

# THE HOURGLASS



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by

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This one is for my Mum.

## Chapter One

I must be quick, as there is so much to tell you and so little time. My name is John Oldaker, and I have 60 minutes to live.

I spent the hour leading up to this one collecting my thoughts and putting them into an approximate running order so that I might finally unburden myself of my shame, my guilt, and my regret.

It was an easier task than I imagined, as every story has an identifiable starting point, a place in time that you can put a pin in; you then simply start to dwell on the life before and the life after. I'll wager that may have brought something from your own life to mind. Invariably, things are always brighter and better before the event, aren't they? That's my way of thinking, and I wonder if that's true of what just came into your head?

The start then, 1979. The year Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister, Trevor Francis became the first million-pound footballer, and Sid Vicious days of anarchy in the U.K. came to a heroin-induced end. I was only six years old, and the event that stood out more than all others was the day my grandpa died.

Now, I know what you're thinking—of course such an event would have a profound effect on such a small boy. But the truth of it is, I didn't really understand death at such a young age, and the shame I mentioned earlier begins with the fact that six-year-old me lapped up the attention from my parents, neighbours, and such. Heck, I wore it like a badge of honour on my return to primary school a week after the event, and I remember a small thrill coursing through me as I entered the classroom to a hushed silence from my classmates and a big hug from Mrs Jacobs, who absolutely gave me the best tasks all week long.

So no, it wasn't Grandpa Rick. That was the catalyst for Grandma Dorothy's slow and steady decline. A decline that led into depression, a fear of going out, and what we thought was senility (I now know better).

Six-year-old me didn't, though. He just thought Grandma was a mean old biddy. And why? Well, it looked to me like she changed overnight. The sweet lady who made such fine cakes and surreptitiously slipped you a treat away from your parent's watchful gaze was gone. The same lady who meticulously maintained a spotless home, rising at 5 a.m. and retiring after 8 p.m., the hours between a catalogue of backbreaking and mundane chores, gone. My loving grandmother, who would snatch you up when an Elvis Presley tune came on the radio and spin you in dizzying turns, was gone.

I remember her there at the funeral, her eyes glazed and far away, and when they shifted and found mine, they held me there as if she were only seeing me for the first time. The moment was fleeting, but I felt a small shiver pass through me. I was scared then, not knowing or understanding the sombre mood as I peered past the small forest of legs towards the brown box being lowered into the ground. Such feelings surely disappeared by the time we reached Uncle Tom's house, where we would hold a thing called a wake. I didn't understand what the word meant, but by 4.30 in the afternoon, I knew I liked such a thing, as slowly and surely the muted conversations gave way to

laughs and cheers as Uncle Tom told the gathered folks about how Grandpa Rick had jumped into the Tolfait River to save him when he was a little more than my age.

That had been back when they had lived in Fairford. I had heard the story a thousand times before, but I was breathless as I waited excitedly on the crowd's reaction as Uncle Tom told how in 1946, the storm of the century had hit the county of Eastland and how the towns and villages had flooded as the rivers swelled and ran as dark and brown as the ground we had laid Grandpa in.

Being only a young boy, he had run from the house as the possibility of adventure beckoned. In tow was his black spaniel, Toby. The two had made their way to the river, and Tom recalled how he was awestruck by the power of the water and the carnage of the storm due to the broken debris that was carried in the river's wake. He had kept a respectful distance, knowing well that his dad could take his belt from him if he got too close. That was until he saw it bobbing its way towards him—a leather Tiento football. With all the care and deliberation he could muster, he scooped up a broken branch and leaned out as far as he could to snare his prize. You know what happened next; his audience knew what happened next, but that didn't stop a few small gasps emanating from their lips.

Tom said he didn't know much after that. He awoke back at home to find his father soaking wet, leaning over him, and Toby yapping incessantly by his feet.

"Let me tell you, I never knew that teeth could chatter like in the cartoons, but mine were rattling like a Bren gun! I've never been so cold. That was until Dad warmed the seat of my pants for me later on!"

This generated a burst of laughter, and hands quickly reached out to pat his back or to be shaken.

I beamed at their reaction and turned towards Grandma, hoping at last to see a fond smile upon her face. She was bent still in her chair, her eyes blank and unfocused. I took a step towards her but was quickly stopped by my mother.

"Leave Grandma be Johnny."

But, Mum," I began to protest.

"Leave her be," she repeated, "she's sad we had to say goodbye to Grandpa."

Sad. I didn't think she was just sad. To me, it seemed like she was broken.

And so it proved to be as the years went by.

## Chapter Two

I only saw Grandma occasionally after that. She continued to live in the small bungalow where she and Grandpa had retired before his death. That was out in Walton on the Naze in Essex. We were still in Springmoor at that time—me, my mum, my dad, and my older sister, Katie.

I used to love our trips out to the coast to see them both. Though I am sure it was more the candy floss and seafront arcades that took my interest than my grandparents.

At first, it was just my mother who would make the trip to see her. This would be every weekend. She'd be weighed down with several casserole dishes and a bag of clean laundry as she fought her way from the house, with two brattish kids begging her to let them go with her. We didn't know then what a chore it was, and we still had thoughts of fun, games, and treats at Grandma's house. The reality was altogether different, though, and it was my sister Katie who was the first to break it to me—that it was a horrible time there.

I didn't believe it though, and I threw the biggest tantrum of my young life when I heard Katie was allowed to visit Grandma and I was not. My cries had been long and loud, and it was only when my father promised to take me to the Wimpey for hamburgers and milkshakes that I relented.

He'd tried to explain it, of course. Grandma Dot was in a 'bad place', and now wasn't the time for a visit. My protests had tapered off between mouthfuls of tasty hamburger with ketchup, but I was savvy enough to know my protests had earned me this reward, and so it wouldn't be the last time I would make such a fuss.

That went on for a short time, and it wasn't long before Katie's protests went the other way, and she instead cried at the prospect of going to Grandma's. It was much the same on her return from these visits, as she would run straight to her bedroom, slamming any doors that stood in her path.

I know now that my parents were trying to protect me from something, but even a seven-year-old boy (as I now was) could see that something was wrong, as my mother didn't look far off tears herself on each and every return, and would fall into the deep armchair of our living room exhausted.

Katie is four years older than me and was going through some changes. I understand that for what it is now, but the only thing I saw at the time was that her teddy bears and dolls had given way to the music of Blondie and Dexys Midnight Runners, while posters of Disney princesses were replaced by those of Adam and the Ants and the Police. I also knew that I fit the mould of the annoying little brother, a role I played to perfection at times. Because of our age difference (I was now 7 and she was 11), her bedroom was now off-limits to me.

My curiosity had become a burning thing, and on another of Katie's tear-filled returns from Grandma's house, I needed to know what was happening. I wouldn't get the answers from my parents; they still thought I was just a kid, but I was 7 now, dammit, and old enough to know what was going on. So, I decided to question my sister on the matter. However, my resolve was quickly broken as I came to the foot of the stairs and stared fearfully up into the darkness. Money was scarce in those days, and it wasn't uncommon for a bulb or two to be out in the house. Every now

and again, they would be replaced, but when another inevitably went out, it would be a matter of taking one of the lesser-used ones to replace, say, the one in the living room.

The one I feared being out the most, though, was the landing light at the top of the stairs, and yes, it was out again on this occasion. I am not afraid to tell you that I was scared of the dark at that age, and ordinarily I would race up the stairs as quickly as I could, so I could quickly make a bedroom, and press on the light switch before the hand of some monster came out of the blackness to ensnare me. I was always just quick enough, I knew, but in my mind's eye, there had been but a breath between my hand making the switch and any monsters reaching me.

It wouldn't do, though, to race up those stairs on this occasion and announce my arrival like some herd of cattle running over a wooden floor. I had to hold my breath and try not to let my thoughts take over as I climbed the stairs as tentatively as I could. Panic began to rise in me, but the deep monotone of my father's voice came to my ears from the living room, and so I used that as an anchor as I pressed manfully onward.

Mercifully, I made it to the top without incident, though my heart seemed to beat strong enough to come out of my chest. Already a pool of light spilled onto the upper floor, and thankfully, I found the door to her bedroom open. Had it not been, my resolve would not have survived her inevitable dismissal while I stood alone in the darkness.

She was sitting bolt upright on the side of her bed. The tears had stopped, and I saw her eyes shining out at me, perhaps evidence she had heard my impending arrival and quickly wiped the last of them on the cuff of her cardigan as I approached.

"Katie?" I ventured.

"Go away." She returned, but there was none of the conviction of her usual rebukes, and so I crossed the threshold to her room, half expecting her to explode at my transgression. It didn't come, though.

"What's the matter?"

I could see her eyes begin to water again, and I didn't have the social skills required to deal with a distraught girl of 11 (and still don't, for that matter). I knew, however, that if I wasn't quick, I would lose this opportunity, and so I used what little insight I had in the hope of showing Katie that I knew what was going on and that it was okay to talk about it.

"Grandma is sick, isn't she?"

I saw her brow furrow in surprise, and slowly her eyes softened as she realised the wall of silence within our home had caused me to come to this conclusion.

"No, Johnny," she managed, "it's not like that."

"Why won't anyone tell me what is going on?!" I nearly shouted, and I guess I must have been near tears myself as my sister reached out, took my shoulder, and steered me to the bed beside her.

I could see she was wrestling with something, and that was whether or not to share with me what she knew.



"Grandma, isn't sick in that way." I felt relief course through me, as at that time I still held the fondest of memories of her in my mind. This moment of relief did not last long, though, as Katie unloaded all she had discovered at Nan's house.

"She's changed; I think you saw it last time at Grandpa's funeral. She just sits there all day in her chair now. She's mean Johnny, mean to me, and mean to Mum. We're only there to help her, but she just shouts and moans all the time, and then..."

"What?" I demanded.

"You can't tell Mum or Dad..."

I nodded my agreement, but even with my permission, it did not come quickly.

"She hit me. When Mum wasn't looking, she slapped me round the face."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing, and I guess Katie saw the disbelief in my eyes.

"She's changed, Johnny; she's mean and horrible, and she hit me!" Her voice was rising as she spoke, and then I did believe her. "I don't want to go no more, Johnny; I hate her, I just hate her!"

Katie rolled away from me and slumped headfirst into her bed, which muffled her cries. I sat there silently, not knowing whether to stay or to go, but it was my mother who made the decision for me, as she appeared at the bedroom door and offered her hand out to me while beckoning me with a nod.

I looked back at my sister, and ashamedly, I felt anger towards her. Not to the truth, as I believed her, but more to the fact that she had broken some cardinal rule in speaking ill or out of turn about a family member when such a thing was installed in you from an early age that you were to love them unconditionally.

I knew instinctively that my mother had heard it all, and as it was, neither me nor Katie would go to Grandma's place ever again.

## Chapter Three

1980 disappeared, and soon after, so did my father. I had been blind to the rift that had appeared in my parents' marriage, but not deaf to it. In front of me and Katie, it had been forced smiles and false cheer from both of them. But after bedtime, the slow drone of their voices from downstairs became deeper from him and more shrill from her as accusations were traded like punches in a boxing ring. More often than not, these exchanges culminated in the slamming of doors, the front door as my father stormed from the house or my parents' bedroom door, preceded by the loud stomp of my mother's footfalls on the stairs.

It went on like that for only a short time; it was April of 1981, and the final slam of a door heralded my father's final exit from our home. He would be in our lives intermittently thereafter, as he still made occasional trips over to see us. These were bleak days, though, something that neither I or Katie relished as he would bombard us with questions as to what our mother was doing and, more pointedly, who she might be seeing. We were very innocent in our responses; after all, we were only children. But I soon learned the correlation between our answers and the accusations that followed on the doorstep afterward, as he delivered us home.

In the end, the visits dwindled down to nothing as he moved on with a new family. We weren't sorry.

I say that with reflection, of course; my hatred towards my father fermented over many years, and as I grew from a boy to a teenager to a man, I couldn't resolve how he had come to make such choices, and so my hatred endured, and I resolved to be the very opposite of everything I believed him to be.

I digress; I'm sorry. I only have 45 minutes, and I've yet to get to the real story here. It wasn't entirely wasted time, though, as you have your background as to what came next. You see, Mum was pushed to the brink by these events, as I am sure you can imagine. She had taken up a shift at Miller's laundry, and the two of us would have to prepare ourselves for school. As a result, there would be those days where hair went uncombed and uniforms went uncleaned. The kids at school were not kind. But this part of the story is more my mother's than mine, as there were still the weekend visits she made to Grandma's house.

She couldn't cope, and we did nothing to help. For one, Katie began to rebel. She was at that age, of course, and it would have happened whatever the circumstances, but with Dad gone, coupled with her unwanted (and unwarranted) status as a second-year school pariah, she became uncontrollable. The house echoed again with door slams, and the screaming could be heard from the end of the street. I was but a casual observer in the proceedings, so perhaps I wasn't a burden, but I was certainly no help to my mother either.

I guess I have always been that way—a bit like that cartoon character Garfield. Do you remember him? Well, back there in the 1980s, you'd know. You had those soft toys you used to see in the rear of people's cars, a suction cup on each paw as he hung spread-eagled, glaring out at the world with a furrowed brow and a mischievous grin. I feel like that's how I've led my life at times: nose pressed up against the window of life, just glaring through, seeing the big show but not being a part of it. But

enough of that; this is about Grandma and how something had to give—less my mother simply blow up or be carted away in a strait jacket. In the end, it was simple. She couldn't lose the job, and the weekend trips were the straw that would surely break the camel's back, if you can forgive the shoddy metaphor, and so, in November of 1981, Grandma moved in with us, and that is where the story really begins.

## Chapter Four

27 Sycamore Road was and still is a cramped three-up, two-down mid-terrace in central Springmoor. It already felt claustrophobic, as the lines that marked the hostile front between my mother and sister were well established. My bedroom served as my sanctuary, and this undoubtedly began my slow and steady withdrawal from the world, as I would lose myself in the pages of my comic books to escape the verbal bombardment that lay beyond my door. How could there be room for Grandma?

The solution was perhaps my mother's salvation, as she gave up her bedroom and instead took to sleeping on the couch. This quelled the fire of my sister's tirades, as how could she shout and scream with Grandma in the house? Instead, she took to sullen silences, and I guess that suited three out of the four of us.

I mentioned there that my bedroom was my sanctuary, didn't I? Well, beyond Grandma's moving in, it became my prison as well. You see, despite all of our difficulties, there have been a few odd moments of calm and some genuine moments of happiness. I have fond memories of Saturday afternoons in front of the goggle box, me sprawled out on the floor, chin cupped, and neatly propped up my elbows only scant inches from the screen. The theme from the Dukes of Hazard would blare out at us: 'Just two good ol' boys. Never meaning any harm', my mum would be nose-deep in a romance novel, but my sister would be as absorbed as I was, and it wouldn't be long before the poster of Bo, Duke, and Daisy covered the last of the paintwork on my sister's wall.

On something, we could all agree, and watching Top of the Pops on a Thursday night was a family staple. I still have fond memories as I picture my mother singing into her hair brush, serenading Katie until she finally broke and laughed.

Perhaps these are the last fond memories I have of that time; these departed as Grandma arrived.

## Chapter Five

It's January of 1982. Christmas has come and gone, and thankfully so. It was a forced affair, as we sat and suffered as Grandma laid into every single thing my mother had done to prepare. At first it was the meal preparation, and then it was her gift choices for us two kids, and finally it was our very upbringing, as Mum had allowed me and Katie to finally escape at about 4:30 or so to our own rooms. The only peace Mum had enjoyed that day was during the Queen's speech, which was watched at Grandma's insistence, and then later in the afternoon, when she finally exhausted her complaints and fell asleep in her armchair.

This time in my life forms part of the regret I mentioned earlier. You see, I couldn't see how difficult a time this was for my mum until years later. The gifts we were afforded, all came from the Freemans catalogue, and would be paid for over the next 52 weeks, and when paid, the cycle began again. Our clothes may have been second hand, handed down, or gifted, but Christmas was the one time mum did her utmost to make sure we were happy, and similarly to the truce of Christmas Day of 1914 on the Somme, hostilities between my mum and my sister were temporarily halted as Katie enjoyed her combined radio and cassette player. (I would finally have my hands on the Millennium Falcon from Star Wars.)

Of course, these gifts weren't appropriate in Grandma's eyes, and she launched into a long sermon about how the youth of today were being subverted by pop music and television. She hadn't bought us anything, by the way.

There is one more thing to say about that Christmas, and although I had undoubtedly seen it before that day, I noticed how once an hour, Grandma would rise from her chair and begin a slow and deliberate climb of the stairs back to her bedroom. Katie saw it too, and we would giggle conspiratorially as only two children of that age might regarding the constant need for the lavatory (as we convinced ourselves it was).

The cold and bleakness of winter can often be ignored in the run-up to Christmas, and so it was in our house, but the change of the year marked the starting point for all the worst of my childhood memories. Such a thing began with Grandma's domination of the living room, and so those scant few times we had enjoyed in front of the television as a family were now gone, as she bossed the TV schedule, marking out her choices in thick black ink on that week's copy of the radio times. What I didn't know then was that this militaristic level of planning was not about the television or the toilet; it was about the hourglass.

## Chapter Six

The hourglass first registered with me during an ad break during Coronation Street. I guess it was February of 1982 now. Grandma did as usual and heaved her hefty frame out of the armchair and began her slow walk to the stairway. I look back now and know it wasn't my intention to follow her upstairs. If I had, I could only have myself to blame for everything that followed. Instead, I can fairly lay the blame at the feet of chance.

I don't know why I went; perhaps there was some toy that needed my desperate attention? Or, did I need the toilet myself, expecting a five-minute wait until she was done? It doesn't matter is the truth; it only matters that I didn't follow her, and I didn't mean to see what I saw.

Blessedly, there was a hall bulb in place, and so the journey went smoothly, without any monster to stalk my steps. I made the landing at the top and turned left towards my room. As I got there, I found the door to Grandma's bedroom open. I can't say I thought too much of this; it was a small house, as I have already suggested, and beyond her place in the armchair, she might just as easily be in her bedroom. I hadn't been in since her arrival, and my sole duty of an evening when she wasn't already camped in front of the TV was to go and fetch her for her dinner. That meant nothing more than bounding up the stairs, hollering "Gran!" at the top of my voice. I knew she heard me, but there would be no response, and I half thought she knew of the monsters in the darkness and would still make me go all the way to her door in the pitch black and patiently knock for her attention. The last part wasn't so bad, as I'd always make my own room first, switch on the light, and let it spill out into the hallway as I made my approach.

Finding her door open was unusual, and out of simple curiosity, I tiptoed the last few yards to the door frame. This part was certainly on me; had I bounded along as I would usually do, I could well have announced my presence and given her time to act. To hide the hourglass.

It was there on the bedside cabinet, and there beside it, sitting on the side of the bed, was Gran. She was hunched, almost doubled over, so that her nose was only inches from the glass. She seemed frozen there. My mouth opened to say what I don't know, but I do recall it snapping shut again, for in that moment the silence was absolute.

That is an odd thing to register when you're an eight-year-old boy, but I did. I was frozen to the spot. I wasn't scared or anything along those lines; I was just puzzled, as my world was ordinarily so full of sound. And so I listened. I actually strained my ears as I watched my grandmother, trying to pick up the faintest of noises. I searched first for the sound of the television downstairs or the sound of conversation between my mum and my sister. There was nothing.

I closed my eyes and screwed up my face in a mask of fierce concentration as I sought any sounds from beyond the house, be it a passing car, a dog's bark, or even the gust of the wind. Nothing.

So I opened my eyes and continued to look at Gran, and as I did so, a small fear began to grow in me. I couldn't break the silence, which was total, but I was now scared that I would be discovered looking in at her.

I delicately picked up one foot and placed it carefully behind me on the soft carpet. My eyes never left her, and I stopped then and followed her gaze to the hourglass sitting before her. At first glance, it looked wholly unremarkable. It stood about 10 inches tall and was made of dark wood. I could see the sands of the top bulb were nearly spent, and I couldn't help but notice, even at that distance, the dark impurities of black that mixed with the golden yellow sand. It was hypnotic, and in that instant, the very last sound that there had been in my world evaporated as I held my breath.

Grandma was equally enchanted by its spell, as she sat as still as stone.

The sands fell slowly away, and now only those in the neck remained. There were only a few seconds remaining until it was done, and all at once a deep sense of dread came over me. I lurched forward, desperate. I reached out for the glass, though I was yards away. Panic overtook me, for somehow I could not allow the glass to complete its cycle.

A cry emanated from my mouth, and grandma looked up at once, her eyes piercing mine, accusing and hurt. A tear fell from the corner of her eye.

"Gran." It was little more than a whimper. In an instant, she reached out and took the hourglass. The neck was all but empty, and in what seemed like slow motion, flipped the stand. I truly felt like time had come to a standstill, as even from that distance, I felt I saw the last of the sand begin to fall, only for it to reverse and land on the bottom of the now-empty bulb.

I stopped dead. Grandma bowed her head, touching the wooden lines of the hourglass.

"Get out." It was a whisper. "GET OUT!" She then screamed at me.

I couldn't move, and my fear exploded in me as she launched herself from the side of the bed and came at me. Hot liquid splashed my trousers, but I did not feel it. The look on her face told me she meant to kill me, and as her hand reached out, I cowered away.

I closed my eyes at the last, and then there was a sound in the world as the bedroom door was slammed into my face.

I ran the short distance to my own room and slammed my own door shut. I made for the bed and quickly hid myself beneath the covers as my tears came hot to my cheeks.

## Chapter Seven

I didn't see the hourglass in my dreams, not then. It was Grandma that dominated them, and in the small hours of the night she would come for me, and I would wet myself again. This was a habit my mother said I had beaten at the tender age of only three years old.

The fear in those nightmares followed me into waking, as now the monsters in the dark at the top of the stairs held a face, and it was Grandma's.

It didn't help that she then retreated more and more to the confines of her bedroom, making the previously simple task of just going to and from my own bedroom an arduous one. The problem now, wasn't my imagination; there was something very real lurking at the top of the stairs — someone in fact, who made sure the last few yards to my bedroom door were made at a run.

I can't quite tell you why. Only that I was a child, and those few moments caught at her door as she gazed hypnotised into her hourglass had left an indelible mark upon me.

If anyone else saw it, I don't know. Things went very much as they had before, with Mum and Kate at one another's throats once again. Gran still dominated the living room from dawn till dusk, and I did what I could to avoid her there. Such a thing isn't such an easy thing for such a young boy, and retreating to your bedroom was more the place of the sullen teenager than an eight-year-old and I think my Mum took some comfort in the fact that our relationship hadn't imploded as hers and Kate's had. As such, she would call me down regularly, and we would talk about the day's events. Nothing as grand as current affairs mind you, only what I had done during school that day, and what she chose to share of her own.

Grandma ruled the TV schedule still, but I would curl up next to my Mum as the evenings wore on, and I found myself engrossed with the humorous affairs of Vera and Jack Duckworth and all those down the Rovers Return.

It might have been normal, but for the fact that Gran would shoot me the occasional hateful glare when Mum was out of the room. On one other occasion, Mum was out in the kitchen making tea. Gran rose from her chair, as was now expected once every hour, and as she passed me, she reached out and pinched my arm, just as hard as I knew she could.

I cried out more in surprise than pain, and Mum came rushing in to see what all the fuss was about. After all, me and Katie weren't adverse to the odd scrap here or there, albeit I would always end on the losing side.

"What's all the noise..." she broke off as she entered the room, only to see that Katie wasn't there. I was sitting on the sofa; Grandma had made her way to the foot of the stairs in that short time and was glaring at me, unseen by my mother.

"Johnny?"

I was on the verge of tears, but I stoically held them back.



“Nothing Mum.”

Gran went on her way, and Mum stood puzzled for a moment, perhaps wondering if Katie had fled another crime scene. For this one at least, she was innocent.

Where is this all taking us, you might ask? Aside from a whistle stop tour of the early eighties, you might think I haven't really imparted much of any use so far. That's not all true. There was the hourglass, you see, and yet I didn't see it. It was forgotten, as it was my fear of Grandma that prevailed in that instance, but it wasn't her; it was that damned fucking glass and the hold it had upon her that was the issue.

I would come to see it, but only slowly. My ninth birthday came and went, and things went on. I had taken to following my Mum into the kitchen now, so that there would be no further repeats of the pinching incident. There was however one notable change, and that was the wind up kitchen timer.

Gran had taken to falling asleep in her armchair, and from out of nowhere, a small plastic kitchen clock with a built-in hour timer appeared on the end table situated just to her left. In the quiet of an afternoon, the steady tick of the clock was an ever-present sound within the room — that was until the hour came around and the tinny alarm would sound and wake Dot from her slumber. She would reach out, turn the dial, so beginning another hour, and then slowly climb from her chair and make her way back up the stairs to her room, before returning some ten minutes later. This would happen once an hour, every hour. That was at least until she retired to bed, but even in the void of the dark, I fancied I could still hear that slow ticking sound through the walls. It was, as I said, ever-present, and in the silence of the night, I would wake up with a start as the hour alarm would ring.

It took a visit from Uncle Tom in the summer of '82 for me to finally break my silence and question just what the hell was going on.

“Hey kiddo, how you doing?”

Tom was a rare visitor, but always a most welcome one, but even his appearance at my bedroom door on this Saturday morning did nothing to lift my spirits.

He frowned, looked behind him, and came into my room, shutting my door behind him.

“Shouldn't you be out, Johnny? It's Saturday. Don't you want to go and play football?”

I shook my head. Just this one simple human interaction had already brought me to the edge of tears, and I am sure he sensed it.

He sat on the end of my bed and turned back to look at me.

“What's up, champ? Do you wanna talk about it?”

I shook my head, but my tears were all the answer he needed. He came up to the top and sat beside me, drawing my head into his side. He smelled of Brut aftershave and cigarettes; the combined smell wasn't unpleasant.

I wouldn't have said a word; I know that in my heart, but he knew what the problem was.

“It's Grandma Dot isn't it?”

More tears came, and I pressed myself close to him, and he pulled me tight and waited it out.

“It’s okay, buddy. I know, I know.”

Slowly the tears dried, and I wiped my nose with the cuff of my sleeve. I felt safe there with him at that moment, and he just held me, perhaps knowing he had to patient.

“It can’t be easy for you or your Mum, I know,” he began. “Me and your auntie Jean haven’t been round much, I know.”

I felt strong enough to withdraw from his embrace and looked up into his brown eyes.

“Can’t you take her away?”

I could see the hurt on his face, and his smile, when it came, was grim.

“I’m sorry, buddy, your Auntie Jean... She and Dot, just don’t...”

I didn’t give him time to finish, my anger overcoming me. “But why?!”

“I’m sorry.” He looked dejected, and I turned away from him, curling up in a tight ball right against the wall. He might have left then, but he didn’t, and a calming hand stroked my back.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated. “Tell me what the matter is, and I’ll see what I can do to help you and your Mum.”

It was as easy as that for a nine-year-old, a simple invitation to unload your troubles, and so half them if Mum was to be believed. It did feel like that, and I unloaded at 100mph. I don’t know what I said or how long I was at it for before he stopped me.

“Say that again? A what? An hourglass?”

I nodded, “That’s what Mum called it. It looks like a big egg timer to me.”

Tom bowed his head, taking it in one hand, and began to knead his brow.

“She still has it?” He said softly.

The question wasn’t for me, I now know. It had instead been the awakening of something else within him.

“Yes, and she comes up the stairs all the time to look at it.”

He looked up, his eyes sharp and focused. “Tell me, tell me all about it.” He demanded, and so I did, though I am sure I laboured on the wrong detail for too long. He was patient, though, and slowly it did all come out. How she would rise every hour and go to her room, and how at first me and Katie thought she was going to the toilet. Then how she had brought the kitchen timer into the house and how she set it once an hour to wake her, so she did not forget to go upstairs a single time. I told him how I had seen her with it, how it had scared me, and how she had become meaner and meaner and started picking on me and my Mum.

“She’s still turning it.” He finally said in response to my story.

“Turning what?” I don’t know how that had escaped me, despite the story I had just told him.

“The hourglass.” He shifted himself on the bed and came around to face me. “Look, Johnny, I am going to tell you something, but it has to stay between us, okay?”

I nodded as I was all of a sudden breathless. I knew I had been elevated to adult conversation and that my silence was my price.

Tom sighed as he tried to find his words and was silent for what seemed an age to me. Finally, he began, “The hourglass, then. I don’t know all of it, Johnny, so you’ll have to excuse any gaps in the story.”

I nodded my understanding, and he went on. “Well, it was your Grandpa Rick that found the hourglass and brought it back home. Did you know that your Grandpa was in the navy during the war?”

He was referring to the Second World War, and I did know of such a thing as a boy, but that was as far as my understanding went at that tender age.

“Well, Grandpa served on the HMS Jaguar. It was what they called a J-class destroyer. She didn’t get off to the most auspicious of starts, running aground only a month after she was commissioned. “

“What’s running aground mean?”

“Oh, sorry, yeah. That’s exactly how Grandpa Rick told it to me, and I dare say I asked him the same thing when I was only little. It means the ship got too close to the land and got stuck there.”

I smiled at that.

“After that though, the ship had a very active service life. Able Seaman Oldaker, your grandfather, was on board as the Jaguar assisted at the evacuation of Dunkirk for one.”

He could see he had lost me again.

“Hmmm,” he considered for a moment, before he continued. “Did they teach you about ancient Egypt at school? You know, mummies, the pyramids, and all of that?”

I nodded eagerly, as the conversation had just come into an area I understood.

“Ahh, well, I don’t know if you know where Egypt is, but it is on the very top of Africa, and its shores sit upon the Mediterranean Sea. Now during the war, the Mediterranean was an area of fierce naval conflict. You know about the Germans, right? Well, back at the start of the war, the Italians were on their side, and the British and all of their allies were fighting very hard in that area. The naval side of the war there was about three things: attacking the enemies supply lines, keeping open their own supply lines, and last off destroying the enemies ability to wage a war at sea.”

I had very quickly forgotten all about Grandma and her hourglass, as I became captivated by stories of war.

“Well, your grandfather served right there in the Med and on board the Jaguar. It was a dangerous life at sea, and Grandpa Rick had quite a few close calls in the early part of the war. I mentioned

Dunkirk there, and German dive bombers had a go at the Jaguar soon after she had rescued over a thousand troops. In fact, they got so close that they damaged a steam pipe which disabled her engines. The ship had to be towed clear before they later restored power and made their way home. That would have been a scary time, sitting there, hoping and praying those bombers didn't about turn and come back for them."

"Maybe when you are older, I will tell you all the rest of it, but for now, you only need know about the day she was sunk and lost 190 of her crew."

I felt a stirring in the pit of my stomach. It might have been excitement, but instead it was a reminder that we were coming back to the story of the hourglass, and how Grandpa had come to find it.

"I said that part of their mission was to protect their own supply lines, didn't I? Well, this often meant providing an armed escort for our supply ships. It was the 26<sup>th</sup> of March in 1942. Your grandpa would have been 36 years old or so when the Jaguar and a Greek destroyer named the Vasilissa something or other (it was the Vasilissa Olga I later learned) were escorting an oil tanker called the Slavol. Now, there were German submarines during the war, and one of these torpedoed the Slavol and set it on fire. The Jaguar went in to rescue the crew but was hit herself by two more torpedoes. Well, the ship quickly broke up and sank. 190 men lost their lives. Your Granddad was one of the lucky ones, though he didn't get away unscathed."

"Oh?" I hadn't heard any of this about my grandpa before. To me, he had been a genial old man. Tom had often told stories of him taking the belt to him as a boy. Not least the famous story of how he warmed his backside after falling in the river that time, but he had always laughed when he told those stories, and so I had not believed them at all. Grandpa, was a strong and vibrant man in my memory, and I still hold fond memories of how he used to hoist me high in the air and spin me in circles until we were both giddy with dizziness and laughter, and how we would play football together in the back yard. He would be Bobby Moore, the England captain, and I would be Martin Peters, both of his beloved West Ham United, and world cup winners, the both of them. As such, it was hard to put this beloved man in such mortal danger in my mind.

"Your granddad was found in the water. He and fifty or so other men, were rescued by a South African vessel called the Klo and transported to the Egyptian harbour town of Mersa Matruh. This was only a few months before the town would be taken away by Rommel, the desert fox."

Tom was lost in his own story now, and so was I. It didn't matter who Rommel was or that this faraway place had been taken away, only that Grandpa had somehow survived this deadly attack.

"He was in a bad way and taken to a military hospital. You won't know this, Johnny, but your Grandpa had a long, deep scar across his belly; that's where they operated on him and removed a two-inch piece of metal that had pierced him during the explosions on the Jaguar. His war was over, and he would sail home within a month, but not before he came dangerously close to losing his life."

"All of that serves as background for what came next. You understand, I only know what he was able to tell me? And he himself was in and out of consciousness a lot, and so he himself was only vague on the details."

Tom paused and looked me over. It had been an exhilarating story thus far, and he gotten lost in the telling of it, but now he had brought it full circle and back to the hourglass, and I could tell he was deliberating whether to take it further.

“Please Uncle Tom.” I begged.

“Okay. But it’s important that you know that what I tell you is just a silly old wives tale. You know what that is, don’t you?”

My blank face was all the answer he needed.

“It means it isn’t true, but it is something that we want to be true or believe to be true anyway. You ever walked down the street and avoided the cracks in the pavement? Well, it’s kind of the same thing, just an old story passed down over many years. The key thing though is that nothing bad ever happens if you step on the cracks.”

I did get it then. My head was full of such things as breaking a mirror, letting a black cat cross your path, or walking underneath a ladder. All of them had bad luck. The last of them I understood at least, as I could easily imagine a bucket of water falling on an unsuspecting victim passing beneath.

“We’ll come to that part in a bit, but it’s important to remember that Grandma Dot believes something about that hourglass, something that isn’t true.”

“Anyway, your grandpa was there in Mersa Matruh. His surgery had gone well, and he was out of danger. Except for the fact that a fever set in. He was delirious, in and out of consciousness, and he told me very matter-of-factly that he saw his own father, dead for over twenty years standing at the foot of his bed, telling him it was time, and to let go. Now you know what that was don’t you Johnny? That was just the fever.”

I nodded, though I knew no such thing. If Grandpa Rick had been near his end, who’s to say what he saw was real or not?

“That aside, he was close— more than close. After he recovered, the doctor told him that it was nothing short of a miracle that he had survived. In fact, you are lucky to be here at all; it wasn’t until your grandpa got home that your mum was conceived.”

Tom stood up from the bed and walked over to the window. It was a bright summer’s day, but in that moment a cloud must have come over the sun, for the room grew dim about him, and in the seconds that followed there was nothing but silence. My apprehension grew within me, and a small voice from deep inside, quiet up until now, told me that I had been stupid to demand this story of him. I think you would know what I am talking about, right? I said right back at the start of this that every story had an identifiable starting point, and things inevitably took a nosedive after that moment? Well, this was that moment for me, and I now wish I could take it back.

“One of the nurses on the ward had taken to sitting with Grandpa through all of this.” Tom continued as he turned back to face me. “All Grandpa knew was that from somewhere in the darkness, a voice found its way down to him and told him to hang on. In the brief moments he was awake, he would find her there, moping the fevered sweat from his brow. Grandpa said there were moments when his mind would fight against her, wishing instead to find his own father and follow

him as instructed. One night, the call was stronger than ever. He told me that the ward was in near darkness, but for a few candles. His nurse sat beside him, mopping his brow, but she was like a ghost, her being so thin that he felt he could see right through her. There, at the end of his bed, was his father once more. He was just the opposite—real. He told him, ‘Son, it’s time to go’. Grandpa knew it was so.”

My eyes were wide, and Tom could undoubtedly see he was scaring me now.

“Just remember, Johnny, this was just his fever. He never saw those things.”

I sincerely have my doubts about that.

Tom continued, his voice lighter now, trying to diminish the sombre mood he had created. “Needless to say, he didn’t go to his father. He said he saw the nurse run from his bedside and quickly come back with one of the Egyptian orderlies. He saw words exchanged but could not understand their meaning before this ancient looking woman kneeled at his side and began speaking in what could only have been Arabic. His father stood there still, but his voice was now drowned out by this woman and her chanting. Grandpa was in a fever, don’t forget, and it’s quite possible he dreamed all of this up, but for one thing.”

“What was it?” I demanded.

“The hourglass, Johnny. You see, when he came around, his fever had broken. His nurse was beside him still, but she hadn’t noticed he was awake. There in her lap, was that same hourglass your grandma now keeps. He was still weak of course and would drift in and out of sleep, but every time he woke he saw her there, and once every hour...”

“She turned it.” I finished for him.

He nodded.

“So it was the hourglass? The hourglass that saved him?” I ventured.

Tom shook his head.

“That’s what the story would have you believe, huh? You should know, your grandfather told it very matter-of-factly. He didn’t buy into all that nonsense.”

I offered my insight: “He still brought it back with him though.”

This time, Tom nodded.

“Yes, he did. It’s hard to explain Johnny, but I guess a little bit of him had been touched by what happened. He told me that story when I was little, like you, and let me tell you, it gave me some bad dreams. But when he was finished, he would laugh and tell me it was all make-believe.”

“I don’t understand.” Was all I could offer.

Tom walked up to the side of the bed and knelt before me so that our eyes met. There was a smile on his lips, but his eyes seemed cold.

“Your Grandpa may not have believed it, Johnny, at least not enough of it. But your grandma, that was a different story.”

A flashlight went off in my head. “She’s been turning it for him!”

He closed his eyes and nodded once again. Slowly, he got to his feet and came and sat beside me again.

“You have to understand that Grandma and Grandpa come from a different time. She and many like her sent their men off to war not knowing if they would ever see them again. They may have prayed to God for their safe return or likewise, spent their days avoiding the cracks in the pavement or shooing away the black cats that got too close. Do you understand?”

I did.

“I can only guess how things went when Grandpa was shipped back home. How he might have told her the same story and brought that hourglass back into the house. If you were the superstitious type, and oh my, I can tell you that she was, it wouldn’t have been a hard price to pay to keep turning that hourglass if she truly believed it had saved him somehow.”

This all begged one obvious question.

“But why is she still turning it?”

“I don’t know, Johnny. I guess it’s her way of keeping his memory alive. I honestly didn’t know such a thing was still going on.”

“But you knew she did it? You saw her do it?”

“I did, though not like you’d think. I’d grown up, you see, and Grandpa’s story was just that — a story. I saw the hourglass in the house but never took any notice. Did she turn it then? I don’t remember.”

He turned away from me then, but I caught something in his eyes as he did so, and I knew he was lying.

“Look Johnny. All you need to remember is that it was a story. Your grandma is very old now, and she misses Grandpa Rick every day. She has changed, I know, and I am sorry if she is mean or if she scares you. But that hourglass is all she has left of him now, and if she is still turning it over, it’s just like I said at the start: just a superstition, and one that keeps her at peace because it helped bring her man safely home from war when so many didn’t. You don’t have to believe it; you don’t even have to understand it; but just know that she believes it and it gives her some comfort. Can you do that for her, Johnny?”

I nodded my agreement.

Do you know what? That conversation helped, at least at first, because I felt I understood her a little better now. That what was going on at the top of those stairs once an hour on the hour was nothing to fear. That was though, until I realised she wasn’t turning the hourglass for grandpa or for his memory. She was turning it for herself.

## Chapter Eight

Tom's story helped, and all of a sudden I didn't fear her anymore. What was more, I didn't fear the darkness in the stairway anymore, as I knew what lurked at the top of them was no monster.

Instead, I got braver. Her steely glares were met with the same (when she wasn't looking, of course), and on occasion, the odd protruding tongue (surely the very pinnacle of childhood rebellion?)

However, as fear departed, hatred began to set in. I didn't recognise it though, as such a thing was entirely at odds with family values, and what I had been told I should feel. I hated Katie on occasion, sure I did, but I knew there was something deeper than that between us, loathe as I was as a young boy to call it love. But there was nothing beyond this feeling I now had for Grandma.

As that year went on, she became more mean-spirited and spiteful, and those nasty outbursts that were previously reserved for me and Katie now spilled over to include our mother, and that is when I resolved I would get her for what she said.

I don't remember exactly what it was that set things in motion, but what I do remember is how they turned out. It was the run-up to Christmas again, and school had been out for over a week now. At that time of year, even Katie was in a good mood, as her groans were only half-hearted as Mum asked us to decorate the tree.

It was an old plastic thing that had seen better days. Some of the branches were missing, but if you rotated that end towards the wall, it wouldn't notice much. What was for sure was that Mum was something of a hoarder, a trait that undoubtedly stemmed from the fact that we were so poor. She was a recycler long before it became the trend in the nineties and the demand it became in the noughties. Such was the family budget that she would be out during the Boxing Day sales, buying up the leftover Christmas cards and wrapping paper to save on the cost next year.

Such a thing extended to the Christmas decorations, and she may find a leftover bargain that would take pride of place next year as it would be new. Not so this Christmas, as it had been a tough year. Dad had finally cut off ties and with it his maintenance cheques. Mum soldiered on, but unknown to me and Katie, she was near on breaking point. That was lost to us as we gathered last year's baubles and the tinsel from the year before down from the loft and near tied one another in knots as we crossed paths circling the tree.

Mum was sitting down on the couch, and a smile played on her lips as she watched us loop back and forth. When it was done, she asked us to both come upstairs with her to fetch the presents down to place under the tree. It was a meagre haul, and Katie, bless her, shot me a look to warn me not to say anything. I already knew such a thing, but was more relieved to know that she wouldn't be the one to cause any issues. I think our outpouring of enthusiasm was a little too much for Mum, as I could see her eyes were wet.

Carrying a bin bag each, we returned to the living room and knelt down at the tree to make as nice a display of it as we could. I looked at Katie, and she gave me a smile and a nod. It is a moment of



connection I hold onto, as we were of one mind at that point, and that was to make Mums Christmas the best one we could.

“BRRRRRRRRRRRIIIIIIIINNNNNGGGGGG”

The moment was shattered by the hourly chime of Grandma’s timer.

She started awake and beheld the two of us on the floor before the tree before casting her eyes over the rest of the room and settling on Mum at the kitchen door.

“Crap.” She muttered.

“Mum?” Our mother questioned.

Grandma began to cough; it was a long, drawn out series of barks. When she was done, she spat into her handkerchief, balled it up and tossed it towards her end table, where it bounced once and landed on the carpet. “You heard me.” She said, as she began to heave her frame from her chair, her hourly chore upon her. “It’s all crap.” She finished, motioning towards the tree and the meagre set of presents that lay beneath it.

I saw Mum’s face begin to crumple, but that did not stop Grandma as she shuffled slowly towards the stairs. “Not like in my day,” she said as if to herself. “Rick would provide, and none of you kids would go without, not like these two, what with that deadbeat father of theirs.”

“Mum...” It was more of a whisper this time.

My own tears had begun to form, but they were tears of rage. It was not me who spoke then; it was Katie.

“Get out you, old hag, Get out!” Her face was bright red, and the veins on her neck pulsed as she screamed.

Gran was nonplussed, though. “A fine job you did dragging this one up, Victoria, is that how you’re going to let her talk to me?”

“You bitch!” Katie screamed. “Get out, get out, get out!”

Gran simply began to climb the stairs, and in her wake, all three of us were crying. Mum went to Katie and pulled her in close. “I hate her, Mum, I hate her.”

Mum looked over towards me and held out her hand. I went to her quickly, and all three of us embraced until we heard the soft thud of Gran’s footfall on the top stair. Mum pulled us along into the kitchen, as Grandma re-entered the living room and sat back down in her armchair.

## Chapter Nine

It's February 1983. I am still nine years old. There were things going on outside of my knowledge at that time which only served to drag Mum down even further. I learned much later on, that Dad had started seeing someone else and divorce papers had been served back in January. What's more, Grandma was becoming worse.

She was 76 years of age at this point in the story and growing ever more infirm. The first clue that registered in my mind was the fact that the timer that sat beside her was now sounding every 50 minutes during the day and not every hour. Reason being, she needed this additional time to hoist herself from her chair and make her way slowly up the stairway to turn her hourglass.

By now, Uncle Tom's story had all but been forgotten, as I had plenty more to occupy my mind and imagination, not least the forthcoming conclusion to the Star Wars saga, which would land in our local Curzon theatre that summer.

I might have alluded to the fact already that my imagination was my escape, and in light of Grandma's continued antics, I had withdrawn more and more to my bedroom, where the adventures of Luke, Han, and Chewie would play out on my bed with my figures or in my mind. The cause being Gran's increasing difficulties with her mobility, which were knowingly or unknowingly projected onto us as a family. Mum now suffered the most, but neither I nor Katie went unscathed.

"Ewww!"

"Katie, just do as you are told, help Grandma upstairs." Mum snapped back. It was about 7:45 in the morning, and the household was running late. All but for me, as I was in the closing stages of the flu.

"But, Mum, she's wet herself!"

I was sitting on the sofa with a blanket wrapped tight around me. I looked between my mother and sister and wondered which way this argument would go. Katie's face was screwed up tight in disgust, and her bottom lip was pushed out in a petulant pout. My Mum however, managed to look both broken and fierce at the same time. Her shoulders slumped involuntarily at Katie's complaint, and her head bowed. She took a deep breath and blew it out loudly as she raised her head to confront her daughter. The bags under her eyes spoke of long shifts at work and long hours into the night tending Grandma. Her cheeks were flushed red, as she had long since tired of her foundation and making herself up for work. She was a picture of exhaustion and exasperation.

"Katie. I haven't got time to argue. I am already late for work. Help your grandmother up the stairs now."

I saw a second's hesitation in my sister as she contemplated some rebuttal, but thought better of it as my Mum growled out to her. "Katie..."

Mumbling under her breath, she began to hoist Gran by her arm, while at all times keeping her body as far away as possible.

“Don’t fuss!” Grandma snapped and lashed out with the back of her hand, knocking Katie’s arms away as soon as she had made her feet.

“Mum!”

“Just follow her up Katie. Or do you want to clean the chair instead?”

Katie’s head bowed in defeat, and she shuffled behind Gran as slowly as she could, all the while holding her arms out just a fingertip away from her back should she fall or become unsteady on the stair.

Mum disappeared back into the kitchen and came back with a spray bottle of vinegar and water and a rag. She scrubbed fiercely at the chair for a minute before laying a dry towel on top of it. This was not Gran’s first accident of this nature, and although we didn’t discuss it between ourselves, each of us knew that she would not break the cycle set by her timer to go and void her bladder, instead just letting go if she needed and only moving if directed to by the 50-minute alarm.

By now, I had tried to raise the subject of the hourglass with my mother on several occasions. To me, it no longer formed part of a scary afternoon story but instead became a matter of inconvenience, and so I tried to argue as to why Grandma didn’t simply bring it down to the living room and place it next to her alarm. Mum had seemed shocked by my knowledge of it, and I tried to reassure her by telling her that Uncle Tom had told me all about it. She didn’t seem too impressed by that, and so I tried to assure her I was old enough to know all about it. Despite my arguments, she warned me off. Telling me not to mention it and to leave Grandma be. I had tried to protest, but she had been very firm with me. Her patience for arguments had all but disappeared in the early part of that year, and I was met with a very firm “I said leave it alone!”

So despite this ridiculous routine, we continued as we were, all until this hectic Tuesday morning, which was going to make Mum late for work, and Katie late for school.

It was coming on eight o’clock and Katie had already left for her bus. Mum was pulling on her coat as she spoke to me.

“Hun, you sure you’re going to be alright?”

I nodded. The truth was, I had been feeling better the day before, but didn’t quite relish going back to the classroom just yet.

She hesitated at the door, looking back between me and Gran.

“Mum, are you going to be okay with him?”

Dot was awake and transfixed on the television and a brand new show called Good Morning Britain; she was enamoured with the male anchors, Michael Parkinson and David Frost.

“What?”

She had heard well enough, I am sure, and Mum shook her head and instead addressed the question back to me again. “Are you going to be alright, Johnny?” She didn’t mean my flu; she meant if I

would be alright here alone with Grandma. The mornings, shenanigans notwithstanding, I was adamant that I would be just fine, as I had a very simple plan of just going back to my bedroom.

"I'll be fine, Mum." I whispered, remembering not to sound too well.

And I was fine, at least until about 8:45, when I could hear Gran shouting up the stairs for me. Whatever else ailed her, it certainly wasn't anything to do with her lungs, I can tell you.

I went down the stairs as slowly as a condemned man might make his way to the gallows.

"There you are!" She hissed at me. "What's wrong with you. Are you deaf?"

I stood there in silence at the bottom of the stairs with my head bowed.

"No," I muttered.

"Well then, you must be retarded. That's it, isn't it? Lord have mercy on me; my only grandson is a retard! Well, come over here, monkey boy, and help pick your grandma up."

I obeyed her command in silence, fighting down both my tears and my anger. I realised at that point that this was likely going to be how the rest of my day was going to play out, and I had been an idiot for skipping school.

I was grateful at least that she was dry this time, but I fancied that at some point later in the afternoon, my nostrils would be stung by the bitter stench of her piss, mixed in with vinegar and water. Gross. The natural functions of the body are the kryptonite of young boys like me.

She made her feet, reached over, and picked up her timer. With careful deliberation, she wound the timer back to the fifty-minute mark and set it back down, before once again making her ascent of the stairs alone. The rest she could manage by herself, and I did not follow as Katie had done. Instead, I sat down and patiently awaited her return.

"Can I get you anything, Grandma?" I said as she fell back into her armchair.

"You can get out is what you can do." She replied quietly and without any hint of reproach.

I was called down twice more over the next two hours. On the second occasion she was wet, as I had predicted.

"Don't just stand there like an idiot. Go get that cleaned up." She scolded me as she again made her feet and reset the timer. I did so, but my anger was at boiling point with her, as I fully believed she had done such a thing on purpose, as again, I believed she could have saved it for one of her hourly trips.

Then there had been the verbal putdowns, and the clip around the ear as I waited patiently for her to come back down the stairs the second time. I said nothing and just ran past her and up to the sanctuary of my room. This day was going to be torture. No, at that point, it seemed that this whole life was going to be torture, not just for me but also for Mum and Katie. But it wasn't with them in mind when I acted, I did it for myself.

## Chapter Ten

It was 11:30, and I was sitting in my room, already anticipating and dreading her call. I resolved to make it as quick and painless as possible this time. She wouldn't call; I would just go down in good time and lift her before she could shout for me. I knew I would be in for some verbal onslaught, but I had resolved that I wouldn't give her the satisfaction of showing I cared.

With that, I drew a deep breath, expelled it, and left my room. My first port of call was the top of the stairs, and I sat myself down quietly so that she wouldn't know I was there. I'd forgotten to say there was nothing wrong with her ears either, and many a day would go by where she would holler up the stairs for myself and Katie to 'quit that racket', even though we had done nothing but open or close a bedroom door.

From my spot on the top of the stairs, I could hear the drone of the TV. It was quite limited back then, with only four channels and on top of that, both BBC2 and channel 4 were off air until the afternoon. I say that now, as I recall quite vividly that it was a programme about pottery on BBC Two as I stealthily crept down the stairs at about 11:40.

I heard Grandma before I actually saw her, as her snores managed to drown out the soft West Country accent of the man on the TV. This caused me to slow up some, as I did not want to wake her any sooner than was necessary. No, I would let that damn timer of hers do that in five minutes.

It was then that the steady tick tock of the clock came to my ears, and my mind drifted back to a thousand quiet weekends (seemed like anyway), when Grandma would do exactly as she was doing now and having an afternoon nap that could not be interrupted. Those afternoons were repressive for kids the age of me and Katie. My Mum, not so much as she seemed oblivious to this mental torture by being deep into the pages of a new novel.

If that ticking wasn't bad enough, the constant braying of the alarm when it came was a near-hourly punishment that went beyond those weekends and would reach me even in the deep embrace of sleep every single night. And now that damned alarm was a minute away from sounding.

No, not again.

I had taken two steps before I even realised what I meant to do, but I still took the third. That was before Grandma's snores stopped and I quickly drew to a halt. I was in limbo, half way between the stairs and her armchair, and a part of me knew she was awake; that she had sensed both my approach and my intention and was simply keeping quiet to see if I dared move on towards her. That is when the fear hit me, and I was instantly transported back to that day, when I stood outside her room and observed her and the hourglass for the first time. That incident held a terrifying conclusion as she had come at me, and it was easy to picture the same again if she should just open her eyes, because I held little doubt she knew what I meant to do.

The moment stretched on, and I was aware that I was sweating as a small bead of moisture rolled down my face and tickled my cheek. I needed to act, either to press on or to retreat. The steady tick tock of the alarm was an accompaniment to my cowardice and hesitancy.

In that moment, I looked at my grandmother, she was quiet, her mouth hung agape, and her head lolled towards me on one of the high wings of her chair.

She grunted once and turned her head away, and at once her loud snores continued. I looked beyond her and saw that the arrow head of the clock's dial was fast approaching its apex, and so I moved.

I ran forward, going behind her chair, and at the last reached out for the timer and grabbed it. Drawing it quickly to me, I actually felt I could feel the internal mechanism turning over and setting the alarm into motion. My hand was slippery but steady as I reached out and clasped the dial. As it did, I felt the slightest of pressures against my hand as it tried to turn over and so mark the end of its 50-minute cycle.

In a far off corner of my mind, I pictured that pressure mounting, that the contraption demanded to be heard and so slowly worked against my grip and began pushing back. But yet, nothing happened. Grandma snored on, and my action had muted the marking of time as the device ticked no more.

Slowly, ever so slowly, I began to release my pressure on the device, fearing all the while that the mechanism would kick in again and that some tiny gear would find some last motion and set the whole thing off.

My hand came away, and the thing was silent.

I began to reach out to place it back where it belonged. My heart was racing now, as my act was complete. If she should wake, irrespective of her alarm, she would see me there and know exactly what I had done. Then I should be quick, shouldn't I? Instead, I hesitated as a picture began to form in my mind, and strangely, it was of my old Nan. The one who had been so full of life, back before Grandpa died, this was quickly displaced as an image of her at his funeral surfaced, and in that moment I felt I understood the change in her—that she had lost something precious and that a light had been extinguished within her.

Tom had told me that the hourglass was all she had left of him, and then the strangest image imaginable came to my mind. It was of a single flame shimmering in the darkness, bright and beautiful but slowly beginning to diminish. As it did so, the darkness encroached all the more, until the flame was no more and all that remained was an imprint on your eyes of where it once had been. Your eyes would adjust, and then all would be darkness about you. But then it flared bright again, and I knew that it has been rejuvenated by a force of will. By my grandmother's force of will and that turning that hourglass was akin to this flame, as turning it once an hour, every hour was giving it life.

But giving what life? Tom has suggested that it was the memory of Grandpa Rick, and that this glass had ties to his life that went beyond our understanding. I wasn't to believe such a thing, but I was supposed to know that Grandma believed it, and if that were true, then what would I be taking away from her?

That was Tom, but my own idea was that she had been turning the hourglass for herself and that each and every revolution was designed to extend her own miserable life. What else could it be? Rick was gone.

But if I was right, I knew well what it was that I would be taking away. But did I really believe such a thing?

Either way, it was Tom's last words to me on the matter that resonated within me, just as I was caught in indecision.

*"...that hourglass is all she has left of him now, and if she is still turning it over, it's just like I said at the start: just a superstition..."*

Just a superstition, like avoiding the cracks in the pavement or not letting a black cat walk across your path...

I set the alarm back where it belonged and quickly ducked behind the armchair and made my way back the way I had come. In my near-panicked state, I raced up the carpeted stairway, little caring now if I woke her.

Of course, I have had time to dwell on that moment and know it wasn't any one thing that made me do it. I could picture myself standing there at the bottom of the stairs and how it all come crowding in on me. The confrontation at the door of her bedroom, the constant ticking, the alarm, the abuse, the stench of piss and vinegar, and forefront of it all was the picture of Mum's exhausted face coming through the door at 5:30 every single night, only to be met with a tirade of abuse from this hateful woman.

I was just a young boy, but I would make her pay for all she had done to us, no matter how small and petty it would be.

I say petty; after all, what had I done? I had only made her miss one of those damned alarms for once in her life. But was that the whole truth? Right there at the last second, I had almost relented, as Uncle Tom's face rose within my mind and the story of the hourglass came crashing down on me, telling me that this was more. That perhaps this was life and death; Grandma turned that hateful thing to prolong her own miserable existence, and I was going to take that away. My mind was torn, and in that moment before I escaped upstairs, I both believed it and did not. My heavy footfalls as I ran back up the stairs give me the answer; as I look back now, I know I hoped to wake her.

## Chapter Eleven

I was frantic. What the hell had I done? I meant to punish her, but by God, what if I had killed her? My imagination might have been my gift, but it was also my curse, as I let it carry me into some very dark places. The easiest example may well be where I find myself today and why I am telling you this story, but the detail in that is still to come.

For that young boy, his imagination was working against him; as in his fear, the power held within the hourglass was real, and Gran was indeed turning it hourly for goodness knew how long to preserve and protect her own life, as she had once done for Grandpa Rick.

It wasn't too late; I could still fix this.

I left my room and marched quickly to the top of the stairs. My hand grabbed the bannister, but I halted with one foot dangling in the air before me.

I had meant to wake her, but to tell her what? That, she had somehow slept through an alarm she had awoken for every hour for at least as long as she had lived with us? No, what was more, my guilt would be written on my face, and she would see straight through me.

*That's if you haven't killed her.* My mind chipped in.

I couldn't undo the alarm, but was I too late to save the situation? To perhaps even save her?

My foot came back under me, and I quickly turned around and headed towards my grandmother's bedroom door.

I quickly pushed it in, only to be met by darkness. I could only make out the silhouettes of the furniture within. I knew it was going to be close; it had been at least five minutes since I'd stopped her alarm sounding, and I knew she afforded herself a good ten minutes to reach the glass well inside the hour to turn it.

The five minutes I had initially dwelled on my crime had felt like hours, as all the ramifications of my actions had piled in on me. Now, though, it worked in reverse, and I felt panic rise up in me as I pawed at the wall, trying to find the light switch.

I started to cry then, and instead ran into the room, banging my leg against the steel frame at the foot of the bed. I pulled the curtains, and though the day was drab and grey, I was afforded enough light to see her bedroom.

The hourglass wasn't there.

"No...No...No." It was but a whimper from my lips.

I fell to the floor and hoisted the blankets that hung from the side of the bed. I was met with the sight of several packed bin bags and shoe boxes that blocked the view through to the other side.



I don't know why, but it felt quicker to crawl, and I worked my way back past the foot of the bed on all fours, intending to lift the blanket on this side. Where else could it be?

I quickly came to a halt as I turned the corner of the bed and was confronted with the view of her bedside table. It had been here that I had seen her all those months ago, sitting on the side of the bed with the hourglass sat on the table before her.

The table had a deep drawer at its bottom and a shelf just above where I saw a book lie. The title and author, Oedipus Rex by Sophocles, it held as much understanding as an alien language. I lunged forward and pulled the drawer quickly, and there before me was the hourglass.

Deep within the narrow confines of the drawer, I could only see the top of it and could not know how much time was left before the final grains of sand fell. I pulled it quickly out and set it firmly on the table.

Through tear streaked eyes I beheld it and yet could not see the sands.

I cried out and wiped my sleeve across my arm, and thankfully, thankfully I saw the slim neck still contained sand.

Grandma would be furious when she woke, but a perfectly formed lie entered my head, and it served both to protect me and to deliver the revenge I had so desperately wanted only 10 minutes earlier.

I would let her wake naturally, and panic would undoubtedly wash over her. She would shout and holler in her desperation for me to come, not knowing how long had passed between her alarm sounding and her waking.

I wouldn't come, though, and as her panic rose, I knew she would find the strength to get out of her chair and make her way up the stairs. I would be forgotten at this point as she made her desperate way into her room and clawed open the bedside table drawer.

She would take the hourglass as I had just done and set it before her; only her reaction would be of surprise, for she would find the hourglass turned as it should be, the top glass full of flowing sand, as a small peak began to form below.

She would turn and find me at the door, only this time there would be no fear in me. She might shout, she might scream, but she would not come at me as she had done last time, as instead of guilt she would see something else in my eyes, and that would be victory.

In my mind's eye, she would have worked it out without my having to tell her. But I would anyway, that I was playing in my room and was scared she hadn't called me. That I didn't want to wake her, but I knew how important a task this was, and so I did it for her so that she could sleep peacefully. All the while, knowing she could see through this tale but dare not challenge me on it. The implied message instead being, I let you sleep and I held your life in my hands.

She would see it in my eyes, and what's more she would know that this is how it would be from now on, that I knew her secret, and that she was now at the mercy of a nine-year-old boy.

As a result, she would hold that foul tongue of hers. She would no longer torture my mother, my sister, and me. Heck, I even held a brief vision of boldly changing the TV channel at four o'clock of an afternoon to watch my cartoons, with not a word of complaint from her, and Katie would look on astonished.

I would do all that with one turn of the hourglass, and so reached out to turn it. I looked deep within the sands and stopped, and as I did so, it appeared as time itself followed suit.

The only marker was the beat of my heart, the sound of my breath, and of course, the falling sands. The former two were quickly lost to me, and in that one moment, I felt as though I could see each and every single grain fall. My mind came to peace, and I stared in closely, so much so that my nose was pressed tight against the glass.

As with the previous time I had seen the hourglass, I could see the same odd dark impurities that tainted the golden cascade of granules. They were at once magnified, and I saw each of them to be blood red in colour, and as they landed on the tip of the mound, they exploded outward to hit the walls of the glass bulb, only to be reflected back and finally slide down the sides of what now appeared to be a mountain. It was hypnotic, and I was in a trance.

Time was lost to me, but I was at peace in that moment, even as I saw the last few granules spin their way into the small glass neck, eager to push past their brother and succumb to gravity.

And so, the sands of the hourglass finally came to rest, and as they did so, time came exploding back to me, as did my senses.

I picked up the glass, turned it, and quickly put it back where it came from. That done, I slid the drawer shut and exited the room.

## Chapter Twelve

The silence in the house was oppressive, and I continually went to my bedroom door to hear for any sign of life from downstairs. There was nothing.

What had I done? I had been in time, dammit! I had only to reach out and turn the bloody thing, and all would have been well. It was more an instinct than any knowledge that anything was wrong, as I was only a boy. It is the time I've had to dwell on my act since that informs me so, not any insight beyond my tender years at the time, you understand?

For that boy, it was all in the feeling, and instead of any sense of victory, all he felt was a deep, miserable ache in the pit of his stomach that told him that something wasn't right. That allowing the hourglass to stop had rendered all bets off, and that something terrible must surely stem from that action.

And in the quiet confines of my small room, and as time wore on, I had a steady sense of what that would be. I had killed my grandmother.

I had no way to mark the time in my room—no clock, no watch. Christ, what need did I have of the time? Except now the need was more urgent than I had ever felt, and I stole from my room twice in the next two hours back to Grandma's room to turn the hourglass twice more. All the while I strained my ears at the top of the stairs for any sound from the ground floor, but there was none.

It was early afternoon now, and Katie wouldn't be home from school until at least 3:30 and Mum not until past 5:30. I was alone, and I was scared.

In the end, it was too much for me, and I approached the stairs. I crept slowly down, half bent so as to afford me an angle to see Grandma's chair from a higher and safer vantage point as I could. The living room had become a dark grey in the gloom of the afternoon.

I could see her there then, just as I had left her. The chair faced the silent TV, which was in the far corner of the room from me. It was at just the right angle that I could see the protrusion of her left arm on the rest and her head again resting on the high wing of its side. She was perfectly still.

I reached out and flicked the light switch, and the room was instantly bathed in yellow light. I had hoped the intervention would wake her, and I could still play out my ruse, though I knew with little conviction. She did not move, though.

Pacing tentatively forward, I kept as wide a berth as I could around the armchair, and slowly the angle opened up to me and I saw her face. Her mouth was wide open as before, and she was perfectly still.

Tears began to fill my eyes. The story of the hourglass was all true, and I had killed my own grandmother!

I fell to my knees and wept, but a small sound from the chair startled me. My head jerked upward, and yet there was no change in what I saw.

“What?”

My heart near gave out as she gasped suddenly for air before turning her head to rest on the other wing of the high chair. I shot to my feet and began to approach her. I began to reach for her, when, all of a sudden, a long grunting snore rose from her, and I saw her chest begin to rise and fall.

No longer caring for the ramifications, I went past her like a shot. I grabbed the alarm and twisted the dial up to the five minute mark, my eyes set upon her all the while imploring her not to wake. With that done, I hastily ran back to the stairs and ascended as fast as my legs would carry me. On making the landing, I went straight for her room and checked for any signs of my intrusion. My panic wouldn't have allowed me to see, I know, but I was satisfied enough. But even then, I had to check the hourglass one last time. I pulled the drawer and withdrew it quickly.

The top bulb was now but a quarter full, and although it appeared well, I questioned myself as to the timing of it all. Would she see it?

*Of course she will; she's turned it every hour for years. She'll know exactly where the mark should be.*

I shook the glass twice, in the forlorn hope that I could force the sand through quicker. There was too much; surely there was too much?

There was no time, though, and all I could do was replace it before the alarm sounded downstairs. When that was done, I went back to my room and waited.

You'll have seen the error in my thinking, I'm sure? I hoped to fool Grandma into thinking that all was as it should be, that her alarm would sound, and as before, she would holler for me to help her from her chair, dismiss me with some barbed insult, and then make her way up the stairs to turn her hourglass, as she may have done a thousand times before. All the while not noticing that the level of the sand was perhaps a tad on the high side?

Possible? Perhaps. In her dazed and sleepy state, she might not notice. But what I was failing to account for was the fact that several hours had passed since she was supposed to have woken the first time. The first and most obvious clue was the clock that was built into that kitchen alarm of hers. Even if I had taken the trouble to reset it (not that it had occurred to me), there were a multitude of other clues: the fading afternoon light, the test page on BBC 2, which marked the afternoon close down, and not least the fact that Katie would be due home imminently.

There is the reasoning of an adult. The child that I was, saw none of those things and thought just to put things back as I had found them. I would be found out, and it took only the sounding of the alarm for that to happen.

My door was closed, but I still heard her shriek through the walls.

“Johnny!”

I was in my bed at this point, some further infantile plan had surfaced where I would just pretend to have been asleep the whole time (again not accounting for any of the things that I had already done).

I covered beneath my duvet, and my fear rolled within my belly, and I felt like I was going to be sick.

She wasn't shouting for my assistance I knew, as I had already heard the heavy thump of her foot on the stairway.

"JOHNNY!" She screamed.

I pulled the blanket over my head, waiting for the inevitable crash of my door. But it was not my room that she went too; it was her own.

I held my breath, and in that moment, the most terrifying of screams pierced me down to my very soul.

"NOOOOOOOO!"

I was frozen in place, and I swear I did not know it when I pissed my pants.

There was something terrible buried there within her pain, but I could not fathom the depth of her sorrow at that time due to my fear.

All went quiet, and despite my fear, I looked over my blankets, as the anticipation from beneath was too much to bear. But when the door did open, it did not do so with a crash.

Grandma stood there, tears cascading down her cheeks. She looked broken. Broken as she had been on the day of Grandpa's funeral. There in her hands was the hourglass, and she sank down onto her knees and cradled it within her lap.

"What have you done?" She whispered. "What have you done?"

## Chapter Thirteen

Uncle Tom died that afternoon. He drowned in his bathtub.

The inquest would later conclude that he was drunk when he died and that there were no suspicious circumstances. I knew better. I had killed him, though it had not been my intention.

When I reflect now, I know I was culpable. After all, had I not believed the story of the hourglass? Had I not questioned the outcome of my actions in relation to Grandma? I believed she had turned it for herself, but no, she had turned it for Tom. The clues had been there, hadn't they? Even embedded in the story I have told you so far. It was Tom's misadventures at the river, you see. Right back there in 1946, when he had been a boy and nearly drowned in the river. I knew it had been me who had killed him by virtue of how he died.

My God, how long had she been turning it for? By my reckoning, it had to have been nearly 40 years.

Fate plays a twisted game, and by virtue of his death, I got exactly what I had wanted. You see, in the wake of his death, Grandma became near catatonic. There were no recriminations or accusations. She sat silently in her armchair in the living room. No more, the ticking of her hourly alarm, and no more the difficult journey up the stairs to turn that she had been turning for nearly four decades. She had nothing else to live for.

My mother was helpless, and so it was that Grandma was placed in a nursing home. I wish I could say that life went back to normal as a result, but how could it? Mum had lost her older brother and slowly turned to alcohol as her comfort. This had a direct effect on Katie, who went unchecked. As for me, I wore my guilt like a millstone around my neck. The quiet and shy boy became more and more reclusive and could only find his escape through fantasy and imagination. It was the only way I could forget, and I did exactly that— I forgot.

## Chapter Fourteen

Life has a way of taking over, and so it did. Mum would eventually go on to meet a new man. Katie became a mother when she was 20 years old. The bond between them, which had been wider than the Grand Canyon, narrowed within the time it took my nephew to make his way balling into the world. Mum became a doting grandmother herself, and to my shame I could see how Grandma had been back before Grandpa's death.

Those reminders were only occasional, as I did what I could to separate myself from my guilt and moved out of the family home in the autumn of 1991, to go and rent a room at my friend Steven's house.

You might well have known me after that, though you wouldn't recognise it. You see, I was that spotty teenager working at your local Blockbuster video store. Shy and nerdy, I may have made a quiet recommendation or a favourable comment if you picked up, say, *The Silence of the Lambs*, or *Drop Dead Fred*. My work there allowed me to lead the kind of anonymous life I was seeking and let me lose myself in the latest Hollywood had to offer as the job allowed me to take home five free films a week.

I would eventually break out of my shell, but that was only after the invention of the internet and my initial foray into MSN and internet chatrooms, where I found kindred spirits.

## Chapter Fifteen

I won't bore you with all the interim years of my life. Not only is there nothing of relevance, but I am short on time.

One thing to note though: Grandma passed away in 1984 at the age of 77, and with that, the act of forgetting became a lot easier for me. The years went on, and now you may know me as the overly friendly sales assistant at your local PC World; confusing you with talk of processing speeds, graphics cards, and RAM. All the while trying to convince you that your meagre budget will run all of the latest games.

That's where you would have found me in 2001, when the next thing of relevance happened; my mother died.

On a warm May afternoon, I am parked in my Ford Focus outside of 27 Sycamore Road for what will be the last time.

I had been something of a stranger to this house for a number of years now, save the occasional Christmas. That's not to say I didn't see Mum over those years, but more often than not we would meet out in the town for lunch and a catch up. The house itself held bad memories, of course it did, but it was more the presence of Jim, my mother's husband that made the place feel altogether different for me. This isn't one of those wicked stepfather type deals either. He was a nice enough man and treated my mother well; it was more the fact that we had nothing in common and we had long since given up trying to bridge the gap between us; he, when he understood it wasn't going to affect his relationship with Mum. Me only five minutes after meeting him the first time.

I sat in the car for a good five minutes, just looking the place up and down. I had the window down on the car, and from elsewhere in the street, I could hear the muted lyrics to the song Loser, by Beck; Track 3 on the compilation album of my life.

My eyes traced upward, to the 1st floor window, and I felt I could see my younger self up there, lost in the pages of a comic book or with blank eyes fixed on the screen of his computer, as he battled monsters made of pixels.

This reverie was interrupted when the front door opened and Katie, came down the pathway and through the gate. I took a deep breath and got out of the car to meet her. We hugged one another, as this now seemed to be the protocol for family members who have shared a loss together. For Jim, it had only been a firm handshake at the funeral.

"How are you, Johnny?" She asked.

It had been just John for years now, all but for Mum anyway. Katie would keep it alive for about a year or so.

I nodded my head and looked back towards the house. I gave my reflex answer as I turned back to her: "I'm okay. You?"



I could see tears in her eyes, and she could only manage a nod in response. We had drifted a great deal over the last few years. She was busy with a new family. Me, doing whatever the hell I had to, to keep my distance. It had been Mum who had made the effort to keep me close, and though I had made promises to stay in touch at the funeral, I knew they were empty words.

There was a movement from the house as the living room curtain twitched.

“Jim?” I inquired.

“He’s not in a good way. I’ve been round every other day, but it’s hard. He hasn’t spoken to his own son in over ten years. I’m just worried that he’ll be alone...”

I reached out and squeezed her shoulder. “You have your own life, Katie, don’t feel bad.” Why should she? It was a hell of a lot more effort than I had made or would have made with him.

“Shall we go up?”

I hesitated. “What is this for, Katie? I mean, I don’t know what to say...”

“I’ve helped Jim sort out some of Mum’s stuff. I thought it would be good for him, you know? I don’t know, perhaps it will help? I’ve already taken four bags of her clothes down to the charity shop. The rest...Well, he just wants you to have some things to remember her by. She didn’t have a will; shit, she had nothing to leave behind. I think it will make him feel better if you had something. Hell, I think it will make you feel better as well. Christ, Johnny, have you even cried for her?”

There was a hint of accusation in her words, and I couldn’t blame her. I had been an emotional recluse for many years, despite my mother’s efforts to keep me close, and Katie’s too, as she had initially tried to foster some kind of relationship between me and my nephew, Matthew.

“I just don’t think it has hit me yet.” I said defensively, and not for the first time, as it had been my go-to response at the funeral and with every well-wisher since.

“Come on.” She took my hand and led me towards the house. She had left the front door ajar, and we entered immediately into the living room. Jim was stood waiting. He was in a dressing gown, though it was just past midday, and the scruff of grey beard on his chin gave further insight to his grief as he was always clean shaven.

“John.” He wiped a hand on the side of his dressing gown before extending it to me.

“Jim.” I returned. I was immediately lost for words.

Katie intervened. “Tea?”

Jim looked flustered, and shook his head. “No, no. It’s my house.” That stung me for some reason, even though it was true. “You two sit yourselves down; what would your mother think of me, eh?”

He walked off towards the kitchen, and I fancied I saw that his eyes were wet as he went.

I sat down, and my eyes were immediately drawn to Grandma’s armchair. It had been moved and now sat up tight against the wall, facing squarely at me. The colour was faded, and the stitching had given away in several places, revealing the stuffing beneath.

“Johnny? Are you okay?”

My eyes were locked, and in that moment I could see Grandma sitting there, her head hanging to one side, mouth agape, waiting for the moment when...

My eyes flitted to the sides, but there was no sign of the end table that had been a near permanent accompaniment to the chair. But in that moment, I could hear the steady ticking of a clock. I stood immediately to my feet, and my head turned frantically as I searched for the source of that infernal ticking sound.

Katie had stood also, unseen by me. Her arm came out to touch mine, and my head snapped back around to face her and see her questioning, frightened eyes.

“Johnny?”

“I...” I stammered. My eyes looked past her shoulder, and there, mounted on the wall over the television, was the source of what had frightened me. It was just an ordinary wall clock, slowly marking time in the quiet confines of the small room.

I fell back into my seat, relief flooding me.

“I’m sorry,” I began. “That chair, that damned fucking chair.”

Katie followed my stare and nodded her understanding when she saw it. “Mum wouldn’t be rid of it, no matter how beat up it got. It’s going to the tip; I won’t be sorry it’s gone, I swear.”

In but a fraction of a second, it had all come flooding back in on me, and my heart galloped loudly in my chest.

“I’m sorry Katie. This house, doesn’t hold many happy memories for me.”

“Grandma.” She whispered.

We were interrupted then as Jim made his way back into the living room, holding a large cardboard box. It was taped up tight, and in black marker, I saw my name printed on the side. He set it down on the floor in front of me.

“Just a few bits and pieces, John. Your mother didn’t really have much of value, and I hope you don’t mind, but I gave her engagement and wedding rings to Katie.”

My mind was still climbing down from its previous frenzy, and I said something to satisfy the moment, though I don’t remember what.

“Anyway, Katie has been helping me sort her stuff out, and I left it to her to choose a few keepsakes for you, as I didn’t think it my place...”

“Thank you.” I managed.

A silence then grew between the three of us, and I felt, not for the first time, like a stranger in my own home. Perhaps that would be for the best, as I felt I could finally confine the dark memories associated with it behind me forever.

“The Tea.” Jim mumbled— a welcome escape route from an awkward situation. He left.

“You will stay in touch, won’t you, Johnny?” Katie said when we were alone again.

“Of course. “ I lied.

She reached over and hugged me again, and this time I lost myself in the moment. It was only the sound of mugs of tea clinking together in the kitchen that informed us of Jim’s impending re-entry that caused us to let go.

## Chapter Sixteen

The more insightful of you will have guessed what the relevance of that last part is. But for those who didn't, don't beat yourselves up, because I didn't realise what had happened either and, in fact, would not do so for another eight years.

"Honey!"

I was up in the spare room of the house me and my wife, Janine, had recently acquired. It was a blazing hot Saturday in August, and though the window was fully open, it did nothing to alleviate the oppressive heat. My muscles ached as I dipped the paint roller in its tray and coated the wall with a very neutral mint green. I hadn't heard her call the first time, as Brian Johnson was belting out 'You shook me all night long' on the CD player.

"Honey!"

Just enough got through. I bent my head into the crook of my arm and wiped the sweat away on my t-shirt before going out onto the landing to investigate.

"You call?" I shouted down.

A very noticeable baby bump announced her presence at the foot of the stairs, before I saw her face.

"I can't find the slow cooker Mum bought us. Have you seen it?"

"Slow cooker? "Hun, are you crazy? What do you need that for? It must be nearly 40 degrees; why don't we have something easy for dinner?"

I saw her face sink, and I knew I had once again gotten it wrong. Yeah, you may not have pictured me with a wife back when I started the story, but somehow it was true, and more than that, our first baby was only three months away.

"I think the baby wants hotpot."

What baby wants, baby gets, and I am a little ashamed to tell you that I felt irritated at her for that and the hundred other times she had used baby to get what she wanted. I'm painting a negative picture, and I'm sorry. It wasn't like that all the time, I promise you, I just think the heat of that bedroom and the fact that I was working hard to get the new house into passable a shape as possible all played their parts and I didn't relish the interruption.

"Have you looked in the outhouse?" There were still lots of unpacked boxes out there.

"It wasn't there."

Half an answer, I'd wager she hadn't checked properly, especially not the boxes on the bottom of the pile, as it'd be too much work for her to unload those on the top.

Frustrated, I took the stairs two at a time, just knowing I would lay my hands on the thing at the first time of looking. I did manage to fix a disarming smile as I passed her, and was rewarded with one in return as I said, "Hotpot sounds great."

The house on Baker Lane in Springmoor was built in the 1960s. It was similar to the one I grew up in, but was only a two up, two down. It had a long, narrow garden and an outhouse built onto the side of the building. This would house all of the gardening utensils and also our stand up fridge freezer, as the kitchen afforded no room for the thing due to its low worktops. At the back of the outhouse was a large recess where coal used to be stored back in the day. It was there I had piled up all of the boxes.

As predicted, I could see that Janine had only opened the top two. I took them down and quickly checked the contents. Plates, dishes, ornaments, but no slow cooker. I set them down and went about the remaining two columns as quickly as I could.

I had created two precarious columns of boxes behind me before I got to the last box. I saw the name 'John' marked in black ink on the side of it and yet thought nothing of it. I tore the packing tape from the top and knelt down to inspect the contents.

My hand came up with a photo frame. I turned it around, and there were me, Mum and Katie. I guess I could have been no more than two years old in the picture. I smiled, and unwittingly, my right hand went back into the box and brought out a blue chiffon scarf embroidered with pink flowers. My eyes traced from the photo to the scarf, and it was then that I realised what I had discovered.

Katie had picked these items out for me over eight years ago, and on getting the box home, I had placed it on top of a wardrobe and instantly forgot about it.

The photo and the scarf had served to knock me off guard. I brought the scarf to my face, and my God, I fancied I could smell her perfume, though the thing had an inevitable mustiness to it, having lived in the box for so long. I could see her then, standing at the front door, whipping the scarf tight around her neck as she beckoned us two kids to hurry the hell up or be late for the school bus again. A tear worked its way loose from my eye, and I quickly cuffed it away. I wasn't sure I was ready for an emotional overload of this nature, being as unprepared for it as I was.

I brought the items back towards their box, resolving to fully explore its contents later (maybe there was something I could pass onto the baby?). I stopped suddenly as I saw the hourglass lying there and quickly recoiled. From my position, squatted on my haunches as I was, there was nowhere to go but backwards. I fell into the two lazy towers of boxes I had constructed, knocking them over. The top-most box rebelled against its brothers and instead fell forward, clattering me on the head before landing squarely at my feet and spilling its load.

I lay there, not breathing, not daring to move. It might have been hours, but it could only have been seconds as Janine was quickly at the door between the kitchen and the outhouse.

"Johnny? Are you okay?" She ventured.

Her words had at least broken through my fear, and I scrambled away from the debris of the fallen boxes. I stood beside her, but no words would come to me. My skin felt cold all of a sudden, despite

the afternoon heat, and I could see the hairs on my arms standing on end; my hands themselves trembled.

Janine was oblivious to my condition as she tentatively slid past me to observe the spilled contents of the boxes.

"It's not so bad, one broken plate." She said, with a slight smile on her face. I realised later that she thought it was funny. That was at least until she approached my mother's box, which still sat in the recess of the old coal bunker. "Did you find it?" She began as she also lowered herself to her haunches before the box.

The world came rushing back to me in the instant I saw her reach out for the box.

"Don't touch it!" I screamed.

She wobbled, and in that split second, I half fancied that she would follow suit and collapse backwards. I rushed forward and grabbed her under her arms and heaved her backward and upward.

"John?" It was but a whisper.

I could see that I had scared her, and her face was teetering on the brink of collapse into tears. But there was also confusion there, and it was that which she addressed.

"What is it?" She followed my stare back towards the box on the floor.

"I..."

"John?"

Something like sanity came over me, and I stepped between her and the box. I took her by the shoulders, and already I could feel my heart rate subsiding. It had been a shock to see that which had previously remained hidden in the darkest depths of memory, but for the occasional blindside, which I would chase back to where it came. Here and now, it had confronted me physically, but it was my wife's fear that caused it to fade away. She was a delicate flower, and it took only the raising of one's voice or a rebuttal to see her retreat within herself. She was to be the mother of my child, she was my flower to protect, and so I drew on that to distance myself from my own fear.

"I'm sorry. It was a spider. Phew! A big one." I saw her face screw up in disgust. "It ran over my hand while I was unpacking. Gave me a start, and I guess I fell over. I'm sorry if I scared you." The tremor that had run through my body had subsided, and I told my lie with conviction. "Look, you go back in, and I'll clean up."

She gulped nervously and stepped back out of my hands. "You'll get that spider?"

"I will if I see him. Payback." I said with a wink.

Janine nodded and turned away. So as not to deal with my own fear, I scooped up the dropped scarf and photo frame and tossed them quickly back into their box, and kicked the flap over, obscuring them and the hourglass beneath from view. As quickly as I could, I started piling boxes back on top,

before at last piling back the lost contents of the box that assaulted my head. With that back in place, I had only to use the dust pan and brush to clean up the smashed plate, and I was done.

There was no sight or sound of Janine as I went back through the house and went up the stairs to the spare bedroom. I found my paint roller, loaded it with paint, cranked the CD player up three notches, and went vigorously back to work.

## Chapter Seventeen

I dreamed of Grandma that night.

It was my adult self this time, creeping down the stairs. The tick tock of her clock alarm was deafening, and I had clasped my hands to my ears to keep the sound out. As I did as a child, I leaned as far forward from the mid-stair as I could to try and open up the angle, but it did not afford me a better view, for this time the downstairs living room was in darkness. Near darkness anyway, as the white hue of the television screen flickered and cast shadows that fell in my direction.

I pressed on, as is the way of dreams.

I made the ground floor and tentatively stepped forward. Her chair was still at that same angle, and I could see both her arm and her head leaning to one side. She was still, and that was all for the better, as I knew my goal to be the silencing of that clock.

I rounded the chair from behind and looked over her head towards the TV. It was soundless; I knew that from the momentary pause between TICK and TOCK. I stood mesmerised as scenes from George Méliès a trip to the moon played out before me. I saw the moon, indistinct and distant, growing larger until the gaunt-looking hollows of three large craters transition into a face at its centre. The moon grew larger still until it is struck by the bullet-shaped capsule into its left eye. In my vision, the black and white is corroded by the blight of red blood as it drips thickly from its wound.

The moon then fades into the background as six weary travellers alight the crashed capsule and lay themselves down on the moon's surface to sleep beneath thin blankets. As they do so, seven stars appear in the heavens above them, each of them bearing a face. In my dream, six of the stars bear the faces of those I know. Grandpa Rick, Uncle Tom, my mother, my sister Katie, my wife Janine, and finally the face of my grandma Dot. Not the Dot I feared, but the loving grandmother who I knew before Rick's death. The seventh star, bore no face, and yet the six faces of my family streamed towards it and span around it in a circle.

This scene exuded peace and calm over me, and I knew what it was that they gravitated towards.

The serenity within was quickly broken, as the scenes began anew and once more the face of the moon was shattered by the bullet of the capsule, and the screen turned red again. I watched on as thick blood poured downward, not realising I had circumvented the back of the chair and now stood at my grandmothers side.

An arm shot out and my hand was grabbed, my head jerked back from the television and saw her head now rested toward me. Her eyes were dead and blank, and her mouth hung open, and yet I could hear her voice come through.

“You'll kill him. Do you hear? You will kill him!”



The words pulsated through my head, and when the echoes subsided, it was the cataclysmic turning of the clock at her side that resonated once again. I tried to pull my arm away, but her grip was too strong. Instead, I reached with my other hand towards the clock at her side. I would silence the turning of time.

“No!” She screamed. “You will kill him!”

All that was alive was her one arm that held me. I reached out and took the clock with my free hand. Her grip was now like a vice, and I saw black nails pierce my skin, and in the shadow of the room, my blood ran black.

I pressed the clock to my chest, and slowly turned the dial towards its peak. When it sounded, I knew the sound would destroy me, but I welcomed it, for afterward there would be peace.

“No, No!” My grandmother implored, but my mind was set; I twisted, and the dial grew stiffer in my hand, and worked against me. Sweat broke on my brow, and with an agonised effort I turned it upright.

“BRRRRINNGGG.”

I sat bolt upright in the darkness of the bedroom, and my hand shot out and slammed the off button of the digital clock on my bedside.

Beside me, Janine shifted and groaned before becoming still again. I wore a veil of sweat, and my heart thudded large in my chest.

In the darkness of the room, my eyes swam, and my addled brain did not distinguish it as the sweat from my night terrors, but as blood, such was the thick and warm texture. My hand traced to my eye, and I felt I would feel the protrusion of some missile, but there was none.

I felt a scream beginning to rise within me, and so I bit hard down upon my fist. Then there was blood, but the pain cut through my stupor, and I was quickly myself again. Nearly, but for the fading echoes of Grandma’s voice disappearing into the night.

“You will kill him.”

## Chapter Eighteen

A simple problem, right? Be rid of the damned thing?

Agreed. Only I didn't do that; I resealed the box and carried it upstairs. A pull of the loft hatch string, and a metal ladder lowers by a fraction, enough for you to reach up and extend it down to the floor. Moments later, I am in the attic, and I place the box on a fold out table at the far end. I am only reminded of it a few more times in the coming days as we unpack the rest of our things and Janine instructs me on what can go into storage.

With that done, I push the ladder back up into place, reseal the loft, and I am done with it. Out of sight, out of mind.

At least at first. There were no more dreams, and as it had done before, life took over once more, and I had more than enough to contend with.

My son Ethan was born on the 16<sup>th</sup> January 2010, and for the briefest of spells, I thought my life both happy and complete. Somehow that shy and nerdish boy had become a man. A man with a wife, a son, and a mortgage to pay. It only registered with me then, that I had long since let my imagination go, and by that I mean the daydreams of bigger and better things, as I was genuinely happy with what I did have, even though that meant days of drudgery at work because I was a provider now and my family relied upon me.

The only thing was that I was just so damn tired all of the time. I'll wager some of you know what I'm alluding to, and that was the sleepless nights with Ethan in the house for the first time.

Janine had presented us with a precious gift, and though I couldn't begin to share in the pain she had experienced, the nausea, the morning sickness, and fatigue of her pregnancy, I could at least be equal when it came to the raising of our son. This meant midnight feeds, the changing of nappies, and soothing the 4am cries. The latter was by far the hardest, and many was the night that I would stand over him, waiting for the moment he would wake so as to let Janine sleep on.

Only one month in, and I did not make a pretty sight in front of the mirror, as dark puffy circles had formed about my eyes. I did not complain, though, and on a diet of red bull, sugary snacks, and power naps in my car at break time, I got through.

Yes, there was a divide between me and Janine. Her days were just as hard as my nights, as young Ethan had a soul-destroying bout of colic for the first four months of his life and would cry endlessly. As such, both me and Janine were like strangers at that time; I would come home, and she would go to bed exhausted. I would sit on our sofa with Ethan in the crook of my arm, and if I was lucky, I might be able to put him down in his crib and snatch a few winks of sleep myself. This was our life, and every day was exactly the same.

That was until I got the call at work from Janine.

"..."

"Hello? Janine?"

"..."

I could hear muffled sobs in the background, and in that moment I became paralysed, and I felt as if a cold hand was inside my head, clamping down on my brain.

"Ethan?" It was barely a whisper.

"Mrs Oldaker?" I could hear a male voice in the background, and within a moment the voice was loud in my ear.

"Mr Oldaker? I am Dr Harkness, from the Stepney surgery."

The hand within my mind gripped tighter, and the feeling was like a chill that extended outward and down my spine.

"Doctor, please." I managed. "What is it? My son?"

"Please don't panic, Mr Oldaker, Ethan is here with us and is safe..."

I felt the hand loosen its grip, and I let out a long, relieved breath. The first emotion after that was anger, anger at Janine for allowing me to think the worst.

The doctor continued. "I am concerned, though, and please don't panic, but I am asking for an ambulance to convey your wife and son to the children's assessment unit at Springmoor hospital."

"Doctor? I don't understand..."

"We will know more when young Ethan has been assessed, but I am concerned that he has developed pneumonia..."

*Pneumonia?*

"...in any event, the hospital is where he needs to be right now, to get the proper treatment..."

"Janine? I'm sorry, Doctor, can I speak to my wife?"

After a few seconds, "John?"

"Honey, it's going to be okay. Just do what the doctor says. I'm leaving right now, and I'll be up at the hospital as soon as I can. Be strong for Ethan, won't you? Please, Janine, it is going to be alright."

"I..." Again, I hated her in that moment for her weakness, and I wished our roles were reversed and it was me there with my son.

"Janine, I'm going to hang up now. Just do as the doctor says: go with the ambulance, and I'll meet you there. Please put him back on."

"Doctor Harkness?"

"Yes."

“Doctor, please, is my son going to be okay?”

There was a long pause before he replied, and my heart thudded in my chest as I waited on him.

His voice was muted as he replied, and I knew this was for me and not for my wife.

“Time is of the essence, Mr Oldaker; please just make your way to the hospital and be there with your wife. Ethan is very poorly and needs specialist care.”

“I’m on my way.”

## Chapter Nineteen

Ethan was rushed to intensive care on arrival at the hospital. I saw my son for only a few seconds before he was snatched from my wife's arms and taken beyond double doors that we were not allowed beyond. In those scant seconds, my baby appeared a slight shade of blue.

"His breathing." Was about all I could make out between Janine's sobs. I held my wife close, though inside I was already blaming her for not seeing this sooner. I mean, he had been okay only this morning; that is to say, his cries were normal, but that colour? My Christ, how long had he been like that?

Janine's own cries subdued, and her head hitched only occasionally on my shoulder.

"He was quiet. Oh, God, he was quiet, and I thought he was asleep. John, you don't know! It was a relief; he didn't stop all morning, and I had already made the appointment with the doctor. But then he stopped, and I thought everything was okay; I...I..."

The sobs began again, and she pressed back into my shoulder, and I held her.

In that moment, she was lost to me; everything about me was lost. Within my mind, a simple thought expanded into being. It was like the break of dawn—the first rays of the sun breaking the horizon. The sun is not yet visible, but you know it is coming; it is inevitable.

So too was the hourglass. It had come back into my life, right there when we moved in, and just before the birth of my son.

I knew what I had to do. I had no choice.

I began to push her away, and as I did so, I knew I was ending my marriage.

"John?"

"I've got to go, Janine."

Her eyes were glazed and blank, and she stared uncomprehendingly at me. I didn't hate her then; I only pitied her.

I was already backing away.

"John, what are you doing?"

"I've got to go, Janine, please don't make this hard. This is for Ethan."

"John, no!" She screamed.

I turned and ran from her towards the hospital entrance; her words crashed down on me like a wave, and I believe I near staggered such were their weight, coupled with that of my betrayal.

But it wasn't a betrayal. I knew the second the thought had formed in my mind, the hourglass had begun its count.

I had one hour to get home. It was one minute after two.

## Chapter Twenty

I near tore the loft hatch down with the strength I used to pull on its cord; the action was so violent that the ladder clattered down towards me, near caving my head in. I didn't pause to take stock and clambered up the ladder as fast as my legs could carry me.

My heart was racing, and not just from the sprint from the car into the house; I had run two red lights on my journey back and certainly tripped one speed camera. Mid-afternoon traffic was light, but by taking the shortest route possible, I forgot about the level crossing on Miller Road. The lights had been flashing as I approached, but the vehicle ahead of me didn't have the stomach to beat the lowering of the barriers. I might have turned and gone back on myself, but it was a good half mile back, and that route would take me through the city centre. And so I sat there, thumping the wheel as the clock on the dash ticked on another minute. I swore loudly at the silver Corsa in front of me. Just the perfect time for Miss Daisy to be out driving.

That fucking car held me up all the way up Convent Hill, and the steady stream of oncoming cars prevented my overtaking. It was now 2:44, and in my panic, I feared the frail old woman in the car ahead was going to kill my son.

It was five to the hour when I got to the house, though that didn't slow my pace. In my head, I had believed that the hourglass had given me this time, this one hour to get back, and so begin my spell, much like the one that Grandma had begun in saving Uncle Tom's life. She had carried that burden for 40 years near told, and dammit if I wouldn't do the same.

I entered the loft and switched on the light, racking my brain as to where I had left the damned box of my mother's belongings.

I needn't have panicked. The box was sitting on the fold out table at the end; this jogs my memory and I recall placing it there. I stop suddenly, though as I see the hourglass sat square in the middle of the table. The box next to it is sealed shut with the same packing tape I wrapped it with back in August of last year.

The sands are already falling, and in the dim light given off by the single hanging bulb, I can see that the grains of sand are near down to the neck. It couldn't be, and yet I accepted it all without fear. My heart rate was falling back down to something approaching normal, and my ragged breaths slowed. I was calm as I reached out and wrapped my hands around it.

I start, as I feel a sharp pain from my index finger on my right hand, and I draw it instinctively away. I see a bead of red blood forming in its centre, and I wipe it absently on my trouser.

I kneel in and look within the glass, and as I do so, I see the small bead of my blood slide down the inside of the top bulb and come to rest on the bed of golden sand, where it is slowly absorbed by a single grain that turns black. I understand it for what it is and what all the other tainted granules represent. For mine, is the mark of the bargain I have entered into, as others belong to my grandmother and the countless others have done the same before me.

I lift the glass and turn it, and at once bury the stained particle among the falling grains of a million more.

My deal. My burden. Whatever it is, had begun.



## Chapter Twenty-One

My place was at the hospital with my family, but I did not leave immediately. I watched the hourglass for fifty-five minutes while I contemplated all that I had done, and all that I must now do. As the sands again neared the glass's neck, I took out my phone, and similarly as Grandma had done with her kitchen timer, I set a countdown timer for fifty minutes, turned the glass, and set the timer in motion.

You may think that there was some divine hand or some divine justice at work by my marking the time in fifty minute intervals as she had done, but not so. I had spent the time leading up to this thinking of every conceivable scenario that might intervene between me and the glass. I decided that Grandma had been lucky in that regard; she had been a housewife and so was always close at hand. That, and there had been no other outside interventions that I could have seen for her. Me, on the other hand, I had a family to look after and a job to go to; I couldn't just mark out my fifty-minute gaps with the TV schedule, nor could I keep the thing on my person. Even Grandma, had seen to turn it away from prying eyes, and I knew that this was right and that I couldn't share this with anyone, not Janine, not Ethan when he was grown, no one.

With the fifty minutes up, I satisfied myself with the belief that the remaining sands would equal exactly ten minutes.

I wonder now how much of this information entered my subconscious at the time of entering this pact, and looking back, I knew it had done so. For one, I knew without reservation that if the glass was allowed to settle before turning, it would mark out exactly sixty minutes, not 59.59 or 1.01, sixty minutes exactly. I also knew I was not bound by these fifty minute timers I was setting for myself; I could turn the cursed thing as quickly and as often as I wanted, just so long as I kept the sands in motion. That is exactly what I did too, when I reached the hospital again. I sat in my car and took the hourglass from the backpack I had placed it in. Without even looking at a watch, I knew it held ten minutes of time. I turned it over, set my timer, and walked back into the hospital in the thin hope I could do or say something to Janine to explain my exit at her greatest time of need.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

We didn't last. I mean, how could we? My untimely exit was unforgivable in her eyes, and my goodness, didn't I exacerbate matters when I left the hospital again after some fifty minutes with the thin excuse I needed to inform my sister. I could already foresee the levels of deception I was going to have to employ, whatever became of my marriage, as every fifty or fifty five minutes I would have to make my excuses, whatever situation I might find myself in. When I had left the hospital to return home for the hourglass I had not lied to my wife; I had said I was leaving for Ethan, and that was true. It was only when I came back that I came out with the pathetic excuse that it had been shock that had overtaken me and I had to get out (yes, that is the best I could come up with). I chose not to make a liar of myself on this occasion, and I duly telephoned Katie as soon as I had turned the hourglass. It wouldn't do, though; I couldn't keep running out every hour, and so I scooped up my backpack, hourglass in place, and headed back in. I made a beeline for the cafeteria and returned to Janine with a sandwich and a drink, telling her that she had to keep her strength up. These had been taken from my pack, so as to possibly explain its presence. With it close at hand, I was able to turn it several more times before a doctor came out and told us that Ethan was out of danger. I didn't know it then, but the hug I shared with Janine would be our last.

In a way, it made my burden easier. There was no way I could hope to attend the hourglass in secret hour after hour without her notice. She went to her mother's with Ethan only a month later and did not return.

This meant the only scrutiny I might bear would be at work, and do you know what? I managed it there without issue for well over a year. You may well know the type of store I worked at: very much open plan, with roaming sales assistants such as myself on the prowl, all the while Lady Gaga would assail your eardrums from our speaker system with her p-p-p-poker face.

I kept a keen eye and a healthy distance, and if I felt the minutes were too close, I would make a hasty exit to the staff room, where I could access my locker and turn the glass. With that done, I could attend to your needs and make my sale without issue. If, however, you caught me just at the wrong moment, I might stall you for say, ten to fifteen minutes as I introduced every type of insurance cover, virus protection, and every other product you didn't want with your new purchase.

It worked, at least for the first year after Janine was gone, and it wasn't a burden. Each and every time I lifted it, I held my son's life in my hands, and as you may have heard a popular movie antagonist say, I was burdened with glorious purpose (I did say I was a nerd, didn't I?)

It was more than that, though, if you can believe such a thing. Of course, it was Ethan's life that drove me to do this, but there was a power here as well, a supernatural one at that, and that filled me with the potential for other possibilities; after all, was this a thing of God or a tool of the Devil? I think now I know, and the answer is both. For reasons I have already told you, it was Ethan's gift and my curse, but I would not recognise that for some years yet.

I'm sorry, I am short on time, and I have yet to come to the end and the real reason I have told you this story; as a warning. If you should come across this thing, don't touch it; distance yourself from it and let the lives of you and yours play out as they should, less temptation get in the way.

Oh, and it will; I think that is a part of it, you see. Why else did Grandpa Rick bring the damn thing back if it did not feel the impending tragedy of Tom's prospective death, and so too hear the call for Ethan and a damp and miserable house that was destined to kill him in infancy?

I have had time to pour over and over these things, and I keep coming back to the same thing: the hourglass wants to be turned. No, needs to be turned because it is alive somehow. Knowing. I will share with you how I know this before I end my story.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

I wake from a short doze and check my phone. It is situated on an end table just left of the armchair I am sitting in. The charging cable is plugged in permanently so the phone does not go dead.

T-minus three minutes and twenty seconds. I'd taken to speaking like a NASA moon rocket announcer at some point over the last few years as I tried to make a mental game out of my predicament. Another one would be that I was a spy and that some nefarious villain's plans for world domination were marked by the countdown of a clock, and like 007, I would save the day by only a scant second.

Those were long years, where time held no meaning and little purpose beyond the hourglass. I became paranoid, anxious, and depressed and took to calling in sick at work and spending long days in a vegetative like state in front of the TV. Does any of that sound familiar? It should, and I believe if I had my family around me, I might well have lashed out at them, much as Grandma had done to us.

My job was teetering on the brink, but the fact was these absences were backed up by my appalling appearance. As and when I did turn up, my belly protruded to such an extent that I had lost the ability to see my own dick when I peed, unless I sucked it all in. My face was blotchy, and those bags under my eyes had become a permanent addition. In his wisdom, my boss took me off the shop floor and placed me in the warehouse, where I would manage stock inventory and the goods in and out. With my own office, a measly 4x4 feet, I had free and easy access to the hourglass.

Work time then became the easiest, and for two reasons: the first was that I had taken to falling asleep at home in front of the TV, and in one terrifying experience I awoke to find that I had slept through a full minute of my braying alarm, which was already set to full volume. This was never an issue at work, as the busy warehouse and the nature of my duties, coupled with the same copious amounts of Red Bull as I had drunk for years, served to get me through the day.

The second reason was that my burden included the fact that I needed to keep a roof over my head. I mentioned paranoia? Well, what if someone sought to do to me as I did to my grandmother? That was perhaps the most far-fetched of my concerns, and in my more rational moments, I knew it to be unlikely, but that didn't mean that some other simple occurrence might come between me and the glass. No, I needed a safe haven for both it and myself if I was to fulfil my duty, and so I resolved to step it up, and stop phoning in sick, and take on what little overtime was available, all with the view of both reducing my time at home and continuing to pay its mortgage.

I realise now that there was something more important than any of these reasons when it came to going back to work, and that was that it occupied my mind, and every once in a while the sounding of my alarm came without my anticipating it, as I had been lost in whatever task was at hand.

Not so at home, where all I could do was watch as much television as possible. Being alone as I was, I found my way back onto the internet and the message boards of my youth, where I could interact with likeminded fans and offer theories as to which direction a show was taking.

So, beyond going to work and the journeys to and from, I remained at home for the next six years; my shopping was delivered; and I disappeared from the world, even from my son Ethan, whose life I was saving once an hour. I hoped the time I was giving him was the best, but slowly and surely the phone calls from Janine slowed and then stopped altogether as she met another man, and Ethan got himself a stand-in Father. I couldn't blame her either; I mean, she couldn't know what I had given up for Ethan and that losing time with Ethan himself was part of this terrible burden. She nagged me, cajoled me, and even tried to sympathise with me, all in an effort to get me to be with my son and build a relationship with him. It pained me so much that I couldn't, and I cried when I saw that he would see me in the same way that I saw my own father.

These bouts of depression would come and go, as would the television shows; the routine, though, would not. Occasionally, I could be lifted out of my funk by what I was watching. The Sopranos was one, Breaking Bad another, but it was the gift of a DVD box set for the show Lost that saw me become obsessed with the character Desmond and how he was compelled to input the numbers 4, 8, 15, 16, and 42 every 108 minutes. I searched for hidden meaning and fired off letters to the show's creators, demanding answers.

They all went unanswered. In the end, it was just a plot device, and, SPOILER ALERT the day Desmond missed the numbers, it released a magnetic surge that brought down Flight 815, as seen in episode one. So in the end, I was disappointed, and not just at the show's finale, as I lamented the fact that Desmond had a whole 108 minutes to work with between the numbers and I only had shy of an hour.

I think the hardest thing was the doubt. I'm sure by now you must think I was crazy—or am crazy, for that matter. After all, where was my proof? Hadn't I simply bought into my grandmother's delusion? That I have allowed superstition coupled with coincidence to infect my brain like cancer? Well, the same thoughts have plagued my mind for many years now, and I wanted to believe it was all false.

Many was the time when I resolved to break the cycle, and so I stood before the hourglass as the sands dwindled before me, determined to let them fall, only for dark memories to resurface like the bloated body of a murder victim from some dark waters. My memories, much like that victim, are shackled and weighted, with rocks stuffed into the pockets, and rowed out to the centre of a lake and pushed overboard, out of sight and unknown until the inevitable pressure of time causes the waters to give up their darkest secrets.

So what then? Could reason win through where the irrational reigned supreme? In that way, I was not like Grandma, not at all. She carried her burden and did so without reservation or diversion, at least that is what I have come to believe. For me, I had to look deeper, for there had been a major plot hole in the story since day one. I just didn't see it right away. Did you?

It all goes back to Uncle Tom's story of the day he fell in the river. Despite the years that have passed, I can still see the smiling faces there at the wake and how Tom told of his ordeal and how he'd woken back at home with his father standing over him. The missing detail of that story is that somewhere in that house, Grandma had taken the hourglass and started to turn it for him.

There's no issue there, but what of Grandpa Rick?

The very same hourglass had been turned to save his life back there in Egypt, and in my mind's eye, I could easily see Grandma turning it for him on his return from the war. But would the spell have been broken if she had now turned it for Tom instead? Or could it be that she doubled down and now carried the burden for two?

I did not believe that—not one bit of it.

My internet research told me of such a thing as a Djinn, or Jinn. A supernatural being in Islamic mythology and Middle Eastern folklore. You might know it better if I referred to it as a genie.

According to Islamic belief, djinn are created from smokeless fire and are mentioned in the Quran. They are believed to possess free will, intelligence, and the ability to interact with humans. Some djinn are considered benevolent, while others are malevolent and may cause us harm.

For me, it fit, though this was no genie in a bottle, and the hourglass served as both a benevolent and malevolent thing. The former speaks for itself; the latter, though, for the terrible toll its spell takes upon me.

There is another feature of Tom's story, and I believe it removes the plot hole I mentioned. You see, back there in the field hospital, Grandpa Rick had been in and out of consciousness and was both feverish and hallucinating. He was though able to remember one key detail, and that was the nurse who ran for the assistance of the Egyptian orderly when he was fading.

When he awoke, his fever was broken, and there were both the nurse and the hourglass. He brought the damned thing home with him when he was discharged, but the key thing is that Tom said Grandpa never bought into the idea, and if not, then surely no one was turning it for him as he returned to the shores of England.

So what does this all mean? Well, I have come to believe there was more to the magic than simply the turning of the glass. It had been back there in Tom's story. How the orderly had chanted in Arabic at his bedside Could that have been it? That with the right words, the glass only needs to be turned for as long as is needed?

I have come to believe exactly that. His nurse had a long and sleepless night beside him, turning the glass hourly, but when his fever broke, the spell was surely complete. Grandpa brought the hourglass home with his story as a souvenir of his war. He never turned it for himself, and neither did Grandma, as there was no need. Not until Tom fell into that river anyway, and her curse, along with mine, is that when we invoked the magic inside of it, we did not know how to utter the ancient Arabic that would mean the glass would be turned only as long as needed. In Grandpa's case, only as long as it took for his fever to break. In Tom's case, only until his father had resuscitated him and his heart began beating, and in Ethan's case, only as long as it took for his pneumonia to break.

I know it.

I also know in my heart that what we invoked is unbreakable. We did not know the words, and there is no going back, no do over.

And yes, in case you were wondering, I did reach out. I did make contact with many renowned Egyptologists, but as with the makers of that Lost show, my requests went largely unanswered. All but one who wrote.

ملمعون اذنت

I had it translated, and it simply says that I am cursed.

So what else is there? I tested it once, setting the hourglass on an angle and propping it up on books to see if the sands would fall any slower. They didn't, and I knew that would be the case. I also knew in my heart that there would be no cheating.

So there I am in 2016. A Netflix title screen is static on my TV before me and I reach out for my phone again, knocking a Pringles can off the table as I do so. There is only a minute or so to go, but I am ready, so I cancel the alarm and begin to lift myself from the chair.

As I did so, I felt a crushing weight hit me hard in the chest and fell back down to the armchair. I tried to take a breath, but my throat felt as if there was a clamp on it, and as I strained to draw a breath, the only sound that emanated was a drawn-out 'UNGHHHHH'. A spasm of dull pain rose in my left arm, and I quickly clamped it with my right hand as I tried to draw another breath. I was having a heart attack.

Panic rose, but it was for Ethan and not for myself. I released my arm and reached out towards my phone. The timer screen greeted me, but all the markers—hours, minutes, and seconds—were static at zero. I dropped it, and it bounced on the side of the end table and hit the floor.

How much time?

The thought was clear in my mind, and despite what I was going through, I found a clear and steady answer.

*You have five minutes.*

Five minutes to get myself out of this chair, get to the attic, and save my son's life.

I pressed down on both arms of the chair and heaved myself upward. My chest felt like it had been crushed, and still I could only manage a gasp of air. My head swam, and I keeled over onto the floor.

"Ethan." It was only a whisper from my lips, "I'm sorry."

Then there was darkness.

## Chapter Twenty Four

Needless to say, I awoke. This is not one of those tales where the twist is that the narrator was dead all along; save that for the hack horror stories you enjoy, won't you? This was real.

I awoke in darkness, and similar to a dark dream from many years ago, the darkness was infiltrated by a hazy light. My mind hadn't caught up as yet, and I was confused as to why I was laying on the floor. Looking up at the TV, I saw the Netflix title screen, which advertised a show called Stranger Things that I hadn't gotten around to watching.

"What?" My eyes flitted across the carpeted floor in front of me, and there before me was my phone. It all came flooding in at once, and I began to crawl before it registered the pain in my chest was down to a dull ache.

The dim light of the room around me was all the clue I needed. I had passed out, and it was getting dark outside. The realisation of what that meant tried to crowd into my mind, but I would not allow it.

I pulled myself onward until the cable of the phone was within reach and pulled it towards me. My eyes settled on the timer and darted over the screen, trying to find the time. It had been so damned long since I had needed the thing that I looked over it twice before my eyes came back and rested on it. It was nearly twenty to seven in the evening. This registered at the same time I saw the icon beside it that denoted a missed call. Next to it was the bracketed number five.

I turned onto my back, and the tears came flooding down my cheeks. I had lost over four hours, and the missed calls would undoubtedly be from Janine. My son was dead.

I don't know how long I stayed that way, but I was given a start when the discarded phone rang loudly next to my ear. Without looking, I reached out, took it, and pressed it to my ear. I knew who it was.

"Janine, I am so sorry." I whispered.

"John? Is that you? Is everything okay?" I heard the concern in her voice, but there was something fundamental that I was missing.

"I'm sorry." I repeated.

"John, just listen, okay? I don't know why I bother with you, but I wanted to give you another chance to make good with your son."

"Ethan?"

"Yes, John, for God's sake. At least you know his name. Ethan was asking after you; he and Bill have had a bit of a falling out, and for the love of me, he asked for his dad."



I sat bolt upright. "Janine?" That fundamental thing I had missed had hit home. She was angry with me; there were no tears.

There was a sigh and a long pause on the other end of the phone. "Jesus, John, were you even..."

I cut over her. "Ethan? Is Ethan alright?"

My demand seemed to startle her, and her voice changed as she replied. "Ethan? Of course. What on earth is the matter with you, John? He's fine, he's..."

"Where is he, Janine? Please, where is he right now?"

"He's upstairs, on his X-box, but why?"

A silent tear rolled down my cheek, and I closed my eyes.

*It isn't true. Any of it. It isn't true.*

"Janine, please let me speak with him."

She hesitated, and I heard a muted "I give up" as she lowered the phone from her ear and undoubtedly went to the bottom of her staircase, where I heard her shout for my son.

"Ethan!"

"What?" I heard him yell in return, and a sob escaped my lips. My son was fine, and everything I had been through and everything I had missed had all been for nothing.

I guess he sensed my anguish, for he afforded me all of three minutes on the phone before he handed it back to his mother. I spoke to her for another twenty minutes, and in that time I promised her I would make it all right again, that I would be the father I should have been all along.

"I'm sorry," I repeated, just as the conversation was beginning to close.

"You said that already, John..."

"No, not for that; I meant for us, Janine. I'm sorry I disappeared on you that day at the hospital, and I'm sorry for everything else. I never meant..."

That is when the old Janine came back, and I sensed her tears on the other end of the line.

"It's too late, John. But it is not too late for Ethan. You make good on your promises, John, or so help me."

"I will." I promised.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

I collapsed back into my armchair, and the weight of six wasted years came crashing down on me. I look back now and I think of the story of the little Dutch boy who put his finger in the dyke. Only for me, the weight of the water was the suppression of emotion: my duty, my love for my son, and my lost marriage. Only the pressure is building and building, and I feel my finger being pushed back, and though I lean into it, bolstering my efforts to hold back my pain, but another leak springs and another, and soon a torrent of water explodes about me, and my futile gesture to hold it back is shown for the ridiculous thing that it always was.

I lost myself temporarily in that chair, and when I found myself again, I found another emotion lurking, waiting patiently in line for its turn: anger.

Ignoring my fragile state (I'd just had a heart attack, for Christ's sake), I picked myself up from the chair and went straight for the outhouse, the same one where I found the box of my mother's possessions. I selected a sturdy club hammer from my tool bag and made for the stairs.

As I did, the most simple of questions formed in my mind, and that was to ask me why I had kept the cursed hourglass in the loft when at home. This stopped me in my tracks, and it dawned on me how stupid that had been when I might just as well have kept it beside me all along. But then I thought of Grandma and how she had kept the thing tucked away in her bedside table, hidden from the eyes of those about her, and I knew that this was part of the spell, that this was something secret. I argued with myself as I went up the stairs.

*But you live alone!*

It didn't matter. The hourglass had taken hold, and it went way beyond a superstition; it was a belief. I had the belief that I had my son's life in my hands, and this was something that had to be protected and hidden from the world.

And so I pulled the cord for the loft hatch, and ignoring my ragged breaths, I climbed up into the darkness. A second cord pull and a dull, low light illuminated the cramped confines of the loft space. Long shadows pooled on the floor and walls about me, and there at the end of the space was the hourglass sitting on its table.

I raised the hammer over my head, and in my anger, I don't know if I shouted or screamed, only that a thunderous sound reverberated about me as I swung my weapon.

Then I saw it, and panic clutched at my heart. Somehow I diverted my blow by a fraction, and the hammer came down hard onto the table just a fraction of an inch from the glass. The force of the blow vibrated up my arm, and in that moment, I thought I was having another heart attack. I fell backwards onto my arse and stared up in blank horror up towards the hourglass.

The sand was frozen just above the neck of the top bulb.

I too was frozen, both physically and mentally, as I did not want to allow the meaning of what I saw to take root and flourish. But it couldn't be denied. The waters were already seeping, and soon I would be hit by the tidal wave.

I stood; I don't know when, but I was above it. I saw my hands reach out for it. My God, what if it was frozen? What if I jogged the sand back into motion? My hands shot back to my sides.

I leaned in close, close enough that the warmth of my breath fogged the glass, but not close enough to touch it. I craned my neck, trying to find some physical obstruction that had plugged the neck, but surely such a thing was impossible? Certainly, my years of turning it had given me an intimate knowledge of the thing, its lines, its texture, its weight, and all of its imperfections.

*The damp, my God, the damp, has seeped in, and the sand is wet.*

Could it be? Hope sprang up and was quickly doused, as I saw with incredible clarity that each and every grain of sand was individual, just layered one on top of another, and a hundred on top of another, and a thousand upon a thousand. There was no moisture binding them together, no external force, and no reason why the thing could have stopped.

I blinked, and a single grain fell from the neck and plunged into the waiting arms of its brothers below.

No.

Another fell, and then another.

"No."

Within seconds, it appeared to me as an avalanche, as if the sands of time remembered their purpose after all.

"No, no, no."

I couldn't deny what I was seeing. The hourglass had not stopped; it had simply waited.

I had been incapacitated, and it wanted to be turned, oh my yes, it wanted to be turned.

I fancied I could hear it in my head, though I knew it was my own voice.

*Hey fella, so this is the deal we struck? You know, the one where you turn me and turn me and turn me until the end of your days? Kudos to you, because Jesus won't you do just that? But hey, if I were to break my side of the bargain to keep that there son of yours alive, then what cause would you have to keep coming on up here and turning me? None, that's what! And let's not forget that hammer there! My goodness, that was close. If that son of yours dies, you might be liable to come back at me a second time, and I'll bet you bottom dollar, you won't miss a second time! So, let's call this one a free pass. A do-over if you like? But buddy, you better start looking after that old ticker of yours, because I won't give you another one!*

I knew it was so. Already the sands were low, and I saw myself reach out, clasp the hourglass, and turn it once again.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

So here we are, and my time grows short. It is Monday, the 30th of January, 2023, and I am nearing the end of my life. I can see the sand fall and know I have about nine minutes, so I must be brief now.

First off, Ethan is fine; in fact, it was his 13th birthday a couple of weeks ago. I saw him for all of twenty minutes, which was all Janine would allow, before his birthday party started. All he had eyes for was the gift that I had bought him, and I knew (as I have for a long time now) that I would not be a part of his life.

I have turned the hourglass for him, hour on hour for the best part of thirteen years now, and it is the gift that he will never know I have given him. The cost? My own life for his, and mine, is so very tiring. I cannot go on.

I believe, though, that I have a way out, a way out that spares him and releases me.

You see, despite the voice in my head sounding like my own, I know it is instead the voice of the hourglass. The object before me is inert, passive, and dead. But yet it is alive; its spell was cast on me from the moment I stood at my grandmother's bedroom door and beheld her turning it. You see, it found me then. Perhaps it knew that her time was coming to an end and so reached out and whispered subversive words into my ear out of revenge, and so claimed me as her heir.

It is that same voice that fills me with dread as to what will happen if I do not follow my duty, and it is that same voice that is deathly quiet when I question it about my plan.

I am leaving now. I carefully take the hourglass from its resting place and walk into the corner of the loft, where I have carefully torn up one of the floor boards. Beside it lie the reams of insulation I have ripped up and created a recess.

Slowly, I lower the hourglass into the hole and stuff the insulation all around it, being sure to stuff the sides so that it doesn't have an inch of space in which to move. Quickly, I set about replacing the floorboards and screwing them into place. My last view of it tells me I have seven minutes left. That's plenty.

That done, I walk to the centre of the room, where I have placed a chair. I step up and feel the coarse texture of the noose I have tied. I pull hard on it, sure that it is strong, and my weight won't bring it or the rafter above down when they bear my weight. I am satisfied.

I have five minutes left. Just enough time to tell you that what I do won't risk Ethan. You see, when I ask the voice the question, it is silent. I ask it, what would happen if I had another heart attack? I ask it: What would happen if I was unable to keep up my side of the bargain? And finally, I ask it if it will wait for me. All of these questions go unanswered, and that is all the answer I need. I can free myself from its curse and, in doing so, break free of the bargains that have been made.

I wonder if the sands will run dry this time, or perhaps they will hold firm as before, waiting endlessly for my return. There is no answer, and I am pleased.

I must be quick now. I take a deep breath and place one foot out into the air before me. I lean forward, and I feel the rope bite into my neck.

I read that it takes approximately four minutes for the lack of oxygen to shut down the brain. I figure that will be plenty, and I have that plus a minute or so more. Time has been my enemy for years, and now it will be my ally, as I will be gone before the sands run dry. It is a race to the finish that the hourglass cannot hope to win, and what is more, it is hidden now. My house is bequeathed to my son, and I am under no illusions that it will be sold, but whoever buys it next will undoubtedly question the lower than average asking price and, upon learning about the shut-in who hung himself in the attic, will avoid it like the plague. Yes, it may be found, but not within the lifetime of my son, I am sure.

I push back with my other foot, and I am suspended in the air. My throat turns to fire, and instinctively, my hands clasp at the rope at my neck. It will be over soon.

*It will be found.*

The voice in my head is my grandmother's.

*No. I reply, It is hidden.*

*There is always another.*

This was the voice of the hourglass.

Darkness begins to encroach, but I am afforded a small spy hole into the room around me, and I see something incredible. I see my son Ethan, an adult now, surveying the space around me. He looks up at the beam where I hang but does not see me. He shakes his head, and in a blur, he is older, and I see him on all fours.

His purpose is clear because I see packages of loft insulation about him, and he is picking up floor boards on his way to the corner where the hourglass lies.

"Ethan, no."

My voice has no weight here, and I look and see a pregnant woman standing behind me, cradling the small bump at her stomach.

I am afforded a glimpse of this future and know that Ethan did not sell the house. He will live here with his own family, and I can see he is only feet away from where I have hidden that cursed hourglass.

He has only to find it and touch it...

Ethan disappears as I take the rope above me in both hands and heave upon it, at once lifting the crushing pain from my throat. I lift and reach for the rafter and pull on that. It is an impossible act, I know; already, the lack of oxygen within my body should have shut off the use of my limbs as it takes oxygen from wherever it can get it.

It is impossible, but so too is the hourglass, a stupid superstition held onto by an elderly lady who believed in such supernatural nonsense.

I am on the floor, and I am crawling. My body is shaking, and my heart is pounding in my chest. My breathing is shallow and hurts me. I claw at the floor boards with my hands, turning the finger tips into a bloody ruin.

I have it; I have the hourglass in my hands. My son's life is in my hands once more.

I turn it.

The End.

## The Story so far - part 2.

As you may know, The Hourglass is one of several short stories or novellas I will be releasing in the forthcoming book 'Comeuppance'.

At the time of writing this, I am not entirely sure when that book will be coming out. Although three of the stories are written, the fourth is only in the early stages and easily looks like being the longest of the bunch. In addition, I want to write a few additional short stories for it, so that it is the best I can make it.

It's for that reason that I am releasing The Hourglass now, as I foolishly suggested that this next book would be ready in 2022. I'm sorry for being so misleading; it was never my intention, but other things have always gotten in the way. As such, I hope this story tides you over for now and that you enjoy it.

I want to thank (in no particular order) Alan 'Taz' Grain, Heather Grant, Veronica Newell, Stuart Harrington, Kelly Kennaway, and Sharon Johnson (or Mum, as she is known to me) for being my test readers on this particular story and the insights and support they gave me.

So, where did the hourglass come from? Well, I wanted to challenge myself to write a story about an inanimate object, much like Stephen King has done with stories like 'The Mangler', 'Typewriter of the Gods', 'Christine', 'The Raft', and many more. The only issue was (and still is) that Stephen King had been there and done it all first! I will always endeavour to be original, though, and I hope I achieved exactly what I set out to do. For me, the psychology of the idea is fascinating, as if you'd begun such a task yourself, could you allow yourself to stop, whatever your doubts and pain?

This was actually one of the easiest stories I have written, the reason being that I borrowed some stuff from my own upbringing and experience. Borrowed, not robbed blind, I should add! My own Nan was a wonderful woman and bears no resemblance whatsoever to Dot, which I am very glad to say. I miss her dearly and wish she were here to share this journey with me, as it was she who helped inspire it.

Whats next? I'm still not entirely sure why I invented the county of Eastland and all of the towns and villages I have placed within it. Especially as I do reference real places in my stories. All you need to know is that it is situated somewhere in the middle of Hertfordshire, Essex, Cambridgeshire, and Suffolk. It would sit within the boundaries of the A120, A12, A14, and M11 if you were to look at a map.

As ever, I welcome any correspondence at my e-mail address [markharrington@mail.com](mailto:markharrington@mail.com)

I'd only ask that if you liked the story, please do share it with someone. It is completely free, and getting the word out is the hardest thing when you are self-published and on a budget

Until next time,

Mark .

20/04/23.