

"A very little key will open a very heavy door." — Hunted Down

Marian Wood

A life unlocked by a small key

I sat that day, pushing my Weetabix around my bowl, deep in thought I couldn't stop thinking about her. The most special lady in the world had now gone. Now in the ground and I can't stop crying. My heart is shattered, and no one will ever replace her. During the worst times of my life so far, she had been there. With her warm advice and tea and cake. I can't remember us ever having had a crossed word.

She was born in 1929, with tales of her childhood, tales of the war and meeting my grandfather. Tales of raising my dad and my uncles. Today she would have adored all her great grandchildren and they would have adored her.

So, sat there my heart was heavy, I miss my grand mother but life has moved on. Having gone through her belongings, not an easy task. I now have her piano which I still need to learn to play. Unfortunately, though due to my small daughter managing to open the top and throw smarties inside it, the piano today is needing to be mended.

A lot of other precious memories have been sold at auction. Furniture and china, her jewellery was shared amongst her grandchildren.

So, it was on this day about ten years ago now, that at that moment there was a knock on the door. Letting him in I knew it was the man to fix the piano, his ID badge said so. Making him a cup of tea my thoughts drifted again to my Grandmother who loved her piano and played it so well.

Walking back into the lounge, I was greeted by piano keys laid out on the floor and a squishy chocolate mess. The man, Mr Lindsey, sat there cleaning off the chocolate. How many smarties had she dropped inside? I think it must have been a big box the mess she had caused. As he cleaned, he methodically replaced them thus restoring the piano. As he reached the last of the keys he exclaimed.

"Wow, what's this? He pulled out a very small bag and passed it to me. I opened it,

"Oh my god, it's a key, why is that hidden inside the piano?"

"Well, does it lock the piano?"

"I don't think it has a lock" checking the front I could see that no it did not lock.

Mr Lindsey finished cleaning and restoring as I sat puzzling over what the key was for.

Having asked family and friends about the key we were all drawing a blank. A mystery had been found that day, had my Grandmother been hiding something? What did it open?

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Here am I today, still wondering about the little key. Over the years we had searched for diaries and letters, any clue as to what it fit. We had tried it in many locks and still no answer. Sat here now with my coffee reading the Gazette my eye catches a small article with the title found. It read

"Having purchased a lovely dresser at auction in 2009, we have just found a diary hidden inside it. The name written inside is Harold. We would really like to find its owner."

I wondered am I the owner? Harold was my grandfather. Did this diary hold the answer to the little key? Both hidden, it was possible they did go together. Maybe the diary has a lock. I looked at the number on the article and phoned it. I was soon redirected through the

phone system to a call handler who took all my details and said that he would ask Mr Hughes to phone me.

About a day later, Mr Hughes phoned, we exchanged phone numbers and I gave him my address. The same day he returned the diary. I thanked him very much and he thanked me for the lovely dresser. He said that a panel at the back had come off and that was when he had found it. The diary hadn't been read, he had just seen the name Harold written in the front. However, he thought it might be valuable sentimentally to someone. I agreed that it was. I now wanted to sit and read, see if it held the answer to the small key.

Sitting with my feet up now, mug of tea next to me, the diary is interesting but maybe too personal for me to be reading. I started to flick through it. My eyes now caught an image as I flicked, for inside was drawn a picture of the little key.

I looked back and started to read about the little key. Sitting here my heart started racing, I couldn't believe what was reading. Somewhere in the Cornwall countryside near the sea was a house which they had bought many years ago, before my dad was born. Inside the house was hidden a box which had valuables stored in it. They had never spoken about this house. It would have been sat abandoned for many years. When had they last visited? The key had been inside the piano which I have had for ten years now.

Our mission now was to find the house. I phoned my brother, he was surprised as well to learn about the house. We both turned on our lap tops and google maps. There was no postcode mentioned in the diary, just a house name, Lavender Cottage, Coast road, Penzance. We entered Coast road and we soon viewing the properties. They all appeared well looked after except one which had a very overgrown garden hiding the house. We decided that this must be Lavender Cottage.

"Ok Max, are you up for an adventure"

"Oh yes, definitely, can you get time off work? Let's go and explore, you do know this cottage is technically ours?"

"Yes, but it might not have been opened for nearly hundred years"

"Yes, but wow how exciting"

This was exciting, what were we about to find? All thanks to my daughter and her smarties and an honest man returning my grandfathers diary.

The next day I said goodbye to my husband and daughter and set off for Cornwall with Max. Driving up the carriage ways and country lanes both filled with excitement. This was a bit like the Famous Five off on an adventure, maybe we could be the Famous Two. I smiled to myself. After driving for what felt like an eternity, we finally found Coast Road. Finding the cottage with the overgrown garden we could not park on the drive. Leaving the car at the side of the road we started to climb over brambles to get to the door. Engraved in slate by the door read Lavender Cottage we were both relieved that we had reached our destination.

We were now looking at a large heavy wooden door. I looked down at the little key, surely not. Surely such a big heavy door would need a big key. Now putting the key inside the lock, I was surprised when it did turn. It now took a bit of persuasion to get the door to open but it was unlocked. After not being opened for so long it was no wonder that it was now swollen shut. Max now heaved his weight against the door to release it from the door frame, finally with a loud squeak it opened.

Walking in we could smell the dust, the cobwebs were everywhere. There was a pile of mail on the floor which I piled up on the unit in the hall. The carpets and the furniture all long forgotten. The cottage was tidy, and we could see photos of my grandparents. Ornaments sat on the dresser, this really was a home so why had they never mentioned it? Now

venturing upstairs, we found two bedrooms. Both with beds, made long ago and abandoned. Looking out of the back window, I gasped at the view, I was not expecting such a sight. I could see out to sea it was incredible. I could see the boats bobbing up and down and Sea gulls flying around. As I opened the window, I thought I could smell the sea air.

It was then that there was a knock at the door. We had been here about an hour now, how come had we got visitors. I crept back down stairs and asked,

“Who is it?”

“Police” Police, I thought, why? I opened the door,

“Yes officer”

“This house is empty and has been for many years, who are you? And why are you here?”

“My name is Susan Maitland, and this was my grandparents house. I have only just learnt about it which is why the house has been abandoned”.

“Ok, and how do we know you are telling the truth”

“Well, I have the door key.” Pulling the key out of my pocket I showed him that it worked in the lock. “Also, if anyone around here knew my grandmother they might say that I look like her, we were very alike.” Surprised at the size of the key he said,

“Wow, I thought a door this size would have a much bigger key”

“Yes, we were amazed too”

“Ok, Mrs Maitland, I will pass the message on. The neighbours were concerned. There has been no one here for so long now.

“That’s ok officer, I can see the concern, but honestly all is ok here. My brother and I are technically now the owners we just need to go through the legal channels. Having only just found out about it, here we are today, looking at what needs to be done”

“Alright well good luck with it, looks a nice place but might need some work”

“Yes, I agree, thankyou officer”

He then left and went to assure the neighbours that everything was alright. I now went back to exploring the house with Max. For such a small cottage it had a lot of character. The kitchen and bathroom told their own story. The water supply had been cut off and the lights did not work so no electric either. I wondered about the council tax then remembered the mountain of mail by the door. I was guessing the water company and fuel companies had cut off the water, the gas and the electric. The council tax was something else. I wondered how my dad had not known about it. Surely, they would have contacted next of kin.

I made the decision to now stop worrying about unpaid bills. We were here to find a box of valuables. I now felt in my pocket for the diary. Detailed in the diary it read “buried in Lavender Cottage.” What did he mean by buried? Was it under the floor boards? We had been in every room, we now started opening cupboards, nothing found so far, until Max screamed from the kitchen.

“In here Susan, come here.” I left the bedroom where I was now sat and ran downstairs. There was Max stood inside a cupboard. There was a box on the kitchen table, which he had found hiding under boards to the cupboard under the sink. Inside it he had found another key which had opened the door.

“Come here, look at this” he was excited. Walking over, I could see that this was not a cupboard but stairs leading down to a cellar. Neither of us had been looking for a cellar.

“Ok, did you bring a torch? The lights won’t work”.

“Funny enough, I have one in the car”. Max ran out and fetched his torch whilst I started to feel my way down the steps. Half way I stopped, I was scared, I couldn’t see anything and what was I about to find?

He soon returned and I was relieved to see the light flicker on. Continuing now down the stairs we were both shocked by what we saw next. The contents of the cellar must have been worth a fortune. Thinking to myself well that’s the council tax paid, I was not aware

how much really was here. Looking around we could see oil paintings and then jewellery. We looked at each other, what was all this stuff? Were our grandparent's smugglers? No one had known about this house. If we hadn't found the little key, we still wouldn't know. I felt gratitude towards my daughter for throwing her smarties inside the piano. Maybe he was an art dealer? Why had no one known about this house?

We sorted through the contents of the cellar. Finding at least thirty paintings and then numerous bracelets, rings and watches. Then in a drawer I found letters, evidence of paintings being bought and sold. This was a whole side to my grandparents lives that I had not known about.

We left the idyllic cottage a few days later. We put some paintings and jewellery in the car as well as taking back all the post and the letters found. On return, we spoke with our dad and invited the uncle's to join us. They were all as shocked as us to learn about the property in Cornwall and all amused with the story of the little key found inside the piano. They remembered times when their dad went away on business, but they did not know where he had gone. They had talked about moving to Cornwall but had thought it was just talk. My grandfather had died after a stroke, my grandmother had dementia at the end so she would have forgotten about it, that's if she knew about it, we assumed that she did.

After further investigation and phone calls, to people mentioned on the invoices we found that our grandfather was indeed an art dealer. The location of the house to the sea was just a coincidence, no evidence of smuggling. So, the valuables found, and the paintings were indeed all owned by him.

I had opened their post and found that money was owed to the water and gas and electric company. Due to non-payment it had all been cut off. There was a pile of council tax reminders, this bill would need to be paid. There was nothing from a bank so we guessed that the mortgage if there ever was one, must have been paid.

A while later we managed to sell the paintings and jewellery at auction. We negotiated with the council and came to an agreement with the council tax, then paid what we owed on the bills from the sales at auction. After checking the legal aspects of the property and ensuring it was now in mine and my brother's joint names, we made the decision to keep the cottage. We were then able to restore it and do all necessary work. It also enabled us to pay a gardening company to sort out the garden.

Speaking with a holiday company a few days later we made it a holiday let through the year. Leaving it empty some months so we could go and enjoy it too.

Finding the little key inside the piano had opened an aspect of my grandparents lives that we now knew about. We had both kept an oil painting. Mine was now sat proudly over my fireplace, the image of a family enjoying a woodland walk. It made me think of walking with my grandmother in the woods as a child. The wind rustling in the trees, the smells and sounds of the animals, the mud and the brown fallen leaves. Happy memories and happy days.

On days now visiting the cottage, my daughter loves it. The pretty garden and the sea air. The neighbours are now used to us visiting and have recounted stories of my grandparents. My grandmother had visited so she did know about it, but as far as the neighbours knew they hadn't had children. I wondered why the secret? Was the art dealing world that dangerous?

All this from an accident with Chocolate smarties and finding a hidden small key that opened a very large door to a secret Cornwall cottage. I sat and reflected whilst drinking my tea.

What an adventure, I am sure my grandmother is sat up in heaven with my grandfather both smiling down. I looked up the woodland painting, such happy memories and so many more now lay ahead of us.