

Family Saga

It's an inevitability and a frustration, when growing old, to find oneself wanting to look back and reminisce on life but finding that the details become less clear and the timelines of events involving family and friends are more jumbled.

Stan Williams, a retired doctor of 65 years of age sat, tea in hand, desperate to get the maximum information from his sister to help him piece things together about his childhood. It was going to be a fruitless task; he knew that. Irene, his sister, was nine years older than him and she had been showing many early signs of dementia for the last six months. Even today, while he was visiting her, topics of conversation were random and she frequently stood up from the sofa, without warning, to wander aimlessly round the cosy bungalow, not really knowing why she had stood up in the first place. Tony Smith was her long time husband and now her devoted carer; organising her daily pills in a box with twenty eight small compartments, taking care of the shopping, the cooking and the cleaning. He also did the majority of work looking after their granddaughter, protecting Irene from the stress of that commitment.

While her short term recall was deteriorating, she still remembered much from her childhood and beyond. After returning from her latest wander, Stan asked her about her early memories of their father and she began with a saga that was still crystal clear in her memory and which had threatened to completely divide the family.

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Before Stan was born, Reginald Williams used to rule his family with a rod of iron. Basically a kind, caring and loving father, he was very keen on discipline and respect within the family and in life. At mealtimes he kept a stick on the table which he was prepared to, and often did, wield towards any of his three children who said or did anything at the table that he considered to be inappropriate. If Irene or Michael or Mary failed to finish their food he would instruct his wife to store away the food in the larder and bring it out for them to finish the following day.

By the time Stan reached ten years of age, the dinner table regime had softened but his father was still very much in control of the household.

Enter Tony Smith. Irene had met him at the local youth club and there was an instant attraction. He was attractive, smooth-tongued and with just a touch of the arrogance of youth. Most important of all, he owned a Lambretta scooter, with small triangular flags on the handlebars fluttering in the wind, on which he raced around the country lanes between the local villages. You were either a mod or a rocker back in the 60s and he was a true mod.

It was a while before her father became aware of Tony; Irene had not been sure how her father would react. The sound of the final revving of the Lambretta engine before turning it off was not the ideal way for Tony to introduce himself to Reginald. He had arrived at the Williams' house one Sunday morning to take Irene to the coast but that never happened.

A fuming Reginald Williams ordered Irene back in the house as she made to leave and, with a loud weeping and wailing, she dashed back into the house and upstairs to her bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

Outside, at the front gate, Reginald angrily told Tony he was not welcome, that Irene would not be allowed on his scooter and, furthermore, would not ever be going out with him again. Despite his attempts at protestation, Tony realised it was an argument he would not win. Anyway, there were other girls at the youth club he could go out with.

Stan had never heard his parents arguing before and, at his age, he didn't really understand it but just knew he didn't like it. A distraught Irene caught snatches of their debate.

'I tell you he's no good,' yelled Reginald. 'Everyone knows that. Him and his gang on their scooters are always causing havoc in the villages around here. It's been in all the local papers; pictures and all. And what about that trouble in Brighton last Bank Holiday? I know he was there fighting that motor bike gang. He's a wrong 'un.'

Joan tried to put Irene's case. 'But our Irene must like him or she wouldn't have agreed to go out with him. She a sensible girl. Can't you give him a chance; give her a chance?'

Reginald refused to budge an inch as the discussion raged.

'Well I hope you realise what you are doing,' said Joan, as the tears began to well up in her eyes. 'This could cause no end of trouble in the family. Irene will take a long time to forgive you;- if she ever does.'

Reginald lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply, turned and walked into the garden.

'Your father thinks he is doing the right thing to protect you,' Joan began as she sat on the edge of Irene's bed the next morning. 'He's a good man and loves his family very much.'

There was no need for table rules now. Irene was distraught. As an obedient daughter, she followed her father's wishes and she, along with the other children, remained silent at the table. She retained inside her a strong unwanted, resentment towards her father and occasionally sought solace with her mother, Joan, who remained a loyal wife but did feel a deep empathy towards Irene and shared in her daughter's distress.

Irene threw herself into her work at the local dairy. It was not enough to drive away the pain of losing Tony or the underlying unhappiness at the whole situation. She couldn't avoid seeing Tony around the local area but they only communicated through their glances at each other. To make matters worse, the sight of Denise Sharman on the back of Tony's Lambretta, her arms wrapped tightly round his waist and her long, blond hair billowing out from beneath her scarf, only intensified her unhappiness.

How could her father have created this situation? Resentment, bordering on hate, towards her father began to fester deeper inside her soul.

For all the wrong reasons, Irene became involved with Ray Wood. There was never a real connection like there had been with Tony but Ray had a secure job as a gardener, he was

well-dressed, not un-handsome and, above all, he was not the sort to get into trouble as he always kept himself to himself and would never be seen dead as a gang member.

When, rather early in their uneventful relationship, Ray asked Irene to marry him she said 'yes' without any great degree of enthusiasm, more thinking it might be the only time she was ever asked. Reginald was delighted, opining that Ray was a steady and reliable man. Joan said she was pleased that Irene was getting married and wished them both well but, deep down, she knew that Irene was not contented and fulfilled in the relationship.

To the outside world, it seemed that Ray and Irene were well matched. Two children, a girl, Emma, and a boy, John, came early in their marriage. Ray has secured a good job as a gardener for a famous racehorse trainer, whose patrons even included the Queen Mother. The job came with a cottage set in the grounds of the vast estate so the young children had acres of rolling countryside in which to play.

This seemingly idyllic existence for Irene was shattered by news of the sudden death of her father. It was not just the loss of her father but, in her heart of hearts, she knew that, deep down, she still held her resentment towards him and their relationship had never been the same. Neither of them had been prepared to take the first steps towards healing the rift. Now she would never know whether he regretted destroying their relationship by his snap judgement and whether he, as she did, wished that life had taken them both down a less troubled path.

Joan's eyes widened in shock!

'You're going to do what? Why on earth, Swindon? What is there in Swindon?' said a flabbergasted Joan.

'Tony has a mate there who will give him a job and he knows of a cheap flat we can rent. Emma is coming with us but John is staying with his dad. They are going to live back with Ray's parents.'

'Your father will be turning in his grave to hear this. You're splitting up your family just like ours was divided because of Tony Smith. Not to mention going against his wishes.'

'Maybe dad was wrong. Anyway, Tony is different now; very calm and he has been working hard. We have always wanted to be together and now the time is right. Not a day has passed when I have not been sorry that dad and I didn't see eye to eye all those years ago but he is dead now and I want to be with the man I love and who loves me.'

Both women hugged each other as their tears flowed onto the other's shoulders. Joan knew that Irene was right; it was for her to choose who she loved and she wanted Tony.

'Just make sure that Emma and John are alright,' said Joan. 'It will be a difficult time for them especially. 'And make sure Tony looks after you!'

'He will!' came the reply. 'We were meant to be together.'

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Stan gently took Irene's bony hands in his and leaned towards her.

'It seems you were right, sis. What a great story that you are still together nearly fifty years later and still as happy as you were then. You remember it all so clearly. I'd also like to believe that dad, as he looks down on us now, would be prepared to admit that he was wrong.'

As Stan looked into his sister's eyes he could see the hint of a few tears starting to gather but he was not sure if they were tears of happiness for the life she had experienced with Tony, regret at recalling the disagreements with their dad or, maybe, just frustration that she was fearful of her memories of the past beginning to fade as her memories of the present had begun to with increasing regularity.

She turned her head and looked at Tony, sitting in his chair, reading.

She still had Tony. After all, they were meant to be together.

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