

‘Pop

A Taggerty writer

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Lottie can feel a finger tracing a circle on the palm of her hand . . .

‘Round and round the garden

Like a teddy bear,

One step, two steps’ . . . the fingers walk up her arm and there is joyful anticipation . . .

‘And tickle you under there.’ Lottie laughs with glee, and ‘Pop’ does too.

Pop is her grandfather and she loves him to bits! She’s seated on his knee in his favourite armchair.

The games continue; this time the rhyme is:

‘Can you keep a secret?

I don’t suppose you can,

You mustn’t laugh,

You mustn’t cry,

But do the best you can.’

The rhyme is different, but the actions are the same, ending in laughter and smiles.

Lottie could sit on Pop’s knee for hours and hours quite happily. He pulls out a filter paper, placing it in his yellow stained fingers, then neatly fills it with tobacco. When he’s satisfied that it is just the right amount, he licks one side of the paper, then proceeds to roll his cigarette. He lights it up and Lottie waits . . . Pop is the master of smoke rings. To a child, there seems nothing more magical than watching those perfect circles of smoke rise into the air and gently waft into the ether. Seemingly without effort, ring after ring appears and she is completely transfixed.

After a time, Pop is ready for a walk outside. His bent stature means that it’s not too far for Lottie to reach his hand. Pop’s bowed legs walk slowly, but Lottie is in no hurry. Stepping out onto the back verandah, they are entering Pop’s domain. On the left there is a large

workshop where the sweet smell of sawdust from his woodworking projects hangs in the air. As they enter, Pop proudly shows her his latest carpentry creation. He makes beautiful pieces of furniture including stools, hall tables and chairs, turning the wood for the legs on his lathe which seems to take up a large part of the space in his workshop. Piles of wood shavings carpet the floor. They look like the ringlets in Shirley Temple's hair and they poke through the end of Lottie's sandals, tickling her toes.

Today, Pop shows Lottie a wooden jewellery box which is almost complete. The light-coloured timber has a beautiful fiddleback grain featuring tight curls, and there is an inlaid piece of darker timber in the centre of the lid. Inside, it's divided into three sections, each part carefully lined with felt to protect the jewellery. It has a rough handle attached temporarily to the base so he can hold it to apply the varnish. The smell of the freshly applied shellac is intriguing, reminiscent of antiseptic or maybe alcohol. Pop smiles as he gently places the wooden box on the bench. 'This one's for you,' he whispers in her ear.

Looking around, Lottie is drawn to Pop's collection of carpentry tools with their large, chunky wooden handles. Most are hung neatly on the wall, including collections of screwdrivers and chisels, hammers, hand drills, saws and pliers. Pop's special woodworking planes and his trusty foldout hardwood ruler, with its large markings, decorative numerals and solid brass joints, are close at hand on the woodwork bench, which is covered in dents, scratches, marks and paint from Pop's many projects.

Pop leads Lottie outside to another one of his favourite places . . . the garden. Nestled between the workshop and the shed is his pride and joy, the vegetable garden. The neatly established rows of soil are filled with all kinds of fresh produce—silver beet, climbing beans, pumpkin, beetroot, potatoes, corn, tomatoes and more . . . Pop bends down and pulls a crunchy delight from the soil. He takes it to the garden tap, rinses off the dirt and hands it to Lottie with the leaves still attached. The smell is earthy, the texture crisp and the freshness is such a delight! Pop's homegrown carrots are one of her absolute favourites! Nothing tastes as good as Pop's carrots, grown with love and tended by his caring hands all the way.

Pop disappears into the shed and returns with a large metal tin. He levers the lid off to reveal his bounty from the big tree in the back yard. The furry skin on the shells is intriguing, soft and velvety to the touch. The nutcracker works its magic and Lottie is presented with a

crunchy delight of another kind, a fresh almond. As Pop and Lottie sit in the shade of the almond tree, enjoying the spoils of Pop's many hours in the garden, there is no other place Lottie would rather be.

Lottie's Nanna appears at the back door of the house. Her curly grey hair is tied up in a bun and she is wearing tortoise shell glasses. Even into her eighties, she has retained her excellent posture and is smartly dressed. She smiles sweetly at Lottie as she announces that afternoon tea is ready. The kitchen is Nanna's domain, where there are always home baked goodies to enjoy.

Pop smiles, and begins to lift himself off the seat. Once standing, he sighs to signal his achievement, then taking Lottie's hand, walks slowly towards the house.

Lottie never tires of Pop's company. So many Sundays are spent like this. The only exception is Christmas Day . . .

The so-called 'formal lounge' becomes a playground for excited children who rush to greet their cousins as they arrive with their respective families. It's Christmas morning, and family members are gathering at Nanna and Pop's house.

This is a yearly ritual, one that Lottie always looks forward to, with food a-plenty and presents galore. What more could a young child wish for? Papers crinkle and crackle as little hands scrunch, crunch and tear to reveal the contents. A mountain of wrapping paper takes on mammoth proportions in the middle of the lounge as parents scramble to contain the mess!

It must be a nightmare for the aunts and uncles, not to mention the poor grandparents, having to buy a present for everyone one of the cousins, but for the children, it is a treasure trove of wonderful surprises! Not that any of the presents are grand in scale or value, but the absolute joy of opening the gifts gives the children such a feeling of excitement and sheer delight, so much so that the excitement levels reach fever pitch at times!

Once the presents are opened, lunch is served in the large kitchen. Lottie is seated at the enormous alcove table with her young cousins. The delicious aroma of roast potatoes fused with that of the roast chicken, seasoned with bread, onion and herbs, wafts across from the

stove. In anticipation of Nanna's lunch, Lottie takes a long breath, savouring the mouth-watering smells.

The adults and older cousins enjoy one another's company in the dining/sitting room, a suitable distance from the children. This arrangement makes for a much more civilised eating experience for them!

A delicious hot meal of meats and golden-brown roasted vegetables magically appears on the table. The saltiness of the ham adds another flavour dimension. Lottie is not privy to the secrets of the meal preparation, but she does know that much of it is home grown, and all of it is home cooked, including the ham. Every year, Nanna boils it up for hours in the old copper on the back verandah until it is just right. Lottie is amused by the fact that, in the past, the copper was used to boil and wash the family's clothes!

The main meal is consumed with gusto! As for dessert, there is one of Nanna's huge home-made plum puddings, served with brandy custard and freshly whipped cream. To top off the meal, there are plenty of sweet treats—chocolates and lollies, plus home baked biscuits and fruit cake, yum!

After lunch, there's time to explore and enjoy the Christmas presents. While some of the cousins are 'heads down' exploring a new board game, others are in the backyard, where there is plenty of space to run around, play hide-and-seek, or maybe chase one another with cap or spud guns in hand.

There is happiness and a comfortable familiarity in this coming together of parents, aunts and uncles, and cousins at Lottie's grandparents' house. Even amidst the chaos, Pop still has time for Lottie to sit on his lap in his favourite chair, and Nanna, with her sweet smile, always makes sure to give a kiss and a cuddle to each of the grandchildren, even if she does get their names muddled most of the time! Nanna and Pop are always so warm and welcoming, so spending time with them at Christmas is always special.

Sundays come and go, and Lottie's visits to Nanna and Pop's continue until . . .

one particular Sunday, when the family members once again gather at the house, but the smiles and laughter are absent from the day. Nanna died suddenly and the family is meeting to discuss Pop's future. Lottie is trying to make sense of the situation. She cuddles up to Pop as he sits in his armchair.

The conversation swirls around them. Heated voices fill the air. Is it passion or anger? From what Lottie can make out, it seems that the decision is made to sell Nanna and Pop's house because, in the opinion of their children, Pop can't live on his own. Lottie wonders if any of them have asked Pop what he wants.

Lottie's mum takes her aside and tries to explain. 'Pop has Paget's Disease and this has affected his bones. Over time, Pop's bones have become fragile and misshapen, and it's difficult for him to get around.'

Lottie can see that this explains Pop's bowed legs and his distinctive facial features, but none of that matters to her. To Lottie, he is just her Pop. He is gentle and kind, and loves being surrounded by his grandchildren. Pop seems to be blessed with so much patience. He is never in a hurry, and is quite happy to 'while away the hours' with those he loves, especially the children, and Lottie knows they all love him dearly.

Lottie can only imagine how heartbreaking this is for Pop, having to leave the house he and Nanna have called home for so many years. She looks across at him. 'Is that a tear in his eye?' she wonders.

The following Sunday visit is equally disturbing for Lottie. Aunts and uncles, normally so friendly, are gesturing wildly, their voices getting louder and louder. As Lottie sits on Pop's lap in his favourite chair, people seem to be circling around them. Lottie is not feeling comfortable. She cuddles up to Pop, sensing that he needs some solace at this time.

The family have decided that, once the property is sold, Pop will stay with each of them for a period of about six months at a time. Lottie's heart sinks. She realises that this arrangement will not include her family. Lottie lives in a small flat with her mother and there is no room for visitors. She is heartbroken at the prospect of not seeing her Pop.

Another Sunday . . . ‘Somehow, Sundays are just not the same anymore,’ Lottie thinks to herself.

Once the decision is made by the family to sell, the next priority is to clear out the house completely. After all, in their eyes, Pop has no need of anything, other than a few clothes. The fact that Pop spends so much of his time in the vegetable garden and his beloved woodworking shed does not factor into their thinking at all.

Every item in the house is dragged out and, as poor old Pop watches on from his chair, the family members attempt to stake their claim, arguing with each other while trying to justify their ownership, even down to the household linen. A squabble ensues over a set of sheets and two of Lottie’s aunts bicker over the outcome. They both tug at the sheets in desperation. It’s difficult to know who the victor is in the end. This argy-bargy continues until the family has methodically distributed all of Nanna and Pop’s worldly goods, one argument at a time. Meanwhile, Pop sits in his armchair . . .

The house is sold, and Pop begins his transient lifestyle. Poor old Pop is shunted from one aunt and uncle to another. Lottie wonders what Pop thinks of his new lifestyle. ‘What on earth does he do with his days without two of his greatest joys, gardening and woodwork?’ And Lottie can’t help but wonder, ‘What became of Pop’s favourite armchair?’