

Hands That Built the Sky



DEDICATION

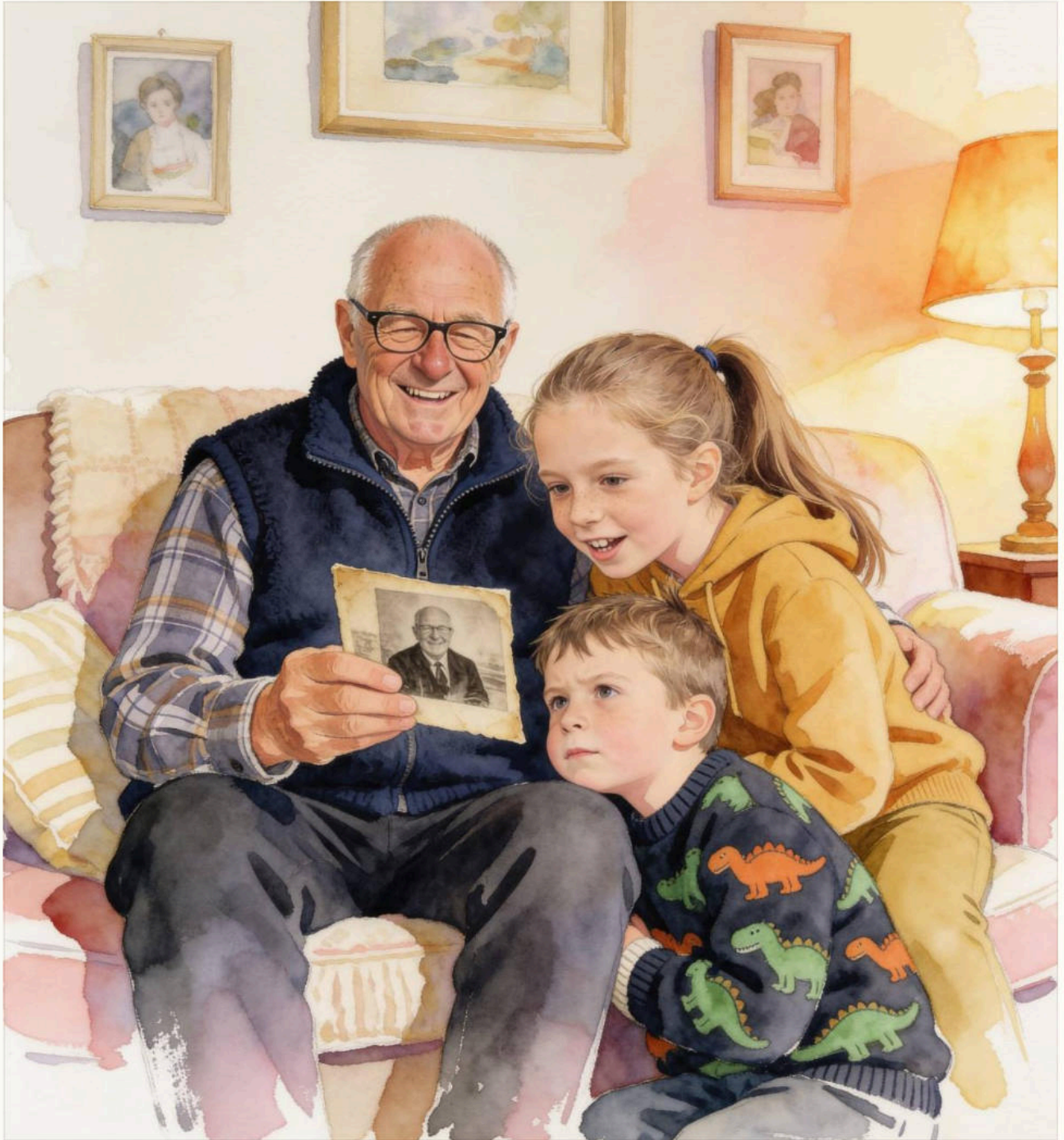
For Maya and Tom.

*One day you will want to know what I was like before I was
your grandad, so here it is, most of it, and the true bits are
truer than you think.*





Maya and Tom came racing up the street, shoes clattering on the paving stones, and burst through the door before Grandad Ray could reach the handle. "We're here!" shouted Tom. Grandad Ray laughed his big laugh and held out his arms. "So you are," he said. "And just in time for tea." The whole house seemed to wake up the moment they arrived.



Inside, they flopped onto the sofa either side of him. Maya spotted an old photograph on the table, a young man she did not quite recognise. "Is that really you, Grandad?" she asked. Grandad Ray picked it up, tipped his glasses, and looked at it for a good long moment. "That is really me," he said. "And I was younger than you'd believe. Shall I tell you how it all went?"

Once I was young like you. Would you believe it? Younger, even. I had scabby knees and a gap in my teeth and I ran everywhere, because walking felt like a waste of good running.

I never once stopped to think how quick it would all go. When you are seven, a summer is a whole country. A single afternoon can hold a hundred years. And then somehow you look up and you are an old man on a sofa with your grandchildren beside you, wondering where the middle bit went.

But here is the strange thing. I did not lose it. It is all still in here, every bit. The cold mornings and the football in the lane. The noise of the aircraft works. The first time I danced with your nan. The last aeroplane coming home. I carry the whole of it about with me, quiet as anything, until somebody like you comes along and asks.

That is the funny trick of time. It only ever runs one way, forwards, and it never slows down for asking. But a story runs backwards easy as you like. So sit still a minute, and I will take you all the way back to the start.





I grew up in Knowle, on a hill of red brick terraces with the washing strung across the back lane. We had an outside toilet and three boys in one bed, top to tail. There were still bombed gaps where houses had been. We called one the Debris and played on it for years until somebody told us to stop. Mum did for a family up in Clifton and Dad was a fitter at the docks. It was cold and it was cramped, and I would not swap a day of it.



When I was seven, my brother Derek dared me to ride our Colin's trolley down Redcatch Road, which is steeper than it looks. It was a plank on old pram wheels, and there were no brakes. There was never going to be a brake. I got about eighty yards, which is a long way when you are seven, then went straight into Mrs Protheroe's front hedge. She came out, looked at me lying in her privet, and said, "You'll be the one who ends up in the papers, you will." I had a hedge-shaped cut for a fortnight and I was the most famous boy in the lane.



I loved taking things apart, clocks and wirelesses and an old motorbike magneto, and very occasionally getting them back together. And football in the lane until it was too dark to see the ball. Years later, when I was twenty-one, they let us apprentices out onto the apron to watch Concorde go up for the very first time. We had been building bits of her for years without ever seeing the whole thing move. She got up, and the noise went through your chest, not your ears. My hands had been on the aeroplane that was in the sky. I have never quite got over it.



I left school at fifteen and started as an apprentice at the aircraft works up at Filton. Five years, day release, and an old fitter called Wally Sims who would not let anything past him. He made me file a block of steel flat, then took a straight edge to it and made me do it again. Six times he sent me back. On the sixth he held it up to the light, grunted, and said, "That'll do." I have never been prouder of anything than I was of that lump of metal. Forty years I stayed there.



I met your nan at the Locarno. I stood at the edge of that dance floor the best part of an hour working up to it, and when I finally went over I got about four words out before the band struck up and Sylvia could not hear a thing I said. So she just took my hand and pulled me on, and we danced to something neither of us liked. Afterwards she said, "What was it you were trying to say?" And I could not remember. Fifty-eight years and I still cannot remember. She says that is the most Ray thing that has ever happened.



One day I dropped a spanner inside a wing. That does not sound like much, but a loose tool in a wing is very serious business. The whole section stopped while four of us went in after it with torches and a magnet on a string. Three hours it took. When we finally got it out, the chargehand held it up in front of everybody and read my initials off the handle, because we all scratched our initials on our tools. He never told me off. He did not have to. He kept that spanner on the shelf above his bench, where I could see it, until the day I retired.



Our Karen was about six when she decided she was going to be an air hostess, purely so she could go on the aeroplanes her dad built. I took her up to the fence at Filton one Sunday to watch them come in. She stood on the bottom rail with her chin on the top one and did not say a word for twenty minutes, which for Karen was unheard of. She is a physiotherapist in Taunton now, and she has never much liked flying. But she still rings me every time a Concorde comes on the telly.



For the best part of thirty years I kept racing pigeons up the allotment. People laugh, and then you explain it. You take a bird two hundred miles away in a basket, you let it go, and it comes back to a shed in Bristol before you have finished your tea. I had one hen, Nineteen, who did Thurso twice, and that is the very top of Scotland. She was not much to look at. She just knew the way home better than anything I have ever met.

The last one landed at Filton in November of two thousand and three, and they let the old hands come and stand out to watch her come home. I put my good coat on for it, though it was blowing a gale off the field.

There were men there I had started with at fifteen. We had filed our first blocks of steel side by side, and now here we all were, grey and stiff, standing along the fence like a row of old fence posts ourselves.

Nobody said very much. That is the thing people never understand about men like us. We had thirty-four years between us and that runway, and there were no words big enough, so we did not try.

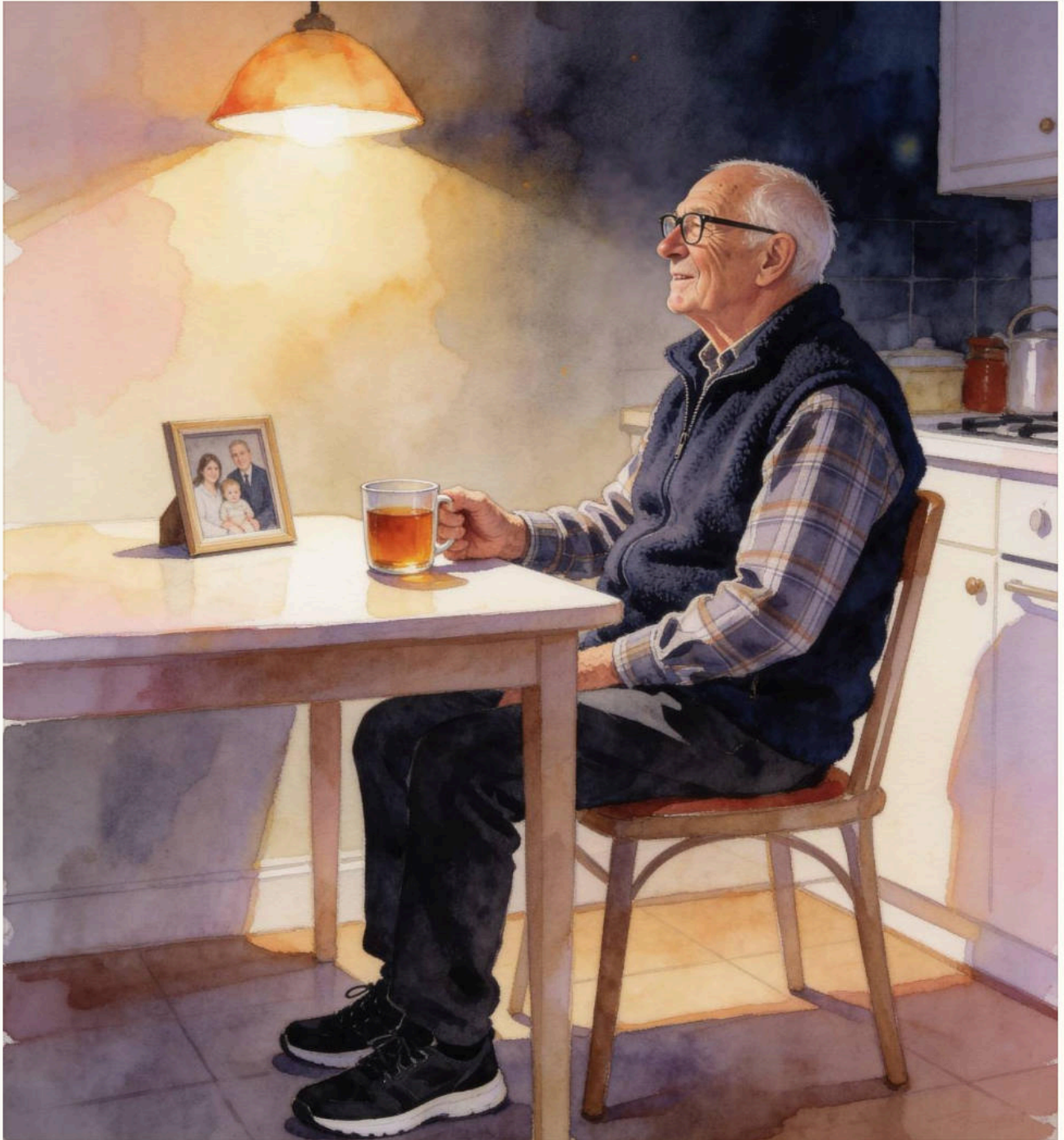
Then she came in low over the field with that sound in your chest, and she came down, and she stopped, and that was that. A few of the men cried and pretended it was the wind. I might have been one of them.

Thirty-four years. From the first one going up in front of me when I was a lad, to the last one coming back in when I was an old one. To have been there for both ends of it, that is the thing I am proudest of in my whole working life.





I am still up the allotment most days. Runner beans climbing their canes, a greenhouse full of tomatoes going red in the warm, and the shed where the old loft used to be. I potter about, I sit in the doorway with a cup of tea, and I listen to next door's radio through the fence. On Sunday mornings I take Maya and Tom swimming, and afterwards we have chips. This little patch of ground is about as content as a man can be.



Sometimes of an evening I sit at the kitchen table with a cup of tea and let the whole of it come back to me. The lane, the aircraft works, your nan pulling me onto that dance floor, the last one coming home. And I think, of all the things these hands ever built or mended, the two best are asleep upstairs when you stop over. Maya and Tom, you are the true end of the story, and the best of it.



"And that," said Grandad Ray, "is most of it. The true bits are truer than you think." Maya was quiet for a moment. Tom said, "Can we build a trolley?" Grandad Ray laughed his big laugh. "We can build a trolley," he said, "but we are putting a brake on it." And the three of them sat close together as the afternoon light went gold across the room.



A MEMORY

Our wedding day, 1971. It rained all morning and then stopped ten minutes before we came out. Sylvia's mother took this one and cut half of my uncle out of it, which he never let her forget.



A MEMORY

*Up the allotment with one of the birds, about 1986.
That loft I built myself out of what was left of
somebody's fence. Best shed I ever had.*



A MEMORY

*Christmas morning in the front room, some time in the
nineties. That paper hat did not survive the day.
Neither did the batteries in half the presents.*



A MEMORY

Building the castle with Maya and Tom. I told them a moat has to go all the way round or the sea gets in. It got in anyway.

A book made only for this family.

This book was crafted by Memolio from the memories Grandad Ray's family shared. The illustrations were generated by AI from the photos and stories you provided, then set with care so the book may be read and handed down for many years to come.



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