



Stories for the Train

Tales on the go

0:8:00

Gingerbread Man

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William never cried. One tear, that is all he wanted. Something to prove that his heart was still beating beneath his rattling ribcage. He lifted a bony finger to the sagging bag under his eye, wiped underneath his lashes, and squinted at himself in the bathroom mirror. His finger was dry. His eyes were dry. The soft creases on his cheeks formed like archaic rivers on a map.

William was eighty-seven. He lived alone, in a small bungalow, down a road not often taken by strollers, walkers, or even stray cats. His family were often otherwise engaged, but he still tried to get through to them at Christmas, for birthdays and school holidays, when he remembered. Stunted conversation with the postman was the highlight of his mornings, and being lifted from the bathtub, naked, by the many-faced carer was his afternoon exchange. He would potter to and from the kitchen to make cups of tea. Exercise was two circuits of the garden if his knees weren't weak and it was dry enough to wear his moleskin slippers. The large man who owned the corner shop always set aside his weekly amenities every Monday, with a complimentary lottery ticket tucked inside his usual crossword book. On his way home he would visit the dog park and reminisce

over a good pal, Jack, while staring at the sky for answers to an arrow-word.

He was a yellow Labrador retriever and his breath stunk of fish, despite never being fed fish. William never kept fish because the refrigerator would whiff for days, but he never questioned the smell. Jack had a stunning grin and from it dangled a milky blob, always on the right side. It would drip and moisten the carpet under William's feet. Jack was nine when William adopted him from the local shelter, and he lived to the rusty age of fourteen.

The day he passed, it was cold and wet outside. His hind legs were all but useless and the dopy grin was gone. William hoisted him into the car, with the help of a neighbour, and took him to the vet. That was that. He watched as puppies and kittens got their check-ups and saw solemn, teary faces leave with empty leads and quiet baskets. But his face was blank. The receptionist walked over and rest her hands on his knees, once he had heard the news.

"Can I get you anything, my dear?"

"No, no. Fine, thank you." William smiled, focusing on her face.

"Cuppa? Calm your nerves?"

"I'm really fine. But could you—"

Her brow furrowed at the sight of his smile, and she turned. When he paid his bill, he noticed her eyes twitch away whenever he looked at her. He made a point of not smiling from then, and he did up his raincoat to the collar before uttering a solemn, yet false, "Thank you for your kindness."

Jack crossed his mind at least once a day, usually at ten in the morning, when he used to have his biscuits and a toss of the Frisbee in the garden. But he never got choked up. A slight knot in his throat

once appeared whilst watching *A Star is Born*, but he realised he had overindulged at the Harvester buffet a few hours prior.

Every day he could see the creases on his face deepen. The rivers widening. He asked the postman what he thought of his problem before he could dash off to the next house, but he seemed even more devoid of emotion than William.

“Can’t cry? So what?”

“Yes, indeed. The thing is-” but he was already through the gate.

The carer, more buxom and talkative than prior helpers, seemed more emotionally mature, though the situation didn’t grant much in the way of a meaningful conversation.

“You’re fine, William. Lots of old boys don’t cry. And I should know, cleaning them all day, feeling their bones crack. Now lift up your leg and I’ll wash your bits.”

“I ... do you ... really ... good ... heavens.”

The large man behind the counter at the corner shop is barely worth mentioning.

“Crying? Why don’t you buy something?”

“Do you cr-”

“Sausages, one pound. Onions, ninety pence. Big bag. Cut some onions. You’ll cry plenty.” He guffawed loudly and continued to read the paper spread across the counter. William bought the sausages and left with a courteous nod.

The bum print in his chair was getting lower but not wider. It was the same chair, no change there. His feet still touched the floor. The faded fabric the end of the arms frayed from years of frustrated

pinching. The antimacassar – slightly stained with sweat and Brylcreem - still caught the back of his head.

Formula 1 echoed from the wood-panelled television. William sighed, clutched the arms of the chair and pushed himself up, falling back into the bum print once or twice, and then swung himself forwards with all his strength. Standing, his arms outstretched and his legs jittering, he embarked on the slow journey to make tea. He noticed that his shoes clopped like hooves on the linoleum floor. His heels slotted in and out, quite freely. The sleeves of his shirt, once taut around his wrists, flagged to and fro, and his gold watch fell to the floor. He knelt to pick it up, releasing a harmony of spinal cracks.

“He-elp,” he gasped.

Three hours passed and he had managed to lower himself into a decrepit downward dog position, holding his watch, stroking the cracked face and bent hands. The carer that found him was less than pleasant, compared to the others. A young man with a small frame and a face that reflected his annoyance of caring for other.

He tossed William around like a beach ball. The car door slammed on the soles of his slippers, his face buried deep into the back seat of the carer’s hatchback. The air was thick with cheap tobacco. Every speed bump was a shot of adrenaline. He landed heavily and was flung into the air like a cat on a trampoline. The car came to a stop, hurling him into the foot well, and the carer opened the door.

“What the fuck, man? Get off my lunch.”

William sniffed at the squashed fish and chips, his stomach growling, whilst being hoisted over the shoulder of his ironic carer. He caught the eye of several people in the waiting area as he dangled

back and forth before finally being dropped into a plastic chair. The carer rustled through his pockets for William's emergency contact sheet, and slammed it down on the reception counter.

"Is this going to take long?" He said, in a most uncaring manner.

A young girl with mussed hair trotted over to William, hugging a gingerbread man like a cuddly toy. William turned his head. They stared and smiled at each other.

"Hello," she said.

"... hi."

"This is Toby."

"Hello, Toby."

She hugged Toby, a little too hard, and his left leg crumbled in the cross of her arms. She cried, running back to her family. The gingerbread man cracked and fell to the floor. Her mother swatted her away with a tensed hand and resumed the loud conversation she was having on her phone. Her little eyes welled as she tugged at her brother's arm. He pushed her to the floor with a teenage grunt and carried on texting.

"Hey," he waved, trying to get the little girl's attention. Her tears hit the plastic floor, tiny splashes all over her dolly shoes. William dropped to the floor like a bag of pebbles and slid himself across the floor. The little girl turned her head, her eyelashes matted together with sadness.

"Look. Look here." William gathered the crumbs, the buttons, the limbs and the gummies. He lurched forward, agonisingly, trying to reach the gingerbread man's right leg, and felt the warmth of her tear-soaked hand on his arm. She handed William the leg and smiled before being hoisted away like a puppet. William watched as the

automatic doors opened and closed, a tiny hand waving through the glass.

“Mr Thomas?” A nurse called.

“Yes?”

“A phone call for you at the front desk. Your daughter.” She said, gently lifting him into a wheelchair.

William felt a knot grow in his throat.

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