

Grandma

The most important figure in my childhood was my grandmother. She was born in 1875, grew up in a public house near Blackfriars Bridge and was the youngest of five children. Her first husband was a relative of Mrs Pankhurst, the suffragette. After her death, we discovered that she had a hard and difficult upbringing, and that her early life was often punctuated with tragedy. She had a reputation for hard work and with my grandfather, (her second husband), had built up a successful tea import business, although this was destroyed by the bombing of the docks in 1942. As a result, she was very strict; it was like living with Queen Victoria. She was rarely amused!

All her ten children were in awe of her authority, especially my Father who was the youngest. When my grandfather died in 1946, she was left alone in her bungalow. So, when I came along the 'family' decided it would be a good idea for my parents to move in and share the house expenses. A wonderful solution for them but a nightmare for my Mother, who was initially treated like the hired help.

She had a reputation for being psychic. Certainly, she seemed to be able to read my mind and could anticipate my reactions perfectly. In fact, I was so scared of her that when I started school I could read aloud, count and calculate change from shopping, embroider, knit, and crochet. All these skills she taught me.

What I couldn't do was talk coherently or hold a conversation. 'Little girls should be seen and not heard' was foremost in her philosophy of bringing up children and I was a brilliant listener but had no opinions on anything because I was never asked. Food, clothes, books to read...all were chosen for me.

As she grew older she suffered from 'turns'. She behaved in strange ways, such as emptying her hot water bottle into the kettle to save water. You can imagine how the tea tasted! She saved everything. Bottle tops, rubber bands, silver foil...nothing could be thrown away. And heaven forbid you should get your clothes dirty or not clear your plate of food. She made modern day efforts to recycle look positively minimal!

Two incidents of her psychic powers are impressive by any standards.

In our back garden was a huge rambling rose which covered fencing along one side of our property. One weekend, a pigeon got trapped in its spiky thorns. It was distressing to watch it try to free itself. My father tried and was pecked for his troubles. Alerted by the noise my grandmother came into the garden. I had seen the effect she had on the animals in our street many times, cats and dogs especially would cower at her feet when she approached them. On this Saturday afternoon, she stood in front of the poor bird and held up her hand. In an instance, the bird stopped struggling and my father carefully extracted it from the thorns. She then walked back into the house and the bird flew away. No-one made any comment. It was taken as normal!

I subsequently discovered that my great grandfather was a magician on the Victorian music halls. Perhaps that was where she developed her skill of controlling animals and birds.

The second incident was even stranger. She had been ill for some time and rarely left her bedroom. But on this morning, she came into the kitchen for breakfast. My father was just getting his briefcase packed ready to walk to the station and I was eating my porridge and thinking about school when she came out with the statement.

'What a pity about Arthur, still at least he didn't suffer and it's a good way to go. But a shock for Dot. Still her family will look after her'.

Uncle Arthur was her oldest son and lived about twenty miles away with his wife and family. Because Grandma often came out with odd things I don't think anyone took much notice but about thirty minutes later the doorbell rang. It was the telegram to say that my uncle had suffered a major heart attack and had died in the early hours of that morning. I think even my Dad was spooked on that occasion.

Nor did it finish there!

Grandma died aged 92. Two years later I got married. The night before my wedding my parents had invited their closest friends to a small party in our house, including Dad's old school friend Mac, with whom he had lost contact shortly after the war. They had met again quite by chance just a few months earlier, waiting for the train on Liverpool Street station. Mac's son Kieran also came to the party. We had only met him a couple of times, and it was the first time he had come to our house. On the way home, he talked animatedly about the old lady with whom he had spent a lot of the evening talking to in the kitchen. His parents couldn't work out who he was describing. It didn't match any of the other guests. On an impulse Mac found some old photos taken during the war. He immediately picked out my grandmother!

My parents didn't tell me until sometime later. But my mother said she had often heard her walking along the corridor from her bedroom to the kitchen, long after her death. My father's comment? She always wanted to be in full control of the family and their affairs...why should death stop her?