

Free Time

Alec Maynard

The carriage was deserted. The station too. Bermondsey looked more worn than John remembered. An entire street of shut-up, empty shops. All but the local off-licence and Amir, who carried a fresh stack of papers with a warm smile. He had walked these same streets with his Grandmother as a child. There was an old, wooden bench missing most of its slats where John got his first kiss. He remembered how very sloppy it was, but he seldom felt that giddy excitement anymore. Though it had been over a year since he was last in Bermondsey, the route was second nature to him. So little was the risk of people bumping into him with everybody hiding at home John barely looked up from his phone the entire journey.

At the corner of the street, it was as if time slowed around John. Sure enough, there it stood, his Grandmother's house. The rosy front door was inviting set against the dull, damp autumnal backdrop of Bermondsey. Immediately he felt at home. Although, upon approach everything felt inexplicably smaller than the last time. John knocked on the door. Like the house, his Grandmother was the same as he recalled though smaller somehow. Hunched over as she was it had become a great difficulty to walk out into the hallway, not that she let it stop her or diminished the wide grin she wore. The door opened and a wave of warmth washed over John. Years later the familiar motley smell of mahogany, fresh flowers and musky carpet still lingered. As a child there was no greater comfort. John remembered there was once a cacophony of ticking clocks. They weren't sounding any longer. His Grandmother came as close as she dared. John longed to embrace her but hesitated for her own safety, lest he risk infecting her. The clocks weren't sounding any longer.

John walked through the hallway and into the living room as he had done his entire life. Not bounding through as a boy but striding as a man. The living room was a memorial to itself. Much like the rest of the house all of the furniture and ornaments were in their proper place, though the lustre John once had for them had faded. The various objects, trinkets and treasures sparkled as the sunlight poured through the large patio doors. A fine layer of dust was lit up in the air. On the mantelpiece above the television the surface was completely covered by a plethora of family photographs, wedding pictures and smiling graduates. John wrinkled his nose and picked up his own picture from amongst the beaming faces of his cousins. John adjusted

the photo that had slipped in it's frame. The young man in the photo may as well have been a different person. John pondered the wisdom he might impart to his past self, full of optimism and ambition, in the hope that he might avoid making the same mistakes in life.

"Let me get the tea."

"No, please allow me, Gran."

"Don't be silly, dear, I insist. Take a seat and eat some cake."

"I'm trying to get fit, only recently started jogging." The sofa felt as cosy as it did from John's childhood. His Gran motioned to the perfectly arranged plate of confectioneries.

"What is it they say? I can resist anything but temptation."

"Go on then! I suppose one positive of this madness is, working from home, I finally have a bit more time for the things in life that matter." John's Grandmother poured tea into immaculate china cups as they effortlessly sank into conversation. They caught up on the proceeding week, then months and then recollected the joyous shared memories of years passed.

“The one good thing about all of *this*, I’ve been painting.”

With a skip in her step, John’s Grandmother manoeuvred herself off the armchair and hurried out. When she returned she was brandishing a wonderfully, elaborate oil painting. She sat and proudly presented it.

It was at that moment pain struck John. His Grandmother smiled at him with the same warmth she always had, but she was old now. Her hair was white, her skin wrinkled and weathered. The seat beside hers where Granddad sat was empty. With a knotted throat, John gazed into his steaming cup of tea. John felt fatigued, he looked worse. His parents were not there, his brother and sister weren’t either. Time had moved on, everyone was scattered. It struck John that he was another dusty ornament in the house, stuck as the world hurtled on around him. His eyes welled up. Time stood still in his Grandmother’s house, unlike outside.

A hand rested on his.

“It’s alright, dear.”

“Gran, you shouldn’t get so close.” John searched deep into her eyes. They were unmarred by age and contained a razor-sharp intellect; full of comfort, wisdom and energy. “I meant to visit sooner. Everything got busy with work.”

“Keep on keeping on. That’s all any of us can do. You’re here right now and it’s lovely to see you.” Many thoughts passed through John’s mind, many loving emotions to convey and much gratitude to express, but the words remained unsaid and the moment passed. She knew.

All too soon it was time to leave. John’s Grandmother guided him to the front door.

“Next time I’m giving you the biggest hug!”

“You’re always welcome for an afternoon tea. Perhaps a biscuit or two.”

“That sound’s delightful. Oh, and we’ll get those clocks ticking again.”

John said goodbye and walked away. His Grandmother waved him off until the end of the street. As John turned the corner, he caught what looked like a sad expression on his Grandmother’s face as she closed the front door. John promised himself that before long he would return. He sighed and swiftly pulled out his mobile phone. He had emails, missed calls and a myriad of other notifications. And just like that the world rapidly sped up again.