

## Gwen Learns Terrible Secrets

Gwen had always found her Grandma, that is her mother's mother, a bit creepy. She could not put her finger on it exactly, but she never felt comfortable when she visited. She also felt that the relationship between her mother and her grandmother was not as close or as warm as one might expect.

At family gatherings, such as weddings and funerals, she always sensed that the feelings between her two uncles and her aunt on her mother's side of the family and her grandmother were not as close as those in her father's family. He, his brother and sisters and their parents were warm and friendly. Her father's parents were Welsh and Gwen called them Mamgu and Tadcu. She had always looked forward to visits to Mamgu and Tadcu. Why had she not felt the same about visits to Grandma?

Gwen had no grandfather on her mother's side. All she knew was that when her mother was still a small child, her grandfather had run off with another woman and cut off all relations with his former family. How could someone have left four children behind and have nothing more to do with them?

When Gwen asked her mother about her grandfather, she was told next nothing other than that he had run off and left the family. It was clear her mother did not want to say anything more about her father. Indeed, Gwen's mother was very reluctant to say anything about her own childhood. It was almost as if she had not had one.

When Gwen asked her uncles or her aunt, they just repeated the same thing and were clearly reluctant to say anything about their childhood. She felt this was a bit odd. She knew heaps about her father's childhood in Wales and about his brother and his two sisters and all the things they used to get up to. She felt it must have been a very happy childhood.

Her own childhood with her bother and sister was happy enough and their relationship with their Mum and Dad was warm. Yet she also felt there was a sadness about her mother.

Naturally Gwen did speak of this with her brother and sister, who were both older than her, but they knew no more than she did. They agreed there was something odd and creepy about their grandmother.

One day Gwen said to her father: "Dad, we know so much about you when you were a boy and about Uncle Tom, Aunt Bronwen and Aunt Tydfil when you were all children. But I know practically nothing about Mum when she was young."

"Your Mum," Dad had said, "did not have a very happy childhood. She doesn't like talking about it. It makes her very upset. Don't pester her about it."

That was all Gwen knew.

So the years passed. Gwen and her brother and sister grew up and had families of their own. But there remained the mystery about her mother, uncles Harry and Arthur and Aunt Dorrie.

Then came the sad day that Tadcu died. At the funeral all her Dad's family were there, her uncle, aunts and several cousins. There were many other people there also as her grandfather had been very popular in the community there in Wales. It was very comforting to have so many people around; the singing at the funeral service was uplifting and the reception that followed was almost joyful as people ate, drank and exchanged stories about the old times.

What a contrast it was two years later when her grandmother had died. She felt as though her

Mum and Dad had gone to the funeral only out of a sense of duty; she felt it was the same for Aunt Dorrie and her husband and for Uncle Harry. He had never married and lived alone. As for uncle Arthur, he had emigrated to Canada many years ago and had made a new life for himself out there; he did not return for the funeral. Apart from the family, there were only three other mourners, who were old and kept very much to themselves. Gwen assumed they must be old friends or neighbours and that, like her grandmother, lived reclusive lives.

There was no church service, just a short ceremony at the local crematorium. Aunt Dorrie had arranged a reception afterwards; only family attended and it was hardly a jolly affair.

Gwen's mother was happy to leave her elder sister Dorrie and Dorrie's husband, Bob, to go through their mother's things. Gwen's Mum and Dad went back home after the reception, as did all the others who had attended the funeral. But Gwen was still curious and wanted to stay on with Dorrie and Bob and help go through her grandmother's things.

Gwen's husband was very understanding. He knew there was a sadness in Gwen's life and told her not to worry. He would go back home and was quite capable of looking after their two children; she was to take her time.

Over the next few days, Gwen and her Aunt Dorrie and Uncle Bob sorted things out. They found an old album with faded photographs. They looked at these. Aunt Dorrie did not recognize all the adults in the photographs. Gwen could not help noticing that there were no photographs of her grandfather. There were, however, some blanks where photographs had been removed and Gwen wondered if there had been some of her grandfather and that they had been removed and destroyed. She asked her aunt about that.

"Almost certainly," her aunt had said. "It was all a bit odd. She was clearly the boss and treated our Dad almost as badly as she treated us. It's a wonder that he ever got the chance to form any friendship with another woman. But if he did and managed to run off with her and start a new life, I don't blame him."

"You don't resent him leaving you all then, Auntie?" Gwen asked.

"The only regret is that he didn't take us with him," replied Aunt Dorrie. "But that would not have been possible. No, his life here could not have been a happy one. If he ran away and began a new life, good luck to him, I say."

Over the next few days Aunt Dorrie opened up more. She had married late in life and she and Uncle Bob had no children. It seemed the influence of Uncle Bob had mellowed her; both she and Uncle Bob took a liking to Gwen, treating her almost as the daughter they never had.

Gwen learnt from her aunt that her grandparents had come under the control of a sect called the "Trembling Brethren", her grandmother enthusiastically and her grandfather more reluctantly. They led very strict lives; the only reading material allowed was the Bible and they seemed to read the Old Testament a good deal more than the New Testament, though the Book of Revelation was favoured. Radio and television were banned; nor were they allowed to go to school or to mix with any children other than children of sect members.

Aunt Dorrie told Gwen how every so often she, Gwen's mother, Uncle Harry and Uncle Arthur were given sticks, told to tremble before the Lord and were forced to beat the sin out of each another. It had not been a happy childhood and each had left as soon as he or she could after coming of age.

Aunt Dorrie did not know what had happened to the Trembling Brethren. She suppose they had either died off, drifted away or lived reclusive lives; she was sure the three old, taciturn mourners at

the funeral had once been sect members.

After five days spent with her aunt and uncle, Gwen returned home. She explained all to her husband; but they decided not to tell their children any details. When Gwen met her mother she started to talk about what Aunt Dorrie had said, but she soon sensed that it was stirring up old memories which her mother had tried to forget and was causing her distress. Gwen said no more about it. It became apparent, however, that her mother was in a way pleased that Gwen understood why she had never said anything about her childhood and the relationship between Gwen and her mother grew stronger.

So Gwen lapsed back into family life and things ran along smoothly for several months. Then her grandmother caused another and, thankfully, her last upset in Gwen's life.

The people who had bought her grandmother's house decided to demolish it and build a new one on the site. One day as builders were excavating new foundations in the garden, they discovered human remains. It was soon established that they were the remains of her grandfather. It was a shock to Gwen but she noticed that although her mother was upset, she was not shocked. Although Gwen's grandmother, perhaps with the help of other sect members, must have buried her husband's body there, did she kill him? Or did he die as the result of ritual beating by her or other sect members? Or did he commit suicide? It would never be known.

Her mother and her Uncle Harry and Aunt Dorrie were determined that their father should have a proper burial. At the funeral when she spoke to her Aunt Dorrie, all Dorrie said was: "I never could believe he had found another woman. I'm not surprised he was here all the time."

Gwen wondered if her mother, Dorrie and their two brothers had suspected the death at the time or, indeed, if any of them had actually known. Perhaps that was why Uncle Arthur never came back from Canada.

Her grandfather was re-buried properly in the cemetery of his home town and Gwen visited his grave from time to time. She could not visit the grave of her grandmother, as her ashes had simply been scattered in the crematorium grounds. But Gwen felt no loss at this. She had learnt the terrible secrets of her mother's family but decided she would not pass them on.