarsely and clutching at his throat. I tried to look away, but despite the horror, had a small boy's fascination with the gruesome side of things.

Joe stumbled backwards into the darkened hallway, followed closely by Grandad. Both were soon beyond my sight. Mum had stopped her wailing but wasn't anywhere to be seen. I could hear Joe's hoarse gasps getting weaker and weaker, then all was quiet.

The back door was swinging gently and I waited for Grandad to reappear, but he never did. Eventually I picked myself up and went inside. There was no-one. I went through all the rooms and found Mum asleep, tucked up soundly in her bed. She had a freshly-bruised cheek but otherwise seemed none the worse for wear. The whole house was silent. No Joe. No Grandad.

I was heading back outside when a soft gleam of reflected light caught my eye. There in the hallway, on Grandma's old side table, beside the framed photo of Grandad, was Grandad's tobacco tin. I picked it up with a sad feeling in my heart and carried it outside.

Inside, I expected to see shreds of soft brown tobacco and Grandad's rolling papers. Instead, there was a small sealed envelope, addressed to 'Master William Walter Jennings'. I tore

this open and found a gilded and embossed card, made from some shiny material, bearing the following message: -

‘You are cordially invited to join Sergeant Walter James Jennings on a trip to celebrate the anniversary of his death. Be at the Passchendaele New British Cemetery, 'S Graventafelstraat, Belgium, on Wednesday 4th October, 2017, at precisely 10.15 am.’

That’s still over three years from now. But my savings are intact – I just have to keep myself alive.