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The Ladder

by Richard Lewis

When the pandemic hit, those early days of lockdown were something of a novelty for Stephen. Like others he was going nowhere and there was a grim fascination in watching the news to hear the latest statistics on the unfolding drama. All the world was quiet and it was a relief being given permission to do nothing, though with summer having come early there were many jobs to be getting on with in the garden. But then as time started to drag he thought to himself, ‘any idiot can face a crisis, it’s this day to day living that wears me out.’

It was during lockdown, having turned his attentions to the garden, that Stephen noticed the old ladder that had found its way into his possession after his father died all those years ago. A relic of the past, it had almost vanished in the undergrowth, discarded in the driveway to be claimed by legions of nettles, dandelions and chickweed. Once upright and useful it now lay unwanted, just a sorry frame of steel; ‘like a reflexion of my father’s poor bones, resting in the darkened earth,’ he considered, or perhaps like of a part of myself, held down by the weight of passing years.’ He remembered how his father had worked with that ladder in a hive of activity, attending to the needs of the house in the sleepy Welsh village of Morganstown, where he grew up.

Stephen’s mind kept going back to the ladder, his thoughts tumbling down the rungs of time, back to his childhood when life stretched out forever. ‘Now,’ he thought, ‘days might be long but life is short.’ In his mind he stepped into that bygone world to the house half way up the hill, or was it half way down the hill, he wasn’t sure. White House stood like a small chalky mountain amongst the pairs of stone semies. Being called White House meant lashings of paint were needed to keep the pebble dashed walls pristine, like a bright shield covering a multitude of sins inside.

He imagined he could see his father working away, content as a bird perched in the high sycamores, out of reach of his nagging wife, a small mountain herself. Every second summer his father would hoist up the sliding rails of steel and like spiderman work and his way round every inch of wall, giving it a new coat. Spreading the white stuff like a fresh fall of snow.

He'd climb the ladder as easy as a staircase; there was no worry about health and safety in those days as he balanced on one leg, stretching as far as his strong arm would allow. It was just a job that had to be done.

Stepping inside the house it was another story though. In his room the drab linoleum curled at the edges and the walls had not seen a lick of paint in years. There was the old iron hospital bed with its anchor patterned bedspread and large glass cabinet stuffed with books that no-one read. In winter the panes of the casement windows frosted over and rattled in annoyance as the wind squeezed its way through unhelpful gaps, making the bedroom more suitable for cold storage. The best thing about his bedroom was the view out onto woodland and the valley beyond. Stephen remembered the summers when house martins built their nests under the eaves and he'd watch them darting back and fore, while in the distance a squadron of crows squabbled high in the beech trees, commanding the timber tops.

Climbing the rungs back to the reality of his lockdown world, it all seemed so strange to think of his father as a young man, so vital and active and himself an old man, his strength fading with each passing year. That thieving pirate of time had taken his best years, leaving his own weary frame to do battle with the tangled weeds of time that remained.