

# THE ALLOTMENT

## MORGAN MELHUISH

OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

Among the rows of potatoes, beetroots and carrots are the bamboo teepees I made. I secured them with clove hitches and diagonal lashings from my *Cub Scout Handbook*. Before we planted runner beans and sweet peas around their base, grandfather and I used them as trebuchets. We dug small stones from the soil and used large elastic bands to catapult the projectiles across the allotment.

I hope they went in Mr G's patch. That's where I aimed for. I don't like him, he always shouts at me if I take the shortcut between his gooseberry bushes and raspberry canes to the scrubland beyond the brambles.

Grandfather is very keen on his spuds this year. One of his mates got free seed potatoes from some sort of online offer, and grandfather loves something for nothing.

'One man's trash is another man's treasure,' he often says.

Grandma, on the other hand, says he's a hoarder and banishes him from tinkering in the house, so we come down here to tinker instead.

Today, though, is special. I'm on orders. I'll get crucified if I get mucky in my Sunday best.

'Shall we give them a good drink then lad?'

I consider it. That should be OK, as long as I'm careful around the stand pipe and don't splash or slop it about.

As water streams into the watering can I watch grandfather inspect the cabbages. I smile to myself. This time of year and he's at war with the aphids and slugs. Heaven help them if they so much as slither onto his plot.

'I'm not gardening for their benefit now am I?' He'll ask me, but of course he doesn't need my reply. It's one of those rhetorical questions we learnt about in school. I'm amazed how often adults use them.

When I'm done grandfather asks, 'How long then?'

'Pardon?'

'Don't play dumb, lad. How long do we have to wait down here before the party.'

I laugh. He always ferrets out a secret. Grandma despairs. 'I don't like surprises,' he tells her. It doesn't stop her trying, and his 60th birthday is no different.

'Be more of a surprise if she put on a bash for my 59th, wouldn't it, eh?'

'You best act shocked.'

'So shocked they'll give me an Oscar.'

I laugh again, 'You're no Katharine Hepburn, grandfather.' He loves his old movies and I've seen a fair few of his favourites - more than once!

'Well as we've given them a drink how about one for us? Time for a brew?'

I grab the box of matches while grandfather pours water from the butt into a small saucepan. I start the ring going with a dull whomp as the flame ignites the gas. We're silent, comfortable in our routines. There's just the hiss and heat as we watch water boil.

'There's biscuits I think lad.'

I leap into action. The shed is lined with shelves full of tins of all shapes and sizes. I know which are filled with nails or bolts and washers - and I definitely know which hold the tea and biscuits! I grab the only bourbon and leave grandfather with the custard creams.

There's a dash of milk in a flask from when he was here yesterday. I cautiously sniff to check it hasn't gone off in the heat and split it between the two tin mugs. I add spoonfuls of loose tea to the old brown pot and carefully drown it in the boiling water. We wait for it to mash and it runs out like water in a brackish tarn.

We clink our mugs together. 'Cheers!'

'Happy birthday grandfather.' I feel I can say it now the cat's out the bag.

'Sixty! How did that happen, eh?'

'One year after another.'

He laughs at me, my comment.

'That's quite a lot of years.'

It's true. I can't imagine being old like grandfather.

‘Good years?’ I ask.

‘Can’t complain,’ he tells me. For grandfather that’s positively glowing praise. ‘I have you lot. You keep me on my toes - especially you.’

I suck on my tea-dunked bourbon pleased he’s mentioned me.

‘And what about you Arthur? What do you want from life?’

I know what comes to mind but it isn’t working as a chemist or an accounts manager, respectable things father would approve of. I hesitate a little. I know grandfather will understand, or at least I think he will.

‘Adventure,’ I say at last.

‘Not much call for pirates or explorers in County Durham,’ he smiles.

‘No!’ I protest. I didn’t mean it like that. I can’t explain it really. I don’t want a house and a wife and I don’t want to go to church every Sunday. I don’t want a life of exams or just typing and emails, forwarding phone calls, like my sister’s so keen on. I haven’t seen what I want yet.

‘Sorry Arthur, I didn’t mean to tease you. There’s plenty of wonder out there, if you know where to look for it.’

‘Where?’

‘Well that depends on you. I found my wonder here, strange as it sounds.’

I'm not sure if he's talking about the allotment or Durham or even about our family.

I must be screwing up my face in puzzlement because grandfather continues. 'Be kind. Think of others. Then you'll see what I mean.'

He drains his mug with an appreciative smack of his lips.

'Though you never know, maybe you'll find a pirate ship needing a tea boy!'

I laugh. I'm nobody's tea boy.

'Well,' he sighs, 'shall we get this over and done with?'

I look at the watch father gave me for my eleventh birthday.

'As long as we walk slowly. And remember, grandfather - shocked. Act shocked.'

*Morgan Melhuish (he/him) is a queer writer and educator from West Sussex. His work has recently been published in Beyond the Veil (from Ghost Orchid Press) and Along Harrowed Trails (from Ghost Timber Press). You can find him on Twitter @mmorethanapage*