

Grandfather's Letter

by Sue Hitchcock

I was thirty-three when my father died. It was too soon and I would miss him – he was so kind, but at least he had met my two little daughters before his death.

I knew he hated his father, who had abandoned him and his mother, when he had started work at fourteen and I even remember some legal efforts when I was a child to extract some money from him. My father very much resented the fact that the children of his father's second marriage had benefitted from a public school education, while he had had to be contented with a new pair of pyjamas for a Christmas present one year, and school shoes another.

His mother, Lydia Brown, had come to London from Glasgow looking for work. The Hitchcock leather factory gave her more independence than being a housemaid, and she was dextrous and hardworking, making briefcases and footballs amongst other things. Besides that she was small and pretty and soon she attracted the attention of the owner's handsome young son. He took advantage of her and she got pregnant. She was not to be discarded and they married. The breakdown of their relationship was not something to make public, leaving a mystery I could never unravel.

After my father's funeral, my mother gave me a letter, which she warned me to read in private. What sort of revelation might it disclose?

The letter revealed, not an amazing violence or hidden secret, but the bitter resentment of a relationship devoid of love. Had the birth of the baby been so traumatic that Lydia could not bear the thought of so much pain again? Had Lydia been brought up to regard intercourse as something shameful? Had the initial coming together been more like rape and the following legitimization of the imminent birth acceptable, when the alternative would have been poverty or prostitution. My grandfather had survived fourteen years without sex, without even the minimum of affection. He complained that Lydia gave more affection to her cat, how he envied the kisses she gave it. Now his son was old enough to leave school and contribute to the housekeeping, he felt it was time to make a new life for himself. It was time to go.

Lydia continued to work at the leather factory and made a special briefcase for me, when I left school. My father always did his duty towards my grandmother, working nearby so he could see her in his lunch hour. Then, when he retired and moved to Suffolk, visiting her every week, right up to his death. She even outlived him by a few months, but she was a joyless woman, and maybe always had been.