

# Someone Came Knocking

Someone came knocking at my wee small door,  
Someone came knocking, I'm sure sure sure.  
I listened, I opened, I looked to left and right,  
But nought there was a stirring in the still dark night.

- - Walter de la Mare

"Bye Grandpa," Matthew shouted as he cycled away from the small cottage.

"See you next week," Robert called back. He stood on the porch of his house, and watched the boy ride down the earthen path. A cool wind blew between the surrounding trees, snatching golden leaves from their branches and sending them chasing after the bike.

Robert Jones waited until his grandson was out of sight, and then stepped back into the cottage. He kept his cardigan wrapped about him while he turned up the fire. Once the heat had built up he removed it and lay it over the arm of his reading chair.

"Come on then Carl," he said to the Golden Retriever. "I'll get you some more food."

The dog, who had been lying on his rug, picked up his ears and then, as Robert left the room, rose to follow. After adding more meat to Carl's bowl, the old man collected up the crockery he and his grandson had used earlier. There was just enough hot water left in the tank to fill the sink, and so, while he let the pots soak, Robert poured a mug of milk into a saucepan and placed it on the unlit stove.

The visits from Matthew brought back memories of Robert's own youth and for a moment he stood in the kitchen and let his childhood wash over him. A branch tapped against the window

bringing him back to the present. He peered out into the gathering night for a moment before remembering that he still held a plate, half submerged in the bubbles, in his hands.

As he placed the last saucer on its end in the draining rack a thought came to him; the garage door was still unfastened. He left the water in the bowl and draped the dishcloth over the edge of the sink. Then he returned to the sitting room and picked up his cardigan. Carl had found his place on the rug once more, and as Robert walked by the dog gave his master a cursory glance, perhaps hoping for the treat of a biscuit.

Robert left the cottage by the backdoor, forgetting to exchange his slippers for his shoes, and headed along the short stone path that led to the rear door of the garage. The night had not only darkened considerably since Matthew had left, but the wind had grown stronger and there was now a chill in the air. He shivered and pulled his cardigan tighter. All about him Robert could hear the trees of the forest creaking and groaning as the wind pushed at them. The autumn leaves of flew past him or pressed themselves against the low wire fence that marked the edge of the garden.

He had to give the rear wooden door to the garage a firm tug to overcome the warped wood, then he was inside, sheltered from the wind. A couple of leaves danced in. Out of the chill air his skin began to warm again, his fingers tingling. Light from the two bare bulbs which hung in the ceiling flooded the garage when he flipped the old plastic switch. Spiders and shadows darted into corners seeking protection from the artificial glare.

In front of Robert were the remnants of his past.

A small wooden row boat hung on one wall. It had not been out since Millie died and the red paint had started to peel. In his mind's eye Robert could still see it as it used to be; floating on one of the lakes with the two of them in it, Millie wearing one of her large hats. They would picnic on the bank: sandwiches and homemade cake.

He turned away from the boat, and his eyes drifted onto the tandem that stood resting against the other side. It had rusted in place, and the tyres were flat. On the front set of handlebars the rubber had worn through to expose the metal which had started to rust, and on the spokes of the front wheel a cobweb had been spun, attached in part to a piece of grass stuck to the hub. Like the boat, the bike had not been used after Robert was widowed, and like many of the things that were linked to his wife it brought tears to his eyes.

A strong gust of wind lifted a slate on the garage roof and caused Robert to jump back to the present. He remembered why he was there and headed for the front of the garage to check on the main doors. On the way he glanced briefly at the woodworking bench with its large vice and worn surface. In front of the tools that were stowed in various boxes sat a pair of half carved woodpeckers. These were bookends he was making his grandson for Christmas. He had started them in mid-summer, but the work was slow due to the increasing pains he suffered in his hands. He was determined he would not let the boy down though, and so worked on them every few days.

Robert had been correct, the front doors of the garage were closed but not secured; the padlock still hung on the inside. He took it and stepped back into the night. After he had slipped the outside bolt home he gave both doors a quick tug to check they were secured, then he clipped the lock into its slot and pushed it shut. He was just about to turn away when he thought he heard a sound from within the garage.

Robert stood on the spot and listened, unsure if he had imagined the noise. Then he gave a short laugh: perhaps it had been the wind.

"You're like a child," he chided himself. "Scared of the dark, and things that go bump." The sound of his voice made him feel more confident.

As he turned to head back around the garage he stopped. There had definitely been a noise that time.

"Carl, that you?" His voice came out hollow, a pitch higher than it should have been.

He moved to open one the large wooden doors then remembered they were now locked.

"Damn," he swore.

As he walked to the rear of the garage he found himself creeping; trying his hardest not to let the dead branches and leaves crunch under his feet. He cursed himself for a third time, and with more determination in his stride stepped around the corner of the building.

There was nothing there of course. The wind had caught the back door, that was all. He scolded himself for being on edge, reached around the frame and turned off the lights. With the keys from his pocket he locked the door.

"Let that be the last of it," he told the wind.

Back inside the cottage Robert gave his hands a rinse under the tap, and then turned on the gas burner beneath the milk pan. The water in the sink had gone cold, and so instead of saving it to wash his mug and saucepan in he poured it away. Once the milk had been brought to the boil he poured it out, and added a large teaspoon of honey. The pan he half-filled with cold water and left in the sink. Then, with his drink, he walked into the sitting room.

The first thing Robert noticed was that Carl was not on the rug. Usually Carl spent the evening in front of the fire. He had been there when Robert left, that was for sure.

"Carl? Carl? Here boy," the old man called, adding a short whistle.

All was quiet for a moment and then he heard a faint whimpering from the other end of the large room. He placed his mug on the coffee table and walked over to where the noise had come from. With a combination of calling and listening he traced the quiet sounds to the old mahogany dining table that stood against the back wall. A white cotton tablecloth covered the dark wood. Robert had to stoop so he could lift it up. Carl's watery eyes looked back at him from the darkness.

"What you doin' under there, boy?"

Carl whined again but began to move, all but crawling on his stomach. The old man reached out a hand and stroked behind the dog's ear.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Becoming as crazy as me and getting scared by the wind?"

Carl looked at him with wide eyes.

"Come on then," Robert said. "You can sit by the fire and I'll feed you a biscuit or two."

The word biscuit, more than anything else, made Carl follow his owner back to the warm hearth, and the dog settled on the rug. Robert dished out the treats and then sat back in his chair and picked up his book.

The milk in his cup had begun to cool and a skin had formed on the surface. Robert disliked swallowing it, especially when he could feel it slipping down his throat. Determined to avoid the thin film, he sipped carefully at the edge of the milk, watching as the skin creased when his breath flowed across the surface.

There was a knock at the front door. Only a slight tapping sound that intruded on the edge of his hearing, but there was definitely a knock. Carl's ears lifted he began to bark.

Robert sighed and put down his book. Who would be calling at this time of night? Matthew more than likely, he decided as he rose from his chair, that would be why Carl was so excited.

As he peered through the panel of glass set in the centre of the door he tried to make out who was there, but the light at his back made it difficult to see anything. Carl pushed past his master jumping up at the door and barking continuously.

"I know, I know, boy," Robert said as he moved the dog aside with his leg. "Just let me get the door open first."

He turned the key in the lock and pulled the door open to the full extent of the security chain.

"Who is it?" he asked, but there was no answer.

Robert muttered under his breath and then placed his right eye to the gap between the door and the frame. The light spilling out from the cottage illuminated a small part of the stone steps and the path beyond but he could not see anyone.

There had been a knock, he was certain of that. Old as he may be he did not imagine things. Robert closed the door and unhooked the chain. He was that wrapped up in his own thoughts he failed to notice that Carl had stopped barking and had now backed away from the door. The dog's ears were pulled back, his mouth forming part of a snarl that never quite became audible.

With the door fully open Robert stepped into the night. The sense of something passing in front of his face made him pause for a moment: it was as if the faintest of spider's webs had touched his cheek. He stood still under the small porch, and peered into the darkness that lay between the trees at the edge of his garden. It must have been the wood of the door creaking as it cooled or maybe a branch breaking in the wind, for there was no one to be seen.

Carl was torn between the urge to flee the cottage or to stay with his master. After a moment his taut muscles loosened, and the dog moved out onto the porch. There he sat and stared into the darkness warily watching the dwarf like figure who shambled away and into the woods. The small man's back was bent low under the weight of the large sack he carried over his shoulder, his feet shuffled over the protruding roots of the trees. A mouldy smell drifted in his wake.

Carl did not move. He did not even bark. Instead he lay on the steps waiting for Robert to tell him what to do. When the postman found him the next morning Carl was still on the porch in front of his master's body.