

Len's Life

By

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Life

Len's coarse, creased hand clutched her small, playful fingers as she kept bending down to find another stone and throw it into the water. They strolled aimlessly along the beach in his hometown of Colwell on the Isle of Wight. He looked around and absorbed his small town; the butchers, the out-of-place carpet shops and the Vine pub. Then he noticed the cigarette butts and graffiti, and then sighed; the town had changed so much from his youth. But then he gazed down at his innocent, sweet great-granddaughter and that put a smile back on his seasoned face.

Back at the house he could smell his wonderful wife's cooking. At 93, Lena could still make the best stew and dumplings. Their great-granddaughter, Jaimie, looked forward to dinner the most. After yet another day out with Jaimie, he would leave her to play whilst he would relax in his favourite chair. His wife always thought he was asleep; he was never asleep, just reflecting. He reminded himself of how lucky he was to be able to walk on the beach with his little angel, how lucky he was to still be happily married after all these years to the most wonderful woman in the world, and how lucky he was to have left such a legacy on this Earth. These thoughts always brought him back to one vivid night that, quite literally, defined his life forever.

It took him back to 16 April, 1943. He was in the Navy and was serving on the Destroyer, *HMS Pakenham*. It was hit by a torpedo whilst intercepting an Italian convoy. He remembered it so vividly. The ship was up against two Italian torpedo Destroyers called *Cigno* and *Cassiopea*. It had managed to sink one, but only damage the other. The hit to *HMS Pakenham* was too severe and although there were attempts to salvage her, she had to be scuttled. It was at this point the ship was going under. At that same time he was with his Captain and they were trapped in a small compartment filling with water – quickly. They only had time for one man to escape without drowning and with great valour his Captain gave his life. He gave his life to save Len's. Not a day went by when he didn't think of his Captain, his hero. It was because of him he could go to the bingo every Monday and Thursday, sometimes taking Jaimie, hoping she'd bring some luck. It was because of him that Len could enjoy the daffodils that bloomed around the house in spring and that he could share tea and biscuits with Jaimie before going to bed. Each of these little things reminded him of that moment when his Captain looked him in the eye with utter selflessness and performed the greatest act of nobility - giving his life up; for Len. It was from that point on Len assured himself to get the very best out of the life he had been gifted.

He was relaxing here now; just shy of ninety years old, with his loyal wife of similar age, sharing stew and dumplings with a beautiful angel four

generations his junior. He would think of the legacy he was going to leave behind and would sometimes mumble to the sky, 'I ain't done too badly, Cap'. In fact, if he thought about it too much, he would almost cry with pride.

Death

The two of them were trapped and time was running out. Water was filling the compartment and they were desperately looking for a way out before they were taken down with the ship, *HMS Pakenham*.

'This way!' the Captain shouted through the gushes of water.

'Captain, Where are you? I can barely see you!'

'Over here, this is the way out! Get over here.'

'Yes, sir.' Len waded his way through the ice-cold water toward his Captain. 'It's freezing sir.'

'Then warm yourself up and help me with this latch.' They pulled and pulled. 'Blast! Damn thing is wedged. We need another exit!'

'Are we going to get out of here, sir?' Young Len was coming to terms with the reality of the situation.

His captain paused and looked his young comrade in the eye. 'Yes, private. You're going to get out of here.'

'Am I going to see my family again?'

'Of course.'

'And you?' A pause.

'Where's the next exit?'

'The other end I think, Captain.'

'OK, the other end. Keep up!' The water was up to their chests and rising fast. 'Over here, there's another latch. Help me.' They rushed to the latch and starting pulling. 'C'mon Private, pull!'

'It's moving, sir! It's moving! Haha!' The latch opened and a giant spray of water hit them both. Len managed to hang onto the door, his Captain was swept away to the back of the room. 'Captain! Captain! Come back! Please come back!' Len swam through the opening they had opened and waited on the other side. He needed to close the latch to stop the flow so he could escape. Time was running out.

'Len!'

'Captain? Captain! Where are you?'

'There's no time, you go! I can't get there in time and my leg is caught.'

'I'll come back.'

'No! If you come back, you won't make it out.'

'I can't leave you, sir! I just can't.'

'Leave me. Just get the hell out of here!'

'But I wa...'

'That's an order, Private! Go!' Although it could not be seen because of the water on his face, Len was crying.

He couldn't think of anything profound to say.

'Thank you, sir.'

'Get out of here!' Len closed the hatch against the flow of the water and left his Captain, his friend, to die.

Change

It was a new place in his town. He'd been there years, everyone knew him, everyone cherished him, and his wife. So it was only fitting for the married couple of 60 years to visit the new pub that had just opened. They also had someone who apparently had some big news.

The smell of new paint was overwhelming. It reminded Len of the copious paint jobs he had done on that blasted shed, at his wife's request. They took a seat and they immediately noticed the condiments on the table. The place had only been open a few weeks and already the ketchup lid was smothered in congealed blotches of red. Lena, Len's sweet but greying wife, had always hated things like that. She stared at the barman in disappointment, but obviously the barman didn't have a clue what she was frowning at and saw it as a cue to come over. "Hi guys, we don't usually do table service but it's pretty dead in here. So what can I get ya?" He was from out of town. They noticed straight away; firstly because he didn't know them and secondly because they didn't know him. 'We'll have a pot of tea please.'

'Pot...of...tea.' He said it out loud as he wrote it down the *one* item. 'anything else?' Lena looked at the congealed ketchup and wondered what the kitchen must have looked like.

'Tea is fine.' Len spoke for her, he could sense her answer.

'You want sugar?'

'Sorry?' Len was taken aback by the abruptness of the question.

'Sugar, the stuff you put in the tea to make it taste sweet.'

Len was beginning to get impatient with this imbecile, but was a gentleman nonetheless. He had been a gentleman all his life and this ignorant 'boy' with all the metal pierced in his face wasn't going to change him...ever.

'No sugar for me thank you, but my wife will have one spoonful.'

The barman walked away, dragging his feet along the wooden floor that was still too new to have beer stains over it.

The bar was empty. Music was in the background that both of them had never heard of. It was some white man talking the words, well, the words that weren't being bleeped out - it was just a noise to them. They were both about 90 though and they weren't here for themselves anyway. They were here for their great-granddaughter, Jaimie. They didn't know why but they were excited because she had asked them to meet her here, at this bar with the loud music, rude staff and congealed ketchup. The only other people in the bar were two men, each with a beer and making awkward small talk. They would talk about the weather then go silent, look around for

inspiration, and then continue to talk about the weather. They both looked out at the sea, the view was good, and they both agreed that the view was the best attribute this place had. They waited in anticipation. Not much excited the ancient couple except for when their sweet, innocent great granddaughter had exciting news. Their pondering as to what her news would be was interrupted by the jangling of tea cups on a tray coming towards them. As the barman came to the table, he made space by shoving the condiments out of the way using the tray, spilling the tea onto the tray as he did so. He was the cliché of a terrible waiter. The two pensioners looked at each other in dismay. He handed a cup to each of them. They both knew before he said anything they were the wrong way around.

‘Ere you go, one with, one without. Anything else?’

‘Milk?’

‘Oh yeah, two secs.’ As he walked away holding the tray by his side, leaving a trail of tea across the pub floor, Jaimie walked in. Len saw her friend and instantly forgot about the incompetent barman. His aging face lit up as he saw her float across the room, she was just as happy to see him as he was to see her. Lena saw her husband’s face and instantly knew Jaimie was here. He only smiled like that when he saw her, it made Lena smile too.

‘Hi guys!’ Jaimie kissed them both.

‘My dear, how are you? Do you want anything?’ Len would have bought her the world if he could.

‘No, no. I can’t be too long as I have a lot of organising to do.’

‘Organising? Organising for what?’ They were both curious. Jaimie always phoned to give a weekly update on her news, nothing big was happening this week.

‘Well, you know Ryan. The guy I have been seeing for a few months?’

‘Yes, of course. You’ve been telling us all about him but haven’t had a chance to meet him. It’s frustrating not being able to put a face to the name.’ They genuinely cared about her love life; they just wanted her to be happy.

‘Well, you already have.’

‘Huh?’ they responded in unison.

At that point, the sound of jeans being dragged across the floor interrupted them. It was the barman holding the milk they’d asked for, fashioning his Calvin Klein pants to the world. Lena grimaced. The only person smiling now was Jaimie. Suddenly the barman perked up too. He gave a happy yet conscious smile – he didn’t want his reputation ruined smiling at a girl.

‘Jaimie, I didn’t know you were coming in.’

'Well I thought I'd surprise you.' Len was observing the conversation intently. Jaimie nearly lost her place until she pulled herself away from the conversation. She looked at her precious great grandparents.

'Guys, this is Ryan. My...fiancé.'

To say there was a silence was an understatement.

Jaimie feebly lifted up her hand to show a ring, trying to get a reaction. The ring looked like it had been on special offer at Argos. They both smiled at Len, looking for a positive reaction. He looked straight into Ryan's eyes, through his bleach black hair, down to his torn, baggy jeans until finally sighing.

'My tea needs milk.'