

When I arrived at the hospital, Grandad was asleep. He was at the far end of the ward – ‘in a nice quiet spot,’ said a different nurse to this morning’s, thankfully, with a lovely, soft-as-feathers voice. I’d hoped to find him propped up in bed, glad to see me, but as I passed the other patients my heart sank: no one here looked well enough for visitors.

Behind Grandad’s bed, the windows were open. The fresh air made it so bitterly cold the bed was heaped with blankets: all I could see was a tuft of his steel-grey hair sticking out from underneath.

I pulled up a chair.

‘That you, Lily?’ he said without looking.

‘How did you guess?’

‘You smell of rain,’ he replied. ‘Your mother would’ve had the good sense to bring her umbrella.’

The blankets twitched. Grandad’s face appeared. I wasn’t ready for the shock. It was only a few days since

I’d last seen him, but he’d got so much thinner, like his skin had shrunk down to his bones.

‘How’s my cat? You been feeding her?’ he croaked. ‘I’ve been trying,’ I admitted. ‘Don’t tell Mum but I skived off school to come and see you.’

His attempt at laughing turned into a horrible cough. Mum had worried about him passing on the infection, but what bothered me far more was how sick he looked.

‘Listen, I’ve something to tell you.’ I dropped my voice to a nervous whisper. ‘A parcel turned up at your shop. It’s from a man called Professor Hanawati, and inside it is the most wonderful—’

‘He sent the *jar*?’ Grandad interrupted. He tried – and failed – to sit up.

I nodded. It was becoming painfully obvious how important this jar was. And how stupid I’d been to let it out of my sight.

‘Why did the professor send it to you?’ I asked. ‘It looks like it belongs in a museum.’

Grandad spluttered. ‘A *museum*? That’s how all this terrible business started!’

‘What terrible business?’

‘The curse,’ he whispered.

He looked sicker than ever, suddenly. Sweat rolled off his face, pooling in his collarbones and soaking

the pillow and blankets. It was horrible to see him like this.

'It's an unusual jar, that's all. I'm sure it's not cursed,' I said, trying to reassure him.

He grabbed my arm. 'I mean it, Lily. There's a curse on that jar. It took Hanawati twenty years to realise.'

Perhaps it was only the fever talking, but I admit I began to feel unsettled. The professor's death was very strange, and the jar had certainly unnerved me.

'If I don't recover,' Grandad croaked. 'If the curse is on me now—'

'Sssh! Don't say that!' I broke in, though it was dawning on me that he might be talking sense. Since that letter had come from the professor, he'd got sicker and sicker, and now the jar had been passed on to him ...

I grew suddenly afraid.

'What do you want me to do?' I asked. 'If this is a curse, what will break it?'

'Send the jar back, Lily!' Grandad gasped.

'To Egypt?'

He nodded desperately. 'To the hotel ... Mr Ibrahim ... before the curse ...'

I sat back in my seat, stumped already. How on earth was I going to get a jar back to Egypt?

'Which hotel?' I pressed him. 'And who's Mr Ibrahim?'

'Winter ... palace ... reception ...' he wheezed.

'Winter Palace? Is that the hotel's name?'

He coughed. I tried to help him with a drink, but he pushed the cup away, sloshing water all over the bed.

'You have to ... otherwise ... too late ...' Another coughing fit seized him. It was a horrible, bed-shaking, scouring noise that went on and on until the nurse came running with a bowl. I didn't see what Grandad spat into it, but it sounded wet and solid. When he wiped his mouth afterwards there was blood on the cloth.

It was awful to see him so unwell.

The nice nurse, seeing my shock, nudged me from my seat. 'You'd better go, love.'

But Grandad was beckoning me to come closer. 'I shouldn't have taken it. Not mine to decide ... all those years ago ...'

'He's rambling,' the nurse insisted. 'Really, you should go.'

'He wants me to help him,' I said desperately. 'I don't know what to do.'

'Give the poor chap a bit of peace and quiet, that's what he needs,' she replied.



When Grandad tried to speak, he really couldn't breathe. The nurse propelled me away from the bed with her free hand, as with the other she thrust the bowl back under Grandad's chin.

'Believe me, it's better if you don't see him like this,' she said.

It was too late for that. I don't think I'd ever witnessed another living person in such a dreadful state, never mind someone this dear to me. It was like being thumped right in the heart.

Knowing how much Grandad would hate me to cry, I held on to my tears until I got outside. Even then it was awkward to be sobbing in public, with people staring and hurrying past as if my sadness was catching. Returning the jar to Egypt wasn't going to be easy. But Grandad had asked me to, so I'd do it. First, though, I had to get it back from Tulip. It was too late – and too far – to go to Highgate today. It would have to be tomorrow, after school, if Tulip didn't turn up at St Kilda's. I wasn't expecting her to, somehow.

Then there was Professor Hanawati's letter to Grandad, which might tell me something about the Egyptian hotel and, I thought with a shudder, the curse. How strange that only days ago I'd mentioned dying wishes, and now here we were – one man dead,

another dangerously ill – and what mattered most was a jar being returned to its rightful place.

On the long walk home I caught myself remembering something from a couple of years ago. Dad had taken us to a funeral: a big one – a *procession*, he'd called it. Mum had brushed off our best coats and, as it was a Thursday, I was allowed to skip school to attend. Crowds were expected all along the route from Victoria station to Westminster Abbey where the coffin would be buried like a king's. Not that we knew who the dead person was, but that, said Dad, was exactly the point.

The Unknown Warrior was what they called him. Dad explained how, in the battlefields of France, they'd dug up four unmarked bodies and chosen one at random. That body could've been a private, a lieutenant, a captain – *anyone*. He represented all the men of all ranks, all ages, who'd died in the war. Put like that, it sounded grand and honourable.

Yet all week in the playground – I was still at my local junior school back then – we'd been gossiping about what would be inside the coffin. Neddy reckoned it was full of jumbled-up body parts because that was all they could find. Someone else – Bobby, I think – said it was actually a dead dog. But Rita Farley, one of

the older girls, said she knew for a fact the coffin would be open, so we'd get to see for ourselves. I was horrified and fascinated by this idea.

Mum had invited Grandad to come with us to the funeral. The plan was to meet him outside Woolworths. From there we'd catch the bus to Green Park, then walk to Constitution Hill, which was one of those wide city roads where the procession was due to pass.

On the morning itself, we waited ten, maybe twenty minutes for Grandad to arrive, me done up in my best frock with a stupid bow in my hair, fidgeting with excitement. Mum kept glancing at Dad, who was starting to get annoyed. When our bus pulled up there was still no sign of Grandad. Dad said he wasn't waiting any longer, which meant we weren't, either.

Boarding the bus, I was very close to tears. I didn't understand why a funeral for someone we didn't know was more important than waiting for someone we did. Even when the funeral was over, and I'd seen the black shiny horses pulling the gun carriage and the coffin draped with the Union flag, which wasn't open at all, I still felt disappointed. All we saw of the Unknown Soldier was a dented tin helmet. And even that wasn't his, so Dad said.

Afterwards, Grandad didn't apologise or explain why he'd not come along that day. In fact, it was never mentioned again.

Thinking of it now, the whole process – the dead bodies, the long journey from France, the public funeral – reminded me of the bizarre situation I was in. Maybe back then it'd reminded Grandad too, of what he and the professor had taken. In the end, the Unknown Soldier was laid to rest in his home country, but the jar was still thousands of miles from Egypt – actually, in Highgate, to be precise, at the house of someone I'd only just met.