

GRAN'S STORY

Tracey looked at the sign: the Ways, Nursing & Residential Home. It was a big, old house with crumbling white paintwork, wide windows and a sprawling balcony. She sighed. Why had Mum made her visit Gran? She'd been on her phone, looking at someone's trip to the Amazon, amazed at the size of the river and the deep green of the forest, when Mum had burst into her room.

'Tracey! It's your turn to see Gran today.'

'But Mum—'

'Don't give me that. I'm tired of you moping round the house all day, playing on your phone. I've gone loads of times. You go today.'

Tracey groaned. Gran was a strange, bad-tempered old lady. She talked a lot, but not in a way that made much sense. Almost every time Gran had come round to their house, she and Mum argued, whether about the colour of the walls, the stains on the carpet or the subjects that Tracey took for her GCSEs. Gran had an opinion on everything. At first, Mum had been relieved when Gran was admitted to the Home—at least she wouldn't be poking her nose in where it didn't concern her. But Mum grew tired of visiting her every Tuesday and Friday. Once the school holidays started, it was only a matter of time before Tracey was ordered to go.

'Margery Wallace,' Tracey said to the woman at Reception.

'Margery? I think she's out on the patio today.' The receptionist pointed towards the back of the Home.

Tracey walked along the corridor and out the door, and saw Gran stretched out on a recliner, with a book in her hand and a turquoise scarf round her neck. For an old lady, she still looked very stylish.

‘Tracey! I was expecting—’

‘Mum’s too busy.’

‘Well, it’s lovely to see you. I’ve wanted to have a proper talk with you for a long time.’

Tracey’s heart sank. A quick visit, a chat about school, maybe a cup of tea and then off, that was her plan. Definitely not a *proper* talk.

‘I’ll tell them to bring you a recliner.’

The Home’s patio was bigger than the little concrete patch at the back of Tracey’s house. Potted plants stood between the chairs and turned their leaves to the sky. From Gran’s recliner there was a view onto a row of gardens. The birds tweeted and the bees buzzed and the breeze carried the smell of roses and apples. Tracey mentioned her bus journey and somehow this led Gran to tell Tracey a long story from when Mum had been at school. She’d been hopelessly confused by the bus timetables and had once phoned from the train station, utterly lost, pleading for Gran to come and collect her. Gran’s eyes twinkled, her voice rose and fell, her hands moved in the air and Tracey was entranced. Was this the same woman who’d made such a fuss about Mum’s carpets? One story led to another, Tracey laughing and Gran smiling, and two hours flew by.

‘I’ve got to go now, Gran. Mum’ll be expecting me.’

‘But I still haven’t told you... Well, it can wait till next time.’

Next time, thought Tracey. Well, maybe.

On Friday morning, Tracey surprised Mum by saying she’d visit Gran. During the rest of the long, lazy school holidays, she went almost every other day. She was tired of her friends and if she stayed at home, Mum would make her do housework. Gran had an endless string of stories, some about Mum, some about people she’d met and places she’d been.

Tracey saw a different side to Gran—funny, but also thoughtful, making Tracey think about

the people she knew and things she wanted to do. Several times, just as Tracey left, Gran repeated that they must have a *proper* talk, but it never happened.

One sunny August afternoon, Tracey and Gran lay out on their recliners, under a giant umbrella. Someone came round and asked Gran if she wanted tea and maybe a biscuit.

‘Two teas, please,’ said Gran. ‘And two biscuits.’

Tracey leaned back in her recliner.

‘Now, what was I talking about?’ asked Gran. ‘Your mum?’

‘You was telling me about the fight she had with Martine at school.’

Gran gave a long laugh, like water gurgling in a stream.

‘Martine? Don’t get me started. That was something, that was a real soap opera. They started out as best friends and then—*oh...*’

Tracey sat up. Something in Gran’s tone alarmed her. Gran was staring at the apple trees at the end of the Home’s garden.

‘What’s wrong Gran? You like you’ve seen a ghost.’

Gran flashed her a look. ‘You can’t see him, can you Tracey?’

‘Who?’

‘There—in the trees.’

Tracey stared. She couldn’t see anyone.

Gran sat back, but kept her eyes on the trees. She let out a deep sigh, like she was giving up the world and everything in it.

‘So he’s come. I knew he would, just didn’t think...’

‘There’s no one there, Gran!’

‘I suppose it’s best that you can’t see him.’ Gran turned to face her. ‘Now look here, Tracey. There’s some important things I’ve got tell you, I’ve waited too long.’

Tracey stared at this elegant white-haired old lady, full of funny stories, who'd held her attention for the past weeks. What was this thing she wanted to tell her? Just in case, she began to calculate: when was the next bus?

'I'll have to—to *leave*, very soon.' Gran waved her hand towards the trees, as if telling a taxi to wait. 'But he'll give me a few minutes. It's—it's...' Gran frowned. 'It began so long ago, when I was in hospital. The first time, long before you were born.'

But this wasn't new! This story had nothing to do with her. It was a family legend, repeated every Christmas. 'You mean after the car hit you?'

'That's it. When I was ten. Of course—'

'They thought you was going to die.'

Gran shook her head, remembering it. 'I was in a funny little square room, all by myself, pumped full of God knows what, tubes in my arms, oxygen cylinder next to me. And they told me to rest!

'People kept coming at all hours. Putting this needle in me, pulling that one out, I don't know. And then I woke up, all alone. It was night and I could hear someone crying, a few doors away. I didn't feel bad anymore. The pain round my chest had gone. I looked at the curtains, to see if there was any light, and I saw *him*.'

'Who?'

'The man, that man *there*—' Gran pointed to the trees. 'He was standing by the bed.'

Tracey frowned. She'd thought she knew this story, but she'd never heard this bit before. Who'd come to a hospital bed in the middle of the night? How could it be the same man?

'A doctor?' she asked.

'No,' said Gran. 'I'd had doctors, I'd had nurses, I'd had cleaners, had them at all hours. But—he wasn't dressed like a doctor. He was—smart. Clever-looking. Nice black

coat, sort of classy. Something worried him. He was looking in this little book, like a diary, flicking through the pages.

'I think I'm feeling better, I told him. He frowned.

'But... he said. There's something wrong here.

'He flicked through more pages, then he stopped. *Ah,* he said.

'What is it? I asked.

'He looked right at me. He had a sad face. *A mistake. It happens. There's more for you to do. I'll see you again, but—not now.*

'I was puzzled and looked at the door, thinking maybe someone could help. There wasn't anyone. When I turned back to the window, he was gone, like he'd never been there.

'I told the doctors and my mum and everyone, but no one cared. *You're better,* was all they said. If I kept on about the Strange Man, they said I must've been dreaming.'

'But who was he?' asked Tracey. Obviously Gran must've have been dreaming. But this wasn't a funny story, she didn't like it.

'Just wait a moment, you'll see.' Gran turned on her recliner and looked right at her. 'In the end, this is all about you, that was his plan, I see it now.'

'Me?'

Then tea and biscuits came, and Gran said, 'Thank you.'

Tracey ate her biscuit. It was only a digestive, not a chocolate one. Maybe Gran would talk about something else now.

'I went for years without seeing him again,' said Gran. 'Got married, had your mum.'

Tracey guessed what was coming and immediately felt sorry for Gran.

Gran shook her head. 'That bloody Henry—'

'But you look so happy in that lovely wedding photo—'

'Henry was a witless, lying, lazy excuse for a man.'

‘So why’d you marry him?’

‘You should’ve seen the others!’

That sent Tracey into a fit of giggles.

‘But, honestly!’ Gran continued. ‘Having an affair with Fat Anna from next door.’

She sighed.

Tracey thought she might go in a minute or two. This story about the Strange Man—it hadn’t anything to do with her. Gran must’ve made a mistake.

They stared at the trees. Gran made another ‘just a minute’ signal to the shadows.

‘I’ll just slip off now—’ began Tracey.

‘No, wait,’ said Gran.

There was something urgent in Gran’s voice that made Tracey stop, although she didn’t want to hear the rest of this story.

Gran shook her head, swallowed. ‘I was upset when Henry left, so upset. It was—it was a dark time. Wasn’t sure what to do with meself. And—you know—I thought I’d do something silly—’

‘No, Gran—’

‘Yes, I’ve got to tell you. I got a neighbour to take your mum for the night. I laid out three rows of pills on the kitchen table and I was ready to take them, one by one.’

‘Not really—’

‘Yes, I was. But I thought that first, I’d go into the garden, just to say goodbye. It was twilight and everything was soft, grey and quiet. Seemed right to just—just take a moment. I sat down and there he was.’

‘Who?’

‘The Man. Him!’ Gran waved towards the apple trees.

‘Him? In your garden? At that time?’

Tracey frowned. Gran had lost it, that was clear. She wanted to go, but she couldn't, not when Gran was talking about these things, it might seem rude.

'He just turned up, out of the blue. Sitting next to me, close as you are now. Made me jump. I hadn't seen him for twenty years, but I recognised him straight away. He hadn't changed.

'What do you want?' I said, just to show him I wasn't scared.

'Margery, he said. What do you think you're doing?'

'None of your business, I told him.

'That made him laugh. This time, he had a Filofax. You don't know them, do you?'

Tracey shook her head.

'Sort of posh diaries for yuppies. They were fashionable, once. He flicked through it, found the bit he was looking for.

'What about your painting?' he said.

'My painting? I couldn't believe my ears. My painting? That's just a Thursday class to get me out of the house. It's just splashing about, just daubing.

'He shook his head. Try again, Margery.

'I didn't know what to say. I stared at him, cool and elegant, sitting back in my garden chair. Then I went indoors, looked at those rows of bloody pills and swept them to the floor.'

Tracey stared at Gran. 'So he saved you? Is that what you're saying?'

'Yes. But look here, Tracey, you learn something from this. Don't ever go to pieces when a man leaves. They're not worth it.'

Tracey nodded. She knew boys could be trouble, but she thought she'd decide carefully. After all, there was no rush, was there? She'd pick and choose.

'Is that the lesson you wanted to tell me, Gran?'

Gran snorted. ‘That’s one lesson you ought to learn. But, no, that’s not the main thing.’

Tracey frowned, thinking about the Strange Man. It was *him* who’d told Gran about painting, that explained a lot.

‘Is that why you started them big paintings, Gran?’

Gran nodded. Tracey thought of Gran’s pictures: great violent streaks of colour, cascades of clashing shades, with little faces or figures hidden between the brushstrokes, buried away. Her mum hated them, always had and Tracey didn’t think she was wrong. There was something horrible, something upsetting about them. So they were all the fault of the Strange Man. Tracey nodded. It made sense, in a mad sort of way.

‘I got meself together,’ Gran started again. ‘Got that little job at the University. They called me a secretary, but all I ever did was bloody photocopying and filing.’

‘You gave up the big paintings, didn’t you?’

‘I won a prize with them, you know? They said my paintings broke all the conventions.’

They certainly broke something, thought Tracey. But she could hear the pride in Gran’s voice. Winning a prize, having people admire you, for something you’d made—what would that be like?

‘I had to stop painting, what with work and your mum being so difficult and all. Never married again, but I’ve had my fair share of men.’ Gran gave a dirty chuckle that surprised Tracey. ‘There are some good ones out there, but you have to look for them.’

‘I had some fun, when your mum wasn’t giving me grief. But then...’

‘Cancer,’ Tracey guessed.

‘Why did it happen to me?’ Gran sounded bitter. ‘I’ve never smoked, never had any trouble with my lungs. Getting the diagnosis wasn’t so bad, at least I knew where I was. Two weeks later they put me in hospital. But the chemo! You don’t know how it hurt.’

‘You lost your hair, didn’t you?’

‘That was the least of my worries! Couldn’t eat, couldn’t sleep, couldn’t walk. And then—’ Gran waved her hand towards the apple trees.

‘What, him? Again?’

Gran nodded. ‘One night, after chemo, in the hospital. I wasn’t asleep. I was aching all over. Like someone was rubbing my skin with sandpaper, from the inside. I heard nurses walking, patients shouting... And there he was! Sitting by my bed. Lit by the lights of that bloody machine next to me. There was something tense, something edgy about him this time. I thought he was going to talk about my cancer. I hoped he’d say it was all over for me.’

‘No, Gran!’

‘You try ten sessions of chemo and see how you feel. But he didn’t talk about that. This time he had—I don’t know—a phone in his hand.

‘You gave up painting, was all he said.

‘I was amazed. Course I gave it up! I told him. I wasn’t getting anywhere and I had a very demanding daughter.

‘He shook his head. A mistake. But you’ve still got time.

‘No, I haven’t. I’ve got cancer, the doctors give me 50:50 at best, and I can’t see straight.

‘He stared at me. You can hold a pen, can’t you? You can still write.

‘He said that?’ Tracey couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

Gran nodded. ‘I was furious. I wanted to scream at him—this vain, arrogant fool who haunted me at my worst moments. But when I looked up—’

‘—he’d gone?’ Tracey asked.

‘Gone,’ said Gran.

‘But you—’

Gran sighed. ‘Yes, I listened to him, couldn’t stop meself. Got a pen and an exercise book the next day. The doctors encouraged me, said it was therapy.’

‘Your diaries,’ said Tracey.

Gran laughed. ‘They’re not diaries, you silly thing. But you know where I keep them?’

Tracey nodded. All Gran’s exercise books were in the second drawer in the cabinet next to her bed.

‘You make sure you take them. Don’t let your mum see.’

‘This man—do you hate him, Gran?’ Tracey wanted to understand.

Gran thought for a moment. ‘No, I don’t. He’s made me angry, that’s certain. But he’s been right. I can see that now. He’s never been a friend, but he has been a—companion, I suppose.’

‘What?’

‘Anyway, you know what do with my books? You know what they’re for, don’t you?’

‘No, I don’t—’

‘One last thing. Your name’s Teresa, not Tracey.’

‘What? But, Gran—what about our talk, our *proper* talk?’

Gran stared at her, her grey eyes twinkling. ‘If you don’t get it now, then you never will.’ She shrugged, gave Tracey a quick smile. ‘You’ll manage, sure you will.’ She looked back at the trees. ‘Right, I’ve got to go. He won’t wait any longer.’

Tracey wasn't worried. She knew what would happen: Gran would get to the bottom of the steps and then she'd finally realise that there was no one under the trees. When she came back, maybe she'd talk normally again, tell some funny stories.

'Wait, Gran, I'll give you a hand.'

Just out of her chair, leaning on her walking-stick, Gran turned round.

'No, you won't! Don't get close to him. You stay here.'

The force in Gran's voice surprised Tracey and stopped her from moving. She watched Gran hobble down the steps, one at a time. Tracey's eyes flickered to the trees and she thought she saw, just for a second, a shape that might have been—

Gran slipped, Tracey screamed, a nurse came running.

They blamed her, of course.

'What were you doing? Letting her walk down those steps by herself.'

'But she said—'

'She didn't know what she was saying.'

In the confusion, what with the ambulance, the paramedics, the nurses and Mum, Tracey was able to slip into Gran's room without anyone noticing. She grabbed the five diaries and took them home.

Gran's books weren't what she expected. They weren't diaries at all. Just bits of writing. Scribbles, really. And poems. Tracey didn't like poetry. And then—a lot of them were rude. *Really* rude. Everyone has a sex life, thought Tracey. But you don't always want to know about it, particularly not your Gran's.

The funeral was rubbish. Mum blubbing all the time, like she cared. A vicar who knew nothing about Gran. A couple of painters, who spoke too long and had to be shut up.

Tracey missed Gran. She remembered sitting on the recliner, hearing her stories. They'd never had that *proper* talk. Or had they? Tracey still wasn't sure.

Tracey kept three of Gran's paintings, despite her mum's protests. She stared at them for ages, trying to make sense of them, looking at the little people caught between the waves of colour. When she felt sad or lonely, she tried to read Gran's books. She'd grab one, open it at random, read a few pages, until it got difficult. But she didn't give up.

She thought about calling herself 'Teresa'. She said it over to herself, testing the sound. Would the girls at school laugh? Maybe she'd try it, one day, in a while.

Some of Gran's poems made a bit of sense. One was called 'Spark'.

A spark flies

From a burning page

To a leaf

To a twig

To a

Mind

It wasn't like she understood it. It didn't even rhyme. But there was something about it—a spark being not just a spark but something else as well. It went round and round in Tracey's head.

'Aren't poems meant to rhyme?' she asked her mum one day. Her mum stared back, baffled. 'Or can you, like, say what you want? Can anyone do them?'