

“Granny’s Old Junk” by Irvine Welsh

The warden, Mrs French I think they call her, is looking me up and down. It’s fairly obvious that she doesn’t like what she sees; her gaze has a steely ice to it; it’s definitely a negative evaluation I’m getting here.

-So, she says, hands on hips, eyes flitting suspiciously in that glistening yellow-brown foundation mask topped by a brittle head of brown hair, - you’re Mrs Abercrombie’s grandson?

- Aye, I acknowledge. I shouldn’t resent Mrs French. She’s only doing her job. Were she less than vigilant in keeping her eye on the auld doll, complaints from the family would ensue. I also have to acknowledge that I am less than presentable; lank, greasy black hair, a scrawny growth sprouting from a deathly white face broken up by a few red and yellow spots. My overcoat has seen better days and I can’t remember when I changed into these jeans, sweatshirt, t-shirt, trainers, socks and boxershorts.

- Well, I suppose you’d better come in, Mrs French said, reluctantly shifting her sizeable bulk. I squeezed past, still brushing against her. Mrs French was like an oil tanker, it took a while for her to actually change direction. – She’s on the second floor. You don’t come to see her very often, do you? she said with an accusatory pout.

No. This is the first time I’ve been to see the auld doll since she moved into this Sheltered Housing scheme. That must be over five years ago now. Very few families are close nowadays. People move around, live in different

pars of the country, lead different lives. It’s pointless lamenting something as inevitable as the decline of the extended family network; in a way it’s a good thing because it gives people like Mrs French jobs.

- Ah don’t stay local, I mumble, making my way down the corridor, feeling a twinge of self-hate for justifying myself to the warden.

The corridors have a rank, fetid smell of pish and stale bodies. Most people here seem in such an advanced state of infirmity it merely confirms my intuitive feeling that such places are just antechambers to death. It follows from this that my actions won’t alter the auld doll’s quality of life: she’ll scarcely notice that the money’s gone. Some of it would probably be mine anyway, when she finally snuffs it; so, what the fuck’s the point of waiting until it’s no good to me? The auld doll could hang on for donkey’s years as a cabbage. It would be utterly perverse, self-defeating nonsense not to rip her off now, to allow oneself to be constrained by some stupid, irrelevant set of taboos which pass as morality. I need what’s in her tin.

It’s been in the family for so long: Gran’s shortbread tin. Just sitting there under her bed, crammed full of bundles of notes. I remember, as a sprog, her opening it up on our birthdays and peeling off a few notes from what seemed to be a fortune, the absence of which made no impact on the wad.

Her life savings. Savings for what? Savings for us, that's what, the daft auld cunt: too feeble, too inadequate to enjoy or even use her wealth. Well I shall just have my share now, Granny, thank you very much.

I rap on the door. Abercrombie, with a red tartan background. My back chills and my joints feel stiff and aching. I haven't got long.

She opens the door. She looks so small, like a wizened puppet, like Zelda out of *Terrahawks*.

- Gran, I smile.

- Graham! She says, her face expanding warmly. – God, ah cannae believe it! Come in! Come in!

She sits me down, babbling excitedly, hobbling back and forth from her small adjoining kitchen as she slowly and cumbersomely prepares tea.

- Ah keep askin yir mothe how ye nivir come tae see me. Ye always used tae come oan Saturday for yir dinner, mind? For yir mince, remember, Graham? she says.

- Aye, the mince, Gran.

- At the auld place, mind? she said wistfully.

- Ah remember it well, Gran, I nodded. It was a vermin fested hovel unfit for human habitation. I hated that grotty tenement: those stairs, the top floor surprise, surfuckingprise, with the backs of my legs already fucked from the sickening ritual of walking up and down Leith Walk and Junction Street; her standing oblivious to our pain and discomfort as she prattled on a load of irrelevant, mundane shite with every other auld hound that crossed our path; big brother Alan taking his

exasperation out on me by punching me or booting me or twisting my airm when she wisne looking, and if she was she didnae bother. Mickey Weir gets more protection from Syme at Ibrox than I ever did from that old cunt. Then, after all that, the fucking stairs. God, I detested those fuckin stairs!

She comes in an looks at me sadly, and shakes her head with her chin on her chest. – Your mother was saying that yuv been getting intae trouble. Wi these drugs n things. Ah sais, no oor Graham, surely no.

- People exaggerate, Gran, I said as a spasm of pain shot through my bones, and a delirious shivering tremor triggered off an excretion of stale perspiration from my pores. Fuck fuck fuck.

She re-emerges from the kitchen, popping out like a crumpled jack-in-the-box. – Ah thoat so. Ah sais tae oor Joyce: No oor Graham, he's goat mair sense thin that.

- Ma goes oan a bit. Ah enjoy masel, Gran, ah'm no sayinf otherwise, bit as dinnae touch drugs, eh. Ye dinnae need drugs tae enjoy yirself.

- That's whit ah sais tae yir mother. The laddie's an Abercrombie, ah telt her, works hard and plays hard.

My name was Millar, not Abercrombie, that's the auld lady's side. This auld hound seemed to believe that being referred to as an Abercrombie is the highest possible accolade one can aspire to; though perhaps, if you want to demonstrate expertise in alcoholism and theft, this may very well be the case.

- Aye, some crowd the Abercrombies, eh Gran?

- That's right, son. Ma Eddie – yir grandfather – wis the same. Worked hard n played hard, n a finer man niver walked the earth. He niver kept us short, she smiled proudly.

Short.

I have my work in my inside pocket. Needle, spoon, cotton balls, lighter. All I need is a few grains of smack, then just add water and it's all better. My passport's in that tin.

- Whair's the lavvy, Gran?

Despite the small size of the flat, she insisted on escorting me to the bog, as if I'd get lost on the way. She fussed, clucked and farted as if we were preparing to go on safari. I tried a quick slash, but couldn't pee, so I stealthily tiptoed into the bedroom.

I lifted the bedclothes that hung to the floor. The large old shortbread tin with the view of Holyrood Place sat in full magnificent view under the bed. It was ridiculous, an act of absolute criminal stupidity to have that just lying around in this day and age. I was more convinced than ever that I has to rip her off. If I didn't somebody else would. Surely she'd want me to have the money, rather than some stranger? If I didn't take the cash, I'd be worried sick about it. Anyway, I was planning to get clean soon; maybe get a job or go to college or something. The auld hound would get it back right enough. No problem.

Prising open the lid of the fucker was proving extremely difficult. My hands were trembling and I couldn't get any purchase on it. I was starting to make headway when I heard her voice behind me.

- So! That's whit this is aw about! She was standing right over me. I thought I's have heard the clumsy auld boot sneaking up on me, but she was like a fuckin ghost. – Yir mother wis right. Yir a thief! Feeding hir habit, yir drugs habit, is that it?

- Naw Gran, it's jist...

- Dinnae lie, son. Dinnae lie. A thief, a thief thit steals fae his ain is bad, but a liar's even worse. Ye dinnar ken whair ye stand wi a liar. Get away fae that bloody tin! She snapped so suddenly that I was taken aback, but I sat where I was.

- I need something, right?

- Yill find nae money in their, she said, but I could tell by the anxiety in her voice that she was lying. I prised, and it transpired that she wasn't. on top of a pile of old photos lay some whitish-brown powder in a plastic bag. I's never seen so much gear.

- What the fuckin hell's this ...

- Git away fae their! Git away! Fucking thief! Her bony, spindly leg lashed out and caught me in the side of the face. It didn't hurt but it shocked me. Her swearing shocked me even more.

- Ya fuckin auld... I sprang to my feet, holding the bag in the air, beyond her outstretched hands. – Better call the warden, Gran. She'll be interested in this.

She pouted bitterly and sat down on the bed. – You got works? she asked.

- Aye, I said.

- Cook up a shot then, make yourself useful.

I started to do as she said. – How Gran? How? I asked, relieved and bemused.

- Eddie, the Merchant Navy. He came back wi a habit. We had contacts. The docks. The money wis food, son. Thing is, ah kept feedin it, now ah huv tae sell tae the young ones tae keep gaun. The money aw goes upfront. She shook her head, looking hard at me. – Thir's a couple ay young yins ah git tae run messages fir me, but that

fat nose yin doonstairs, the warden, she's gittin suspicious.

I took up her cue. Talk about falling on your feet. – Gran, maybe we kin work tae githir on this.

The animal hostility on her small, pinched face dissolved into a scheming grin. – Yir an Abercrombie right enough, she told me.

- Aye, right enough, I acknowledged with a queasy defeatism.