

The Whispering Grandfather

This is a long story, I know. But by rights it should be as it spans the decades of my own life, up until last month. I understand we all find ourselves busy with the ever-present worries, priorities, and goals within our life, but I beg those with a little time to read on, and offer my poor old soul some explanation.

My mum and dad were always quite reticent when it came to talking about my grandfather on my dad's side. It's not as if they'd outright refuse to speak about him, but whenever he was brought up – say, a neighbour innocently asking how the folks are doing - the mood would just change so suddenly that it would almost give me whiplash. I still remember, very clearly, my mum would grow harrished and flustered, then try to commandeer the conversation, talk about her own parents (both deceased before I was born) and then steer the topic in to other territory.

I never understood why, but, I was only young so it didn't really occur to me to persist. When you're a kid, you take in so much from your parents that you don't even realise, so, I had this strange tasting cocktail of the insatiable curiosity of a child, and the learned behaviour that afforded to me by them. I would say it was a battle that was fought little, as I had other things to occupy me, but when it came up on the forefront of my conscience, the latter only won over very few times.

Anytime I'd mention some homework I had in which I had to talk about family tree, or heritage, I would get a flustered response from them, in which my mum would don that same stressed demeanour, and my dad would become steely and rigid. I'd be told to steal away to my room, then the next day in school, I would be approached by a fretful and vehemently apologetic teacher, who would paint me with all colours of regret, and then exempt me from the work and either provide me with a new project, or told to sit out and read for a while as the other students worked on theirs. I never complained. I liked reading.

I'm no longer a kid; far from it as my well-earned beer gut and wispy hair clutching around each side of my head, but for the tuft at the top, will attest to. And still, for a long time I found myself telling my kids that they're not to ask their granddad about his dad. This initially conjured some questions, as they plied the same curiosity I'd learned to silence, mostly, but sooner or later they didn't ask anymore. Which was as well, because my dad *wouldn't* answer, and I *couldn't* answer.

It's odd, though, because from the ages of, perhaps, five to ten, or at least somewhere there around, I did get to go to my grandparents' house. And, though I could tell there was something that was somewhat out of the ordinary, it didn't seem at all unnerving or abhorred at first. I was told my grandfather had to stay in the other room, and that seemed acceptable enough for my young brain.

Families were different, I always knew that. My friend had a whole hospital bed in their living room for their nan, who was apparently 'not long for this world' but stayed alive well in to my teens. We used to sneak over and look at all the buttons, and read the little canisters and devices, it was interesting rather than saddening. I knew grandparents were old, could get sick, could pass away – so I had no idea why everything was being shielded from me.

Overall, I visited them only a handful of times, and it was always due to my grandmother being poorly. I used to get so excited, though, because every visit, I would be driven to the toy shop on the way, and my dad would always pick out something new for me. Toys back then weren't as varied as you can get today, but my dad used to always say the ones with lights and sounds were the best ones, regardless of whether I wanted them or not.

After that, we would be driving to their home which was a little further out than I would have expected, and when the suburbs gave away to bosky landscapes, the mood within the car would change, and my mum and dad wouldn't say a word to each other. My dad would usually drive, and his motions with the handbrakes would be sharp and staccato, he'd be grumbling and grunting swear words at any other driver on the road, and when they seemed to dwindle in numbers, any road sign, or sight, or- whatever he could find to hate.

God forbid we were ever stopped at a red light. The entire duration would be spent with him leaning forward, his elbows on the steering wheel, and supporting his head in his hands as if this was a travesty. My mother would wait a moment, then when the lights started changing, place a gentle, reassuring hand on his shoulder which didn't do much to alleviate his mood, but he'd at least look up to the side, lock eyes with her, take her queue and then press on the pedal.

Now that I think of it, maybe she was only breaking him out of his sudden wallowing disposition because if a car behind beeped at our stalling, she was afraid my dad would get out and cause a scene. He wasn't an angry man, and if he ever lost his temper with my mother or me, it would usually be rectified and apologised for within minutes, then given an explanation of why he was angry, why he acted the way he did, and why it was wrong – which I guess did wonders for me and my patience with my own emotions in future life.

Yet, when I got there with my rocket, or robot or roaring dinosaur (cliché, I know) in hand, my grandmother would be sitting in her little pyjamas of the year (she got a new set sent in the post every Christmas from us), and would pull me in to her arms the second I tottered through the door. Within seconds I'd be met with a thousand kisses from her wrinkled, dry lips, and with the aid of breath that smelled like sugary tea, I was asked all manner of questions about my school life, my friends, if I had a girlfriend yet (again, cliché with an added tincture of gender normativity, I know), and get showered with all manner of sweets she'd been saving for me.

The house was, by any stretch of the imagination, an ordinary grandparent's house. My grandmother's chair was positioned just in front of an antique grandfather clock, and on either side of that were about a thousand pictures of me that I can't remember being taken, or of my mum, dad and me together. She would have birthday cards and Christmas cards in their envelopes, "The ones we missed, and the one we'll miss," she'd say with no sadness, or joke, nor anything but accepted fact.

I'm not going to lie, I loved the attention. It was like all this silence and hush that forced this strange stigmatised super injunction on my grandfather was remedied in the arms of such a sweet old woman. She had the lovely delicate voice that the kindly, gingerbread making grandmothers in movies had. She would nestle me in to her breast, have one hand stroking my cheeks in relaxing circular motions, and the other playing with my hair – twiddling it this way and that as she told me how lucky I was to have such golden curls (I remember them fondly), and that she thought about me every day, that she was so proud of me and she loved me more than... and then go on to as many items she could list, before deciding any word she ever learned could never do it justice.

And, I craved it. Just the knowledge that my grandmother was the perfect archetype was enough to offer equilibrium to whatever was going on with my grandfather.

The only thing, though, was each time, the visit would turn immensely sour after maybe thirty minutes or so, which is when the sudden normality of the visit would begin to fizzle treacherously. Even at my earliest memory, I remember a shiver of discomfort tickle through my body, because from the other room, there would be a chorus of whispers – just loud enough to be heard – emanating through. As soon as they started, my grandmother would pause for a moment, and I'd watch as she shot a glance to my dad, who would then turn to my mum. I'd

usually capture her “don’t-let-Edward-know-we-are-arguing” face, as my dad’s brows furrowed, and his eyes began to fill with rage.

Then, from the other room, the whispers would incrementally grow in volume, so that I could hear individual words being spoke, but too muffled to make them out. The rhythm and general sound of them didn’t seem exactly natural to me, there were a lot of consonants and more “s”s than I knew a language to have, but that was probably due to the fact that they were still, in nature, faint whispers. Whisper a ‘hello’ to yourself now, and let the breath push gently at your throat, and barely escape past the teeth – that was the quality the entire sentences would form in. Only when there would be a sudden shout, or visceral bark which caused my grandmother to flinch and quickly regain composure, would my dad stand up, in a fit of rage, and suddenly my nan would forget about asking me any and all questions, and then my toy would be the star of the show.

The radio would get turned up then, and the television, so the two could wage sonic war on one another. Amidst this sudden chaos, my nan would have me howling with laughter as she tried to copy the noise of the toy, in an absurdly loud and dramatic imitation, that I would have to copy; the two of us bouncing off each other’s mimicry until we were both screeching at the top of our voices.

...and I knew it was a distraction technique even then, because my mum would only be watching with half her heart. Her eyes were on us, her smile was fixed – almost programmed or rehearsed – in place, but her mind and hearing was tuned to the door. The barks, grunt and sudden outbursts from my grandfather were still there, but added to them, the challenger of my dad’s anger, built up and repressed from a thousand trivial driving complaints. All loosed in one bizarre and frightening cacophony, before, it would all settle and after a few minutes, my dad would return, completely composed and almost *too* jovial.

Then, the time would come for me to say the briefest hello and goodbye to the man himself. They would act the way I see heads of state’s security act when walking anywhere. They would be checking every corner, and exchanging similar silent glances that spoke a thousand words, until I was brought in to the ante-parlour in which my grandad stayed when I visited.

The room was dark, and always had a strange dank smell. I was unsure if he was the source, or this was just one of those rooms that had acquired the strange scent and was loathe to relinquish it. Again, my friend’s living room always had a strange, unfamiliar yet simultaneously recognisable scent to it, so I just assumed it was an old person’s smell, and each had their own. It wasn’t a horrid smell, as such. It was just, I suppose, a prevalent and that demanded attention. Maybe it was because it was one of the only discerning features within the rooms.

There was no furniture, and the windows had been blocked off with wooden boards that had been painted black, and bolted in to the walls with thick, heavy-duty bolts that would offer a muffled response to the muted glimmering chandelier. I’m unsure where the thought came from, but I was convinced they were the ones that were bolted in Frankenstein’s monster’s neck – but I suppose that was just a scared kid in creepy room connecting dots.

In this dark room, with no natural light, my grandfather would always be stood at the very back, dead-centre, flat against the wall. It was an old house, so the height of the room wasn’t quite what it was in our own house, but it was still about three of my full height – yet, my grandfather’s head managed to just brush underneath it. He wasn’t, I suppose, abnormally tall so that it would break any records, but definitely taller than anyone I’d seen before then. This was made even more curious by just how slim he was. Again, there was nothing to hint that his frame was unnatural, but, again, for a child who assumed the bolts with the orange glint were borrowed from a fictitious monster’s neck, it was quite an impressionable and terrible sight to behold.

He would just stand stock still, wearing a plain black dressing gown that was cinched at the waist with a simple hempen chord, and though the sleeves seemed to dangle further than they had any right to, I would still see the tips of his fingers poking out. Atop his head was one of those sleeping caps that we associate with the sandman, but this too, was of the same black as the gown – or perhaps the dimness of the room stole away any colour clothes may have boasted. The dark of the clothes melded so well with the blackness that the chandelier couldn't purge, that it was difficult to tell where the enshrouding shadow stopped and he started.

The first time I saw him, I was trembling so much it felt as if the entire world was quaking and I was the only one trying to stay upright; my throat grew dry, my legs felt numb, weak and ready to collapse, and as much as I knew blood dictated that I love this man, the sight of him terrified me.

It got a little easier over the next few visits, especially because they were usually at least a year apart, but he'd always be in that same position, standing the exact same way, in the exact same robe (which by the last visit was frayed, torn, threadbare and patched in many places).

Yet, the one thing that never got easier was the approach. Each step I was flanked by my parents, and my grandmother would be standing at the door, keeping it wide open. "Say goodbye to your granddad, Ed," my dad would urge, more of a hurried order than a parental encouragement. Then I'd have to take his hand, and as his fingers touched mine I could feel they were icy cold, and had a strange parchment-like quality to them – tinder dry, and raw.

I was told to kiss the back of his hand only once, with no saliva. I did so, and as I looked up, my neck bent at an almost ninety-degree angle to look at his face, I saw only a gaunt, expressionless visage looking back. In the dim of the room, I couldn't make him out entirely, but his visage seemed fixed and frail, his eyes vacant and though aimed at me, never really seeing me.

They had a strange shape to them, though, even now I can't really state what the shape was – but still, all these bizarre factors together couldn't, by any right, be considered particularly odd or abnormal. It was similar to looking at one of those "What's wrong with this picture?" tests you see. You know there's something you're missing, but if you only have a passing glance once a year to discern the hazard, you aren't going to find it. Then, on my way out, I would be told, "Walk, slowly now, that's it. *Don't* run, Eddy. There's a good lad," but, with each forced steady step I took, I'd hear a hint, an echo, of those strange whispers starting from the back of the room.

After those visits, for the next three days I would constantly be checked over. Not just where my hand or lip made contact, but my entire body. They would be asking if I felt okay. Any wooziness? And nausea? Any discomfort? Any tightening pressure? Any issues with hearing? There never was any.

The last time I visited with them, I was old enough to be embarrassed about having to get completely naked in front of my parents, and when I tried to fight back and tell them I don't want to, I was beaten so badly, pinned down and checked with all the more angry scrutiny, until they were satisfied with whatever they were looking at, and then the sheer apologetic fear on their faces was another image I'll never get out of my head.

I was showered with gifts for nearly a year after that, and they promised me I'll never have to go again, unless I wanted to, or until I was old enough to.

Keep in mind this was all over a number of years, and only a few times, so the image of my granddad never left me exactly, and I'd sometimes wake up after having a nightmare that he was standing at the edge of the horizon in my dream, watching, but that's the imagination of a child for you. But that was one day out of the year, so school kept me busy, friends kept me

busy, games and books and whatever else keeps us company during our time on this planet took precedence, and I believed this helped dilute the experience. So, it wasn't as if I was subject to this event constantly, but the few times I had was enough, and the fallout of the last was enough for me to not want to go again.

I got older, as we do, and finished school, went to college, then moved away for university and lived my life. I met my first girlfriend at twenty-three and thus unfolds the usual trials and tribulations of dating, hurting, forgiving, loving, talking, so on, so forth. And one day I was brought to meet her parents, who just so happened to allow her grandparents to stay with them – both old, frail, and I guess this was the equivalent of my friend's nan in the living room. That was all well and good, and though her grandparents clearly weren't very well, they were happy as anything and were more than willing to engage in conversation.

This got me thinking about my grandfather again, and, on my next trip home, I brought back a whiskey (it was brewed in the city I studied at, so could get it fairly cheap), and bit back each foul wincing sip, all of which were preceded by a "cheers" and a glassy *clink* to my dad's pour, which I made sure was always a little more than mine.

I hoped the whisky would offer me some amber courage, and what defence it bolstered of mine, it would decay and weaken of his. Half a bottle in, and I managed to force the question. "Dad?" I asked, my voice already nearly a screech with the nerves. "What was the deal with my granddad?" My mum, who was drinking her gin literally dropped her glass, as if the question was so out of the blue and unexpected, it physically knocked her off guard. It shattered on the wooden flooring, and the noise of that clung in the air during the tension that followed. She was up in a flash, and though the dustpan and brush were kept below the kitchen sink, she sailed up the stairs with the drunken elegance only she could command, and I didn't see her for the rest of the night.

Well, I won't get in to the way he finally reacted exactly, because he really was overall a fantastic man. But, the long and short of it was, "He's a sick man." And, so, I accepted that at face value. I was a twenty-three year old, soon to be twenty-four, and I knew the euphemism of 'sick' meant they're due death. And I knew that also meant that their time may be longer than any expected, yet, death all the same. A sorry subject no matter which angle you view it from, and, I guess I forced square answers that didn't quite fit in to the circle holes of the questions I had, just so I could convince myself that chapter was over and done with in my life.

It was probably some bizarre sickness, that rendered him unable to move or talk in such a manner that others could, and stole the colour from his flesh, and- and perhaps it was infectious which is why they checked me over, and- and- everything else, whether it allowed through the sudden open gates of acceptance, whether it was logical or not.

Years trickled by, the girlfriend and I broke up, I met a new one, we shared summer, winters, springs and autumns. Holidays, and proposals matured over time in to honeymoons and mortgage. And suddenly, I get a call from my dad, who by now had lost the colour of his auburn hair to the merciless greed of time, and was offered a face wrought in wrinkles and sad old eyes in its stead. It was about my grandmother. "She's died, Ed," he said.

I came back home with my now wife. The funeral arrangements were quickly sorted and solved, and I noticed, though I daren't bring it up, that my grandfather wasn't involved. My wife asked when he'd died, assuming that was the case, and I admitted, I didn't know – nor would I ask my dad when it was, and why there were no funeral arrangements for that.

Anyhow, her funeral was a morbid, grim affair as funerals tend to be. She was well in to her eighties by this point, so she'd lived a long life as far as they go. I regretted wholly and truthfully not seeing her more whilst she was alive, but, with moving away and the whole strangeness about visiting, it just didn't seem to be conducive to my life. My partner comforted

me as I shed tears tasting of grief and guilt, staring at the kind face that made me feel special and loved, thinking of how that sleeping countenance had howled, and beeped and squealed with me when I was young, and small enough to be bounced on her old, not-yet-frail knee.

I heard others sobbing, old women and men I'd never met crying for the loss of a woman whose very blood ran through my own veins, but I knew little of. That made the grimacing guilt even worse, as I turned away from the coffin to see a humble yet sizeable congregation of unknown friends, who could have been with her from school, and me, the grandchild standing at the side of her death, ignorant and selfish not to have made the effort I could have in her life.

Speeches were spoken, more tears were shed or stifled, sermons were served and prayers were uttered. Then, as the song she'd chosen began to play, reverberating around the cavernous walls resonating within the crematorium as it did within our hearts, the coffin disappeared behind the curtains, further protocols were observed, whilst announcements of respect and love were declared, and the gathering – all of us like living black wraiths that proved her kindness – began to usher ourselves unguided out the doors.

I took one last look back, to whisper an apology for the nan I abandoned as people shuffled past one by one, most hunched and shuffling.

Then I heard them.

The horrid, insidious whispering that crept beneath my skin as a child. They seemed to be writhing about the hall like a thousand spectral snakes, and though my eyes darted everywhere, from the lectern, to the pews, to the divine decorated corners and flickering candles – there was no sign of him. And there shouldn't be, because he was a sick man. He always seemed much older than my grandmother in the way he looked; so tall, and fragile and thin and pale. Couldn't have been less than ten years her senior.

But still, the whispering continued and though, like when I was younger, I could hear specific words being spoken, it was like listening to a different language. When my wife grabbed my hand, I almost lashed out and hit her in complete shock, being brought back to my sense. And when I saw the fear in her eyes, I apologised profusely which was instantly forgiven, considering the circumstances.

We left the venue, and made our way in to the sprawl of grouped widows sharing memories, or haggard and lonely individuals wondering who will mourn them when their time came. We moved, trying not to draw any attention from anyone as I searched for my mum and dad. I scanned everywhere, wondering where they could be, when in the distance, I saw standing by the far end of wall – under the balcony so as to be shielded from the refreshing, and lukewarm daylight, the same tall, shadowy garbed sentinel I'd only ever seen in the dark room.

The figure was dressed in all black, and he was holding a large ivory cane which he clutched from leathern gloves. A bowler hat sat atop his head at an angle, and as he looked up, seemingly aware my eyes were on him, I saw he was wearing sunglasses and had a black scarf wrapped up almost to his nose, though the day was pleasant and gentle as my grandmother had been in life. Only slithers of bone white pale flesh could be seen in the small gaps permitted between scarf and glasses, and glasses and hat.

I grabbed my wife's hand, with a sheer iciness clutching at me from within – as if his very hands had found themselves on my heart - and I pulled her to our car deciding that mum and dad could do their rounds of people I didn't know, and we'd wait for them in the venue we were to drink to the love of a wonderful woman.

That was thirty-odd years ago now, and the thought of seeing him there still harrows me. A man in his eighties, maybe nineties, standing as tall and still as he had done every time I had seen him before. It didn't make sense if he was a sick man. That's when the whole concept of

the word sick struck me with an unseen impact. Perhaps when my father said he was sick, he meant mentally. Perhaps my grandfather was fine in physical health, but his mind had rotted and festered long before I was conceived? This, unfortunately, authored more questions than it answered, and unravelled a few of the knots I thought I'd tied up.

From then to now, we settled in to the routine of our lives. We had children. We celebrated promotions, and ventures anew. We moved to the city she was from, half way town the other end of the country, meaning we only got to see my parents every now and then. It was only ever for Christmases, their birthdays, our birthdays, or the kids' birthdays, and even then it wasn't every time. I wanted my children to know and love their grandparents equally, perhaps out of guilt for my grandmother, and because of what I experienced with my grandfather.

I never knew if my father saw him there on the day of the funeral, and I never wanted to ask – he was ageing. He didn't need the hassle. I didn't need the argument. My wife didn't need to be introduced to it all.

Though, I do regret sealing the words behind a coward's lips, because now I'm well over the best years of my own life, as the aforementioned gut and ghostly grey memories of those once golden locks warned you about, and my dear mother passed away a decade ago, leaving my brave dad to totter along as best as he could, until last month he, too, passed away – outliving his own mother by one month exactly. Bringing with him - to whatever is waiting for us - all the answers I never got to ask.

His funeral was much of the same, affair, and I'm still finding myself waking up with a suffocating sadness in the middle of the night, that, much like my father in the car, only the staying touch of my wife's soothing hand can quieten.

But so too, is the fear suffocating me. So tight and asphyxiating that I can almost feel a vice grip of cold steel around my throat.

Because as I was thanking the priest at the end of the sermon and shaking his hand in a grateful goodbye, and the congregation had made their way out through dulled conversation, hissing snuffles, muted sobs and the clack-clack of smart black shoes they never wished to wear... there begun the snarling whispers. Those whispers. Those horrid, deafening, insidious whispers. Then him. How?! How, in any holy world, did I see that same sentinel, the figure who fathered the man lying dead but ten feet away from me, standing upright and silent as ever – a grim looming statue that denied time and refused death – staring at me from the old crooked candle-lit corner?