

Lemon

Clem hunched over the kitchen table; his fingers methodically straightened the fraying ends of the placemat. The world outside was its usual chaos of colour and movement but today something else caught his eye. Wind pulsed the jacaranda branches above Grandma Tink as she sat on an upturned bucket at the bottom of the garden. Her silver curls a twisted tornado of grey and silver, petals and leaves spun a cloak around her.

‘Mum.’ Clem said softly. His eyes trained on his grandmother. ‘What’s Grandma doing?’

‘She’s telling her stories.’ Mum explained without looking up from the pile of bills.

‘Who to?’ He frowned and squinted harder, leaning further towards the glass. There was no one there.

‘Jill, I told you.’ Stephen raised a knowing eyebrow to his wife, who returned serve with pursed lips and an almost imperceptible head shake. Clem knew what that meant. His parents’ private language was not particularly discreet. Roughly translated this sequence of movements meant they would ‘have this discussion later.’ His sister saved him years of exhaustive interpretation and explained his parents’ idiosyncrasies. A head shake meant ‘not now’, mum’s vein popping out of her forehead meant Dad was in trouble, nail biting and Dad cracking his neck meant money was tight and if he saw a wink followed by a giggle Clem was under no circumstances, neither death nor house swallowing fire, to ever go into his Mum and Dad’s room, or the shed.

People were exhausting and complicated. Clem preferred dogs. Cats. Grasshoppers. Worms, mice and even the odd snake. They didn’t confuse him, nor make his stomach twist and lurch. Dogs didn’t roll their eyes when he talked, magpies didn’t hide his lunchbox or wrinkle their nose when he skipped a shower. People were difficult, his family was no exception. Mum claimed to listen, while she tapped on her phone. Dad nodded with fake enthusiasm but his vacant eyes showed his disengagement. The only person who really listened was Grandma.

Lemon

Outside, Grandma Tink had begun to wave her arms, carefree and wild in the growing wind. He didn't understand carefree. At the mature age of twelve, Clem knew enough to know he knew nothing. Three weeks into Year Seven and he was done. Exhausted. He asked Dad if his classmates came with instructions. Dad's whole body belly jiggle and tearful smile suggested there was one in the works, however an unpublished manual was of no help to Clem.

His perfectly ordered world of Primary School had been replaced by utter mayhem. Year Seven was a never ending series of unexplained rules and expectations, noises and smells. People were walking riddles. Clem found that the girls were the worst. They had changed over the summer, becoming loud, colourful and smelly. It was the odours that bothered him the most. A shiny lip he could ignore, they had probably eaten too much greasy food for breakfast, but the aromas were troublesome, they lingered and cloyed at him in every class. Some were spicy, others flowery. There were sweet ones, sticky ones, powdery ones, some girls smelt of vanilla ice cream while others made his nose tingle. A walk between classes was a sensory gauntlet that put his head on the verge of explosion.

And now, to top it off, Grandma had lost her mind.

The wind flung the back door open with a thud. Grandma entered the kitchen in a swirling bouquet of purple petals.

'Why so worried Lemon?' she asked, closing the door. Leaving the two of them alone in the kitchen.

'I'm not worried.' Clem fixed his gaze on her apron now swung behind her neck like an aged superhero.

'Yes, you are, your forehead has more wrinkles than a bedsheet and your foot's got more bounce than a kangaroo.' Clem slapped a hand on his right knee. Both pogoed under the kitchen table causing the salt to topple over.

Lemon

Grandma Tink reached a sun spotted hand across the table, scooped up the granules, closed her eyes and threw them over her shoulder. Another clear sign his beloved Grandma was puddled. Moisture bloomed uncommanded from his armpits. He'd had his mandated shower today and didn't want another. There was no other way to deal with this, he had no choice but to tell Grandma that the whole family were discussing her sanity, or lack thereof. Mum and Dad were probably having a critically important meeting about it in the bedroom, or shed.

He wriggled; the metal chair leg scraped on the wooden floor. 'Grandma, I'm sorry to tell you this but it appears you've lost it.'

Against expectation, her eyes creased, the gold fleck in her right iris danced and cherries bloomed on her raised cheeks. People were confusing.

'It's not good news Grandma.' Irritated she wasn't giving this catastrophic news the levity required. 'There's a meeting and everything.'

She pulled out a chair next to him. Her hand briefly hovered above his hair; she faltered before placing one hand on top of the other. He appreciated that she knew he didn't like to be touched.

'Lost it? What exactly have I lost Lemon?'

'You're mind.' Grandma Tink didn't react as he predicted she might. Instead of being offended, she laughed. A rich warm laugh that unexpectedly made his chest glow and his jaw relax.

'What makes you say that?'

'Many reasons.'

'Many?'

'Yes. Many.'

'Care to list them.'

Lemon

‘Of course. Ascending or descending order.’

‘You choose.’ She clasped her hands together and straightened her back. Clem was pleased she was finally giving the matter the respect it deserved.

‘One, you call me Lemon, when my name is Clement. Clem for family. Two, you smell of washing powder, not vanilla. Three, you have purple flowers in your hair. Four, you eat Turkish delight. No one likes Turkish delight. And most damning of all, you tell stories to yourself. I could go on but Mum told me I should stop listing after five,’ Clem stayed focused. ‘Irrefutable evidence one might say.’

‘That’s quite a list.’ She raised a hand to her hair, ferreted around and removed a lilac trumpeted flower. She placed it on the table in front of Clem.

‘You’ll need to wash your hair; it’s a school day tomorrow.’

‘My Darling Clem, I appreciate your concern.’ A gentle smile played on her lips. ‘I follow a different set of rules. I don’t need to wash my hair for school because I can do as I please.’ She pirouetted the bloom between her fingers before she tucked it behind her ear. ‘Shall we tackle the reasons one by one?’

She was taking him seriously, his knee finally still. Clem nodded in agreement.

‘Ascending or descending?’

‘You choose Grandma.’

‘Lemon is my special nickname for you. It’s from the nursery rhyme.’ Clem frowned but didn’t argue.

‘As for the washing powder, well I don’t like perfume. Never have.’ Clem accepted this. Would Grandma Tink be willing to persuade his female classmates?

Lemon

She leaned back in her chair and continued, 'Turkish delight is vastly underrated. Everyone gives me theirs, so I end up with a year round supply!'

He considered this for a moment and ran his tongue thoughtfully over his teeth. Her answers were compelling. If he hadn't seen her talking to herself, he would have thought his parents mad, not Grandma.

'And the talking,' her voice softened. 'I know I can trust you,' her lips twitched. 'The talking is the most important one. I'm not talking to myself. I'm talking to the wind. I give it my worries, share my troubles, the wind takes them away and sometimes, if I really concentrate...'

She peered over her shoulder, her sharp eyes darted left and right, scanning the empty space conspiratorially behind her. The faint hum of the fridge the only sound breaking the silence.

'...the wind whispers back.'

He folded his arms and narrowed his eyes. Grandma Tink didn't look crazy. But still, talking to the wind. Ridiculous. Was she having him on? Grandma Tink wouldn't lie to him, ever since the Tooth Fairy embarrassment, she had promised him she wouldn't.

'You should try it sometime,' she said, sensing his scepticism.

He harrumphed, torn between curiosity and madness. 'What, like a science experiment?' Testing the theory was the logical path to take. And he certainly had plenty of worries to offload.

He tilted his head, considering. 'Are you sure the wind doesn't mind?'

'Oh Lemon. The wind loves a good story.' Her grin widening, 'and it never rolls its eyes.'

That, Clem thought, sounded perfect. It was a hypothesis worth testing. He rested his elbows on the table. Turned his head to face her.

'Say I was to give it a go, for scientific purposes, obviously.'

Lemon

‘Obviously,’ she said with a straight face.

‘What do I do?’

‘Wait for the wind to be just right, strong enough for clouds to race, but not so hard that it gives you a chill. Find a comfortable spot, settle in and tell it whatever you wish. No need to shout, a whisper in the wind carries a long way.’ She looked wistfully past him towards the bowing trees at the end of the garden.

Clem squinted and picked at his fingernail. ‘What would I ask?’

‘You could ask anything. Start with something simple like why do some people like Turkish delight or,’ she paused, pulled the jacaranda bell from behind her ear and placed it in front of Clem, ‘you could ask why people laugh at things they don’t understand?’

Clem blinked. The remark hit harder than he expected. His mouth opened but no words came out.

‘Go on, Lemon. Step outside.’ His eyes flicked to the back door. ‘No time like the present.’

Clem stood, hesitating with one hand on the doorknob. He glanced back at his grandma.

‘Trust me Lemon.’

He inhaled, turned the handle and ventured into the wind. He did trust her. More than anyone else.

Under the shade of the jacaranda, on a blanket of blossom, Clem sat and collected his thoughts. The breeze stirred, faint and teasing, whispering through the trees and sending the leaves into a soft, restless chatter. He picked at leaves and sticks, building up the courage to talk.

Lemon

Clem's gaze darted back to the window. Grandma Tink, a tiny figure in the distance, gave him an encouraging wave. His eyes studied the earth, as he shredded a blade of grass.

His heart pounded as he wrestled with himself. This was absurd. But then again, what did he have to lose? He'd start with an easy one. Clem let out a shaky breath and squinted into the rich coral and peaches that melted into the deep indigo and dusty blue of the sunset. He finally spoke, his voice barely a whisper.

'Grandma tells me you can help.' The wind picked up, ruffled his hair and caressed his face. It felt different, softer somehow; it was waiting for him.

'Tell me. What happens in the shed?'