

LITTLE WEM

PART ONE - AGED PARENT

Little Wem stood in the Aged's garden, breathing a sigh as tall and long as he was. Cry, everyone said, let it out. But he couldn't. He made an effort to unclench his fists, like the Aged had always requested of him. He raised his face, breathed in the day's cold. He wanted to feel cold, and numb, but he felt lost, whether he sat inside, walked about, or stood watching the birds peck for worms in the unweeded garden.

He felt he'd not been given time to get to know the Aged properly. Not like the Aged had got to know his Aged Parent before him. But as can be the blisteringly sad way, by the time the Aged had finished his working life, he wasn't allotted much in the way of the 'rest' of his life, to do the things he'd planned; To ease into the velvet armchair, sunken lumpy by the Aged before him; To potter with The Trotters, who were currently snuffling bristled snouts around the curdled turf of the garden; The garden, that he never got time to fully tend.

Little Wem released the cold from his lungs back into the misty white, as a demotivated bird upped and left the hard ground, empty mouthed. His eyes fell on the Aged's beloved greenhouse that had been left to algaefy like an old fish tank. Some wilting shrubs that underlined the high, ramparted wall, would never have you believe, in their current state, that they had once born the perfectly red, scaly heads of John Wemmick's famously tamed, wild strawberries, though with eyes squeezed tight enough, Little Wem could just imagine them hanging, prime and minutely bulbous, ready for creaming, sugaring, and lip-licking. He spied the furthest corner, where ran the runaways, the Aged's favourites - a group of ambitious sweet-peas, creeping subtly upwards, left to scale the crumbling wall like convicts.

No, the Aged was not to enjoy his long planned-for, earthly delights. He'd been swiftly, but mercifully, called on to his next appointment. Punctual and efficient as ever, he'd responded with complete professional efficacy, exiting stage right - and falling clean out of

bed, cold and still as a stone in a river, precisely how he looked in discovery. With the yellow tinge of crowing day creeping over his bare blue feet, Wem stood over his Father, his eyes with the glassy stillness the dead embody, his own reflecting the vision of the Aged swimming before him, as if he lay leagues under the wavering waters of Lethe, waters the younger would not be able to swim, or drink, until his own time came.

He'd comforted himself with the thought that, despite the Aged's love of the self-built castle he'd now inherited, in all likelihood, it would have sent Old Wemmick mind numbingly, eye rubbingly, hair-on-endingly insensible, spending every day here, suspecting the joy of the place, lay in the leaving it to come back. Even when time finally was his own, after life driven by a subordinate's purpose, he'd start the day with small ferocious eyes wide, and swish his hands together, brisk as Lady M at her damned spot, muttering 'Things to do, things to do', when in fact, there really was no 'thing' to do at all.

He was brought out of his garden reverie by a slight mew. Ms Tibbs was angling against his shins in a bid for food. Sighing, he drew himself indoors.

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Wem hadn't spent the greater part of his life here at Walworth. He'd lived away for large chunks, preparing for a life of labour and, never happier than when outdoors, in sheep-dotted fields, the Aged had encouraged his enterprises, ensconcing him with a childless farm-labourer and his wife, where even from young, he was handy enough to milk a cow. He missed the countryside. It felt cavernous in here, for such intimate quarters, especially now he knew that as night approached, the chalky walls would grow black and long with just one shadow, two, counting Ms Tibbs.

'C'mon then Little Miss. Let's be having you some dinner.'

He'd set two places at table again, and had to remind himself to stop keeping an extra plate of whatever, stodgifying on the stove. He put away the extra place, and later, in the pitch, hooting-black, he'd scrape the contents of the other plate out for the Trotters. He never could eat it. That, for Little Wem, would have been like an admission.

PART TWO - PORTABLE PROPERTY

The Aged had provided well for his chip off the old block, with plenty of what he'd called, portable property. The Aged had called him 'The Chip', with a sardonic smile on his inscrutable face, same smile as when he insisted on being called Aged, even when he wasn't so old. It seemed to amuse him.

The younger couldn't have had a more different physiognomy from the elder. The Chip just didn't have the eyebrows for it for one - orderly lines that they were, wholly inadequate for scrunching, crumpling, creasing or wrinkling into various compositions. Little Wem's surprise had to be expressed audibly, through the wooden O of his mouth, whereas with one arch of the Aged's badger brow, displeasure could ripple through the atmosphere, while keeping intact an otherwise friendly air. Where Old Wem was small of stature, Little Wem was long limbed and exaggerated, large eyes, wide jaw, plush, plummy lips, big hands with an odd, refined elegance. He drew fluttering and longing looks, from girls coquettish, and shy, which had always embarrassed Little Wem, but drawn pride and rosycheeked chuckles from the elder. 'You'd break some hearts my boy, if only you knew how', he'd say with that pleasant, sardonic face, looking side-on at the long graceful figure and the handsome, shy shining face of the awkward, blushing son, a bashful discomfit flushed in his cheeks, and tinging his broad throat pink

The Aged had tried to pass on his knowledge, but Little Wem had been allowed to drift off, like a dream, into dreams, and when the Aged charged him with being a dreamer, it felt less of an accusation, than a compliment. He remembered Father's smile at what must have seemed such simple prospects to a man of the city. Mother had lauded how good he was with his hands, strong and powerful, and Old Wemmick, pleased to let him use them, had gladly sent him off into manual labour, rather than the muted entanglements of a clerk's work, and the grimy, oft unrealised expectations of London life.

Now you might find it hard to believe, but Little Wem had never seen inside a certain room of the Aged's house. More out of necessity than curiosity, did he enter. It was Mary-Anne, old friend of Mother's, phenomenal nose, and occasional housekeeper, who nudged him.

‘Property, portable or not must be dealt with. My Skiffy would turn in her grave if she knew the old place was going to pot like this, unopened rooms and the like. She would. Turn in her grave!’

Skiffy’s earthly representative stood bustling, wider than she was long ways, flushed the hue of a vibrant ginger flower, and with handfuls of her own elbows, she was waiting for Little Wem to lead the way, and abolish the curiosity causing her acute pain in her phenomenal nose. Little Wem paused.

‘Well, go on then!’

Wem gulped. ‘I’m not scared’ he said, as if he’d been asked if he were.

‘Well go on then lad.’ Mary-Anne simmered like a boiling kettle, curiosity like steam apparently rising.

‘To see you a grown man, frightened of going in a room of his own house. I’m trying, God help me Skiffy. I AM trying. But don’t he make it hard.’

Little Wem’s eyes rolled heavenbound, he took a deep courage-summoner, and reached out.

He’d imagined the room many times, and had concluded because of the turreted exterior, that it would be cylindrically imposing, like Eurydice’s tunnel, but already level with the earth, would be pointed skywards, and be packed with redundant oddities and plentiful with portables.

His reticence had been caused, partly, because of sleepless nights spent in this place, lying awake, when, with the stars mocking an adamant mind busy refusing sleep, all manner of grotesques would gush forwards, leaving him only to wonder - where such rushing bloodied images came from. With fistfuls of blankets to mouth, and wide-awake eyes lit only by a laughing moon, he’d imagine what jagged and unnatural contents might be housed in the forbidden room.

He believed one particular incident had triggered it. Thirsty as young minds are for grotesquery’s, that make closing eyes to a horror an impossibility, an image of two, towering, morbidly plastered faces had been drunken in by the little, Little Wem, in the one time he’d visited the Aged’s workplace. The static, alabaster visages, had quenched any further desire to trespass into the Aged’s offices again, and Wemmick’s demeanour itself had unnerved

him. It had been as if, in Father's place, there'd been an imposter - a version of Father with the same wolf hair, face alert, arms spindly, small hands busy. It was as if there were twin Wemmicks, and that was the wrong one. He'd shown no further curiosity towards that vague and devastatingly defining question – what is it that you do? - Not so much fearing the question, as the answer. Because of these childhood nightmare-fancies, he worried the room might devastate his image of the Aged as the peaceable man he'd loved. The door creaked as it opened.

It was lighter than expected, curtains, usually closed, drawn apart wide and clean. Expecting a glittering trove of cob-webbed portables, torn canvases of forlorn ancient faces, puzzlingly inscribed watchchains, stopped clocks, books stacked floor to crooked ceiling - the walls were bare, but for a small oval mirror, where he caught his face, and Mary-Anne's quick eyes, steeled on him at first, then in fleeting, squirrelish grabs, flashing around, taken aback at the sparcity. Not even a spider or his friend the fly had deemed to grace it. An oak desk centred the room, so splintered and thick it looked like a suitably shaped tree had been plonked in to save the carvers a job.

All there was in there was paper. Paper paper everywhere and not a drop of ink. A horsehair high-backed chair was placed centrally, facing outside, only the snooty assembly of saddleback sows afforded a look in. It was a surprise to see everything so clear of the transportable assets so highly prized in his daily teachings. Mary-Anne relied on a good old-fashioned throat clearance. 'Right then'

Little Wem's eyes didn't move from the chair.

'I've left chicken and leek in the kitchen, giblets for Ms Tibbs too' - and with tongue-between-teeth, out tip-toed Mary-Anne.

Wem inched forwards, pulse thudding his temples, loud, ringing-silence piercing his ears. The pale haze of a darkening day glimmered on the beaded forehead of his relief, as he clenched the chair, as if it were the throat of a menace, and turning it, saw only green indented leather, shining its emptiness proudly, in the white of the late evening light. No gossamer laced figure, no chain-riddled apparition, no muddied and gasping, saucer-eyed corpse. But there was a letter. And it was addressed to him.

PART THREE - MOLLY'S HANDS

Little Wem's hair on end, fervent hands ferreting reams of disordered papers, cat meowing and scratching the door – all of these were more than Skiffy's representative on earth could take. At a loss where to start, the cat's protestations most newly catching her attention, Mary-Anne took up the nearest complaint.

'What happened to Tibb's giblets?' 'Have you been here all - ?' 'Oh Lord, Skiffy I am trying'

'Sorry Mary-Anne. Thank you!' With that he dashed past, the documents flying at empty walls and gambolling the floor, Mary-Anne drawn against the wall, eyes to rafters, lips rumbling seraphically-aimed pleas for understanding from Dear Departed Skiffy, hands to face, elbows bosomed, she stood as if in fear of being brutally bombarded by a broom, and not the thin air, into which the mighty Little Wem had vanished.

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He found himself in the place that had occupied his nightmares for as long as he could remember. Because his frame now towered too, the room looked smaller. The mahogany surfaces no longer gleamed with the grease of a thousand elbows, it had less the grave air of serious business, no stacked piles of ribboned files. A chair was swivelled away from a desk free of clutter. The room, lit by skylight, was heavy with a clouded moon eager to initiate nocturnal proceedings. Wem's voice echoed round the chamber.

'Mr Jagers?'

Wem picked up from a table, a jaundiced volume, loosening from its binding like old teeth in an old mouth. He heard a squeak, and with a thump, closed the book. The chair began to turn, slowly as a screw. Into view, came an etiolated old crow, formerly of sharp, black plumage, now whitened, a twilit crow in snow fall. Dark eyes, tinged cerulean with cataract, stared off-centre, while his ears strained and angled to locate him.

'Molly? Who is this?' The frame had withered but the voice was the same, a foxes' tongue, sly and smooth.

‘It’s Y-young Wemmick, Sir.’

‘John?’ the old man’s upper body breathed to life and inflated forwards, like the last exhalation of a corpse that can spring up with one last blast of bodily air.

‘Little Wem Mr Jagers, J-J-John’s son.’

The old boy froze, still-black eyebrows, meeting. ‘Little Wem? That’s your name?’

‘Wem Wemmick Sir, John Wemmick’s boy.’

‘I know *who* you are boy I asked if that’s what he named you.’

Little Wem picked at his thumbs, exposing his nervousness, and a habit that often left his fingers blotched and peeling.

‘They call me Little Wem Sir, never owned the name John.’

‘Wem Wemmick?’

‘Only names I know Sir.’

Jagers muttered about the certainty of recurrence, his lip curdled, an un-humorous shock of mirthless laughter was quickly converted into a dredging of ailing lungs. Wem eyed the old rug, brushed plush as the day it was laid - most visitors, he wagered, neither wanting, nor being afforded the chance to stay long enough to wear it out. He thought on how his Father’s feet had trodden where he stood now, and shuddered to think on all he must have been privy to, in his capacity as that other Wemmick.

‘And so, Little Wem, it falls to me.’

Wem stalled.

‘You have been left a letter, you have come to me, I deduce dear Father has passed.’

‘Yes Sir.’

‘Funeral?’

‘Private and personal, Sir, not wanting you to see him like that, were his sentiments concerning it.’

‘Your’, short pause, ‘Mother?’

‘Gone, some six years Sir.’

‘Dead?’ Jagers’ face lifted in the eerie beam of skylight.

‘Yes. Sir.’

With unexpected agility, the scrape of chair on floor grated, the withered crow stood, flapped to the fireplace, with its grey grate long cleared of ash, where he stood, hands behind him, as if winged and warming himself by invisible flames.

‘Come and dine with me.’ Wem felt years of practise in the impressive immobility, whereby veiled eyes and thin lips stayed firm.

‘Engaged elsewhere?’

‘No Sir.’

‘Then,’ said Jagers, ‘come, after all, every man ought to know his own business best.’

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Had he memories before the age of three, what did he remember of early life? Jagers had rhetorically posed questions, setting a pace that never allowed him reply. Over a succulent dinner, Jagers had put forward a series of cases regarding prosecuted, foresworn, be-devilled children, born as spawn, who would grow into fish, who would grow only to swim to the ends of his net. His forehead furrowed as he chattered, sounding increasingly befuddled. Wem’s tension eased, his shoulders unlocked, his voice re-engaged its depths. As Jagers patted the ends of his napkin to his down-turned mouth, he spoke of times apparently still fresh in his clogged mind. Wemmick’s letter, and Wem’s questions, was covered in incoherent stabs.

‘Give the children into my hands’ were the drowsy, closing sentiments. Wem eased his serviette from chin to plate, edged out his seat. Jagers’ vibrations paused, Wem froze, but the pale-tired head merely lolled, and dropped to resume its resounding snores.

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Ms Tibbs' mew became the roaring purr of a lioness, as she winked sly green eyes as Wem laid the table, setting down mis-matched chintz, examples of his portable acquisitions. The sizzle of chops spat from the stove, soil-brushed mint from the garden lay jagged sweet on the table ready for saucing. He stepped back into the parlour – he'd set two places again. He whistled. The table was indeed laid for two. He was expecting a friend to dinner, a friend he hadn't seen for nearly eleven years.

Jaggers had echoed a line from the Aged's letter - 'You have her hands boy, you most definitely have her hands.' The manuscript that would enable Wem to 'know his own business', as Jaggers claimed, lay on the side, unopened.

'You were his most portable property boy, and most prized. A good life, had you not? *She* was not so lucky. You have no idea how lucky *you* were boy.' His slurred syllables had become insensible. The glazed simplicity from such a formerly shrewd old crow had caused sadness in Wem, who neither understood, nor wanted to delve into Jaggers' ragged, tattered verbiage. He opened a drawer, and swept the manuscript away from sight. The sideboard creaked as he leaned in to draw another plate. Pip was bringing an old acquaintance with him to Walworth, a lady.

Wem smiled, his dark, handsome face alight. There would be three shadows growing long against the wall, in the tranquil, amber evening light that night - Four, including Ms Tibbs.