



## The Way It Was

Amanda Taplin

**That was the way** it was with him. My old man ... my grandfather. He was always reminiscing about the past, pondering what was. Whenever I'd go visit him his leathery face weathered from the storms of life would light up and for that one small minute I would realise this man was more than my own blood. He was a soldier.

'The way it was back then was different to now. I believed we had a land worth fighting for, worth dying for. I enlisted as a naïve boy. An innocent child sheltered in the prosperous land down under. With a trembling hand I scrawled "Charles" on the enlisting paper. Photographs of the past whirled around me as I signed away my future; my smiling kelpie, the white winding veranda embracing the old farm I used to call home. My tearful sisters waving farewell as the ship left Sydney Harbour ...' Grandfather paused and looked at his wrinkled toes protruding from his sandals. It takes him a long time to use words these days.

'I had been ready to blossom then, Mandy, filled with idyllic dreams for the future. Young. Ready to flourish. Bound for an adventure to the pits of hell.'

The things he didn't mention were the ones that stood out to me the most. He never told me about the trenches. He never told me what it felt like to have narrow walls of mud close in around him as rain dampened his already dwindling strength.

He never told me how he would find shelter from the falling artillery. About the billies, pieces of wood and scraps of

metal scattered about the deep ditch like misshapen chess pieces upon an overturned board.

But I could see it all as the indescribable desolation descended upon him ... every time he relived his battles. It was as if his golden hands, once caked in the thick filth he was immersed in, were red with the blood he had spilt, and the dark oblivion he had blown so many men to.

'Imagination keeps you sane, Mandy. Remember that. I kept memories of the past alive. Constantly in my mind, I would close my eyes and sift through what was. The favourites I would replay in my head, over and over again like a favoured song; the southerly wind blowing through the gum leaves on the old farm, and the fizzy taste of ginger beer upon my tongue after a hard day in the paddocks. I was in another place each time I pulled the trigger.'

Grandfather's voice is still a baritone, deep and rumbling. Mum always says that I'm the only one he has ever talked to about the past. That I'm his hope. He opens up to me. I guess it's because I listen well, or maybe it's because he doesn't want me to make the same mistakes he has. Either way, he usually has trouble expressing how he feels.

'Mandy, the trouble with today is that no-one cares for each other any more. We plant no seeds and wonder why there are no flowers. We slaughter lambs and wonder why there are no sheep. And we fought in wars and were surprised to find no peace. But life is about Fate. Circumstance, how we handle situations — how we fight makes us who we are. How we fight controls how we grow as a person.'

Grandfather stopped again, deep breaths rising and falling in the chest of his emaciated body. He reached for some tea from the delicate china cup that had once been my grandmother's. With trembling hands, his whiskered lips blew gently on the boiling water. His appearance was greatly changed from the man he once was.

'The way it was, back in my time, I used to take off my metal helmet and stare at my reflection in the dull tin. My mahogany-brown hair came down past my ears and gaunt cheeks spoke weeks of malnutrition. But my eyes, my young

hazel eyes, glimmered hope full of possibility. Some day, when all this was over, I dreamt of returning home.

‘I remember once running my hand across the mud and making an outline of Australia in the moistened earth. The raindrops trickled down the collar of my uniform, but I still traced the outline of the map I’m so fond of looking at, memorising each curve of coastline.’

There was silence in Grandfather’s sitting room as the wind started up again. A cold southerly off the ocean, rattling the window panes, blowing the faded sapphire curtains grandmother once made until they dance like an old forgotten waltz. Grandfather pulls a tattered quilt around his hunched shoulders as he rocks back and forth in his chair.

Some people might say that my grandfather is a shadow of the person he once was, with the past an inescapable weight on his shoulders. But really it is the spirit of his comrades that is for ever with him. Their bodies drenched red with the sins of the enemy. Their hands holding their hearts as they whispered dying words. ‘Remember me, Private. Don’t forget me, soldier. Don’t forget me, mate.’ The last stand; the final fire before armistice. I suppose he just tires easily.

‘Would you like to lie down for a while, Grandfather?’ I asked him as I stood to help him out of his chair.

‘How about we water the plants outside, Mandy girl,’ he told me.



Grandfather bent down. His cultivated garden beneath him, he inhaled softly. That earthy scent brought back memories. As he plucked petals from a few of his glorious red flowers, he rubbed them in his hands. The red colouring stained his fingers, bringing him back to the battlefields branded to his mind.

Raking red-stained fingers through grey, thinning hair, Grandfather stood laboriously. I think gardens were his solace from the past. The flowers seemed to glow as the sun began to set. Twilight was upon us. Time had aged him. Life had aged

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him. His mates had passed on years ago. And Grandfather was still here.

Grandfather shook his sunspot-riddled face. Creasing his eyes, he sighed. Stooping down to pick up a rusted watering can he began to dampen his plants. The cold feeling of callous metal beneath his fingers seemed vaguely familiar.

He had a thirst to forget the past that could never be quenched. The vagabond spirit within him longed to be satisfied, as the plants were with water. Grandfather inhaled, feeling a rattling deep in his chest, settling on his lungs. The gases of war haunted him every day with every breath.

Setting down his watering can, we trudged back inside. His house was homely and had a chord of simplicity to it. Old war clippings lined the walls — the front page of the day the war was declared over, pictures of white lines of crosses dotting the battlefields that were now empty of weaponry. All images etched to his mind for ever.

Grandfather kicked off his tattered old sandals as I helped him sink down onto the dull bed sheets. He stared up at me, a helpless, wounded bird I could do nothing to save.

‘I love you, Mandy,’ he said. He thought I couldn’t see his gnarled fingers closed around a bottle of pills, the white plastic encasing seeming celestial.

Overcome with emotion I looked into his eyes.

He’d never said that to me before.

‘Lest I forget you, Grandfather.’



**Amanda Taplin** wrote this in 2008 when she was in Year 11 at Ulladulla High School in New South Wales.