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Enter the Panama Hat

by Richard Wilding

“Phew.”

“But, Herc, I think it is you who is Goldilocks. It is you who has the paper heart.”

A paper heart upon which she wrote a new story for my life.

The story of unlikely events which led to my holding Yolanda in my arms in a hotel in Quito had begun many years earlier when my father had thrown a Panama Hat onto Sally’s copy of ‘A Manual For Cleaning Women’.

We lived above the family shop, Graham’s Milliners, on Croydon high street. The shop front was painted a deep mauve – “aubergine” my mother had called it. In the window to the left of the door were women’s bonnets of all styles, while to the right were the men’s. My father made them. All of them. It was no secret that while he was fond of his family, he was fonder still of his hats.

We heard him bolt the front door as the clock struck five and a moment later heard the familiar, reassuring sound of his heavy boots on the stairs. He was not a man afraid of eating, my father, nor was he abstemious when it came to the bottle. He was in consequence a heavysset man of considerable girth, the equator of his waist being something it could take a while to circumnavigate. He had a full head of hair, purest grey, which struck out at every angle other than downwards, in defiance of both pomade and gravity.

While he had a ready smile and a sunny disposition, he could be quick to temper. His anger was never directed at us. It was reserved exclusively for the enduring mysteries of his financial affairs. He would stay up late by candlelight when the house was quiet save for the scratch, scratch, scratch of a quill on paper while he tried to balance his books or wrote to his clients asking once again that they pay their bills. More entrepreneur than pragmatist, a dreamer rather than a hard-headed businessman, I don't believe my father ever had as firm a grip on his finances as he would have liked us to have believed.

The door to the parlour where we sat eating our bread and cheese – damson jam to follow - was opened with a flourish. Father's face, however, didn't appear. What did appear instead was something none of us had ever seen before: a white straw hat! "Ta-da!" father exclaimed, entering the room like a circus ringmaster. With the panache of a music hall artist he threw the hat across the room towards Sally who was sitting at the piano, her elbow resting on F, G and A. We three children screamed with pleasure. Sally, meanwhile, did not even look up from her book. "What in the name of the Lord do you call that?"

"It's a Panama Hat," declared my father, "and it is the first in all England. And," he added "it is going to make our fortune."