

Where there's a Will . . . by Lydia Penn

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July 26, 2018



Well ensconced in his favourite armchair by the fire, Grandpa belched loudly, clunked his teeth, and looked around at the four younger men of his family. “If you want my opinion – “, he began. But no one did!

George, his eldest son, was loudly pontificating on the world political situation; words such as “Hitler”, “the Sudetenland”, and “flimsy bit of paper”, came to Grandpa’s ears, but he was too deaf to follow much of the conversation.

It was Christmas Day 1938, and his first Christmas without Grandma. He supposed that was why they all fussed over him so much. I wish they’d leave me alone, he thought; those silly women hovering all the time. Don’t they think I can do anything for myself now? It was a good meal though, he mused, as he belched again loudly, settled back into his armchair and began to snore.

The younger men soon became silent too. As each sought to digest the political crisis and the large meal they had just consumed, cigarettes were put out, and before long their quieter snores blended in with those of Grandpa.

In the kitchen, other weighty matters were under heated discussion among the women of the family.

“Something must be done quickly”, declared Josephine, the oldest daughter, her tall angular figure dominating the room. She went on in her loud rasping voice, “its a lot of money, and if he dies intestate – well! And then there this house”.

The others dutifully took the tea towels she handed out as she prepared to officiate at the sink. Only Annabel ventured a protest.

“That’s not so easy”, she argued. “I mean we can’t just walk up to him and say, ‘Father, now that mother has gone, you must make a new will quickly’. It is a bit heartless, don’t you think. I know he left everything to mother, but he is a bit difficult you know”.

Maude, whom all her sisters-in-law thought distinctly odd, began to titter as she settled her ample frame at the kitchen table, pointedly ignoring the proffered tea towel. She gazed round the room, her large myopic brown eyes, reminding Hannah of some ruminating cow staring over a hedge.

Oh dear, she’s been at the sherry again, thought Annabel. I don’t know how Ernest puts up with her. Aloud she said, “Hannah, perhaps George – ”

“Oh no”, said Hannah Hastily. “This is a matter for Mr Wrigley”.

“Who is Mr Wrigley?” asked Clarice, who usually took no interest in her in-law’s affairs.

“Mr Wrigley”, answered Josephine in her strident tone, “Is the junior partner in the firm Ramsey, Smith and Kline, father’s solicitors. That is if he is still alive”. She took her hands out of the sink and turned to face the room.

“Lettie”, She boomed at her younger sister, “You live with him. You must work on him to make an appointment with Mr Wrigley”.

Lettie became agitated. “Oh, but I couldn’t. Father gets so angry, and its bad for his blood pressure”.

“That’s another thing”, rasped Josephine. “He must see Dr Legge for a checkup”.

Maude sniggered. Lettie said nothing, and Josephine turned back to concentrate on her work at the sink, but not for long. “Then there’s the matter of Mrs Bundy __ __”, She began.

“What’s the matter with Mrs Bundy?” Annabel’s nine-year-old daughter had crept silently into the kitchen. “I like Mrs Bundy. She nice and she makes lovely cookies. Grandpa likes her cakes too,” she added.

“That’s precisely the problem,” Josephine continued, as Annabel hastily bundled her small daughter back into the dining room, where the younger members of the family were squabbling over a game of, “Happy Families.”

Mrs Bundy, an attractive, well proportioned middle-aged widow, who made no secret of the fact that she was once more in the marriage market, came in daily to act as housekeeper. Recently she had started to bring homemade cakes and other delicacies with her.

“The way to a man’s heart __”, cackled Maude. The others ignored her. “Then there’s that dreadful Miss Biggs”, went on Josephine, warming to the topic.

“I saw, she knitted him bed socks for Christmas”, remarked Hannah. “Are you sure, Lettie dear, that he keeps warm in the cold weather. He was telling me that he gets very cold at night in the large bed”.

Maude made no attempts to hide her mirth. “There is always Mrs Bundy”, she cackled, her heavy bosom heaving up and down rhythmically.

There was a horrified silence.

Each had a mental vivid picture of Grandpa and the voluptuous Mrs Bundy!

Lettie turned bright pink. “Surely not!” She stuttered, then went on, “I put two hot water bottles in his bed each night, but he will only have the old type stone ones, and I can’t leave them in. He says he’s afraid a rubber one may leak”.

Maude was enjoying herself enormously. “Is that the only leak he’s afraid of?” she asked guffawing loudly.

Once again there was an embarrassed silence! The others were appalled and Lettie dropped a plate.

“Let’s have a nice cup of tea”, suggested Clarice. “It’s nearly 4 O’Clock. I’ll put the kettle on. I’m sure __”.

Here she was interrupted by the door flying open. Annabel’s five-year-old son, Billy, rushed in screaming. “Grandpa’s dead, Grandpas dead. He won’t talk to me, he’s dead, Mummy”!

Hysteria took over in the Kitchen. With Billy still screaming, they all made for the door. Clarice tripped over the cat as Josephine roughly elbowed her out of the way. The others followed, Hannah clutching a tea towel, and Annabel the brandy bottle. Only Maude remained at the Kitchen table, close to the cooking sherry.

The commotion woke the other men. “what on earth’s the matter”, snapped Arthur. “And why are you waving the brandy bottle?” he demanded of his spouse.

Billy screams were a little more subdued. The kettle began to whistle in the background.

“Call a doctor”, yelled Josephine.

“Call a minister”, screamed Annabel.

“Fetch Mr Wrigley”, cried Hannah.

“What, On Christmas Day?” asked Clarice seriously.

Billy began to scream again. “He’s dead, Grandpa’s dead”. he cried.

But as Josephine put non too gentle fingers on his pulse, Grandpa suddenly jerked up, opened his eyes and glared around the room.

“Nothing is wrong with my head”, he growled, “shut that boy up Annabel. What are you all fussing about now”.

He paused then added, “but since you are all here will someone fetch me a cup of tea – and a big piece of Mrs Bundy’s Christmas Cake”.

* * * * *

Christmas 1939 and England was in the middle of what was to be described as the “Phoney War”. The panic which had followed the declaration of war had subsided, and the family gathered once more for their traditional celebrations.

If Grandpa’s hair was a little thinner on top, he made up for it by the increased growth on the lower part of his face. Josephine’s errant husband had made a brief appearance in his army uniform, and as quickly disappeared again. (“I Don’t blame him,” commented Hannah, who found Josephine’s rasping voice very trying). Maude, they learnt, had been stockpiling cans of food and having filled all the available space in the kitchen was now halfway through stocking up the large old wardrobes.

Annabel who had fled to the country at the outbreak of war, taking her two children, had tried in vain to persuade Grandpa to join her.

“He’s getting more stubborn”, reported Lettie. “Every time I mention Dr Legge, he just gets so worked up and I am afraid he’ll have a stroke”, She added. “And as for Mr Wrigley, he goes quite deaf if I mention his name”.

But Lettie had been active; she had enrolled in cookery classes to try to outdo Mrs Bundy; she started knitting bed socks in the evenings, the click, click of her needles beating a rhythm with the clunk, clunk of Grandpa’s teeth as he alternatively dosed and checked the obituaries in *The Times*.

The war dragged on and the bombing in London became heavier. Mrs Bundy had left to “help in the war effort”, though exactly what she had in mind was dubious! Miss Biggs they learned had had to be hospitalised for the duration – delusions of grandeur, someone had said.

It was George who had received the news. The family home had received a direct hit in a heavy air raid. Grandpa and Lettie were home at the time

Mr Wrigley summoned the family to read the will.

“What will”, demanded Josephine. “He wouldn’t make one _ unless, unless he did see Mr Wrigley after all. Lettie must have made him, but she never said anything”.

Mr Wrigley, a stooped, wrinkled individual, who looked as if he never got his fair share of food rations. peered out through his gold-rimmed spectacles and began, “Your dear father _ _”

He stopped and extracted two rather grubby looking white tablets from one of his pockets which he proceeded to swallow with his nearby glass of water. He continued, “My ulcer you know – Oh yes where was I. Your dear father had the foresight to realise that with her delicate heart condition you dear mother might predecease him. So he made such provision in his will, dated, eh, ,oh yes August 10 1935. . . .”

