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Opening extract from

The Memory Cage

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THE MEMORY CAGE

RUTH EASTHAM

Who's there?

Hamlet (Act I, Scene I, Verse I)

I tell this story so it won't be lost. The only sure way to remember things is to write them down. Grandad's illness taught me that. You need to remember things. Keep your secrets safe. And every family has secrets. Mine more than most.

What's your earliest memory?

Mine's with Grandad. On the beach near our house, collecting fossils.

I was seven, and that's the first picture of me in Mum and Dad's album. Before then, I didn't exist.

That's the way I like it.

No memories.

No me.

Part One: The Promise

Chapter 1 – Trying To Put It Out Of My Mind

Breakfast table. Summer holidays, Church Fête Saturday. Absolute chaos.

Me trying to stay well out of it. Anyway, I had more important things to worry about.

I slid a bowl across the table towards Grandad. I couldn't help thinking, if he could just shove some cornflakes down him without anybody saying anything, then maybe we were in the clear. Maybe we'd got away with it.

I stretched over for the cereal packet...

'Let me taste more jam, Mummy! Let me!' My little sister Sophie tugged at Mum's elbow, fairy princess wings flapping.

'Don't you dare get any on your costume!' Mum wagged the pen she was using to label jars. 'Oh, of all the Saturdays to have to go into work, Richard!'

'Think I want to, Hilary?' Dad lifted his *Financial Times* in front of his face.

I tipped cornflakes in. So far so good.

Sophie scooped leftover strawberry jam into her mouth from a saucepan, adding an extra layer to her smeared face paint.

'Greedy pig!' Leonard grabbed the pan off her. 'Give it.'

Sophie stuck her tongue out at him and started cutting up one of Mum's cooking magazines with a pair of pink scissors.

I splashed milk over my cornflakes, and then eased the milk jug towards Grandad.

'We should all be doing our bit for charity, Richard,' said Mum.

'Yes, Hilary.'

Leonard mouthed at me across the table. I knew he wouldn't miss a glowing opportunity like that. 'Charity Case.'

Charity Case. That's what he calls me when Mum and Dad aren't listening. Or his really witty favourite, *Bosnia Boy*. I wouldn't exactly say I got on with my big brother. You'd think things would be okay after six years. But I don't think Leonard ever liked the idea of me in his family. There was a lot more than just four months between us.

Grandad poured milk on his cornflakes. Some splashed up and dribbled down the side of the bowl.

I pushed the sugar his way.

He picked up his spoon.

Sophie picked up a glue pen and started sticking jagged-edged pictures of perfect cakes and summer salads onto the pages of her scrapbook.

'Remember your lunches!' Mum waved a hand over the row of boxes laid out across the middle of the table – Dad's white plastic one for the office, Sophie's pink glittery thing with fairies, Victoria's with its *East Kent Girls' College* emblem, Leonard's coffin-shaped one with the guns. Mine and Grandad's rolls wrapped in foil and stuck in a plastic bag.

'Crammed with healthy muck, no doubt!' said Grandad, giving me a wink.

'You've those photos still to get ready, William,' Mum snapped back at him. 'The Fête starts at ten, remember!'

'Sugar, Grandad?' I prompted, plunging my spoon into my bowl and crunching in his direction. I felt myself sweating.

'I'm not carrying a lunchbox round!' Leonard stabbed the butter knife at his toast. 'I'll want a burger.'

'Me too! Me too!' Sophie skipped around the kitchen with her scissors while Mum tried to get them off her. 'With lots of onions and lots and lots of ketchup!'

For once, I agreed with Leonard, but I shovelled in more cornflakes and kept my mouth shut. Leonard didn't like me agreeing with him.

'Ketchup!' Sophie sang. 'Ketchup! Ketchup! Ketchup! Who'll play with me now? Who'll play cocodriles and transhlers?'

'It's Crocodiles and tarantulas, stupid,' Leonard said. 'Alex will.'

'Who'll play cocodriles and transhlers?' Sophie wittered on. 'Who'll come up with me to the secret room?'

'You stay away from that room, Sophie!' barked Dad.

Sophie had a thing at the moment for the room at the very top of our house. It's an attic room that nobody can get into and that Sophie thinks is full of scary animals. Mum said it was far too dangerous because the floorboards were loose, and anyway, the lock was changed years ago then the key was lost. Whenever I asked him about it, Grandad always changed the subject.

I looked over at Grandad as he sprinkled sugar over his flakes. His eyes had a faraway look and his spoon stayed hovering in mid-air.

Eat, I willed him. *Take a bite, for God's sake!* It was impossible some mornings, getting him to eat. But if I didn't try, who else would?

I wondered if he'd forgotten about last night. I sipped milk from my spoon and glanced steadily around the table. Nobody had said anything, yet. But I could have kicked myself. If only I'd kept a better eye on things. If only I'd watched him more closely.

Had we got away with it? I sneaked a look at Dad. Or was he planning to spring a surprise announcement when he'd downed the last of his coffee?

Bread popped out of the toaster with a clatter, smoking. The smell made me feel sick. Leonard juggled a slice onto his plate.

The smoke alarm wailed out like a chisel to the skull. Mum flung open the back patio door and then snatched Dad's paper out of his hands and started fanning the detector with it. Shame the detector upstairs didn't do that last night. Then again, thank God it didn't. The din stopped.

Dad stood up with his coffee cup, scraping his chair against the wooden floorboards. The noise set my teeth on edge even more than the alarm. He looked really annoyed. Was this his moment to say something? I held my breath.

Dad took back his paper, then kissed Mum's cheek. 'Be good all of you.' He disappeared out of the kitchen and I heard the front door slam.

I let out a long sigh of relief.

'Well done, Leonard,' said Victoria, coming into the kitchen and eyeing his burnt toast. 'Keep doing your bit for the Greenhouse Effect.'

That's my big sister for you. Always going on at us about the Environment. Conveniently forgetting about the telly in her bedroom and the fact that she drives to College every day, rather than gets the bus. I wondered whether reaching seventeen did something to your brain cells.

Leonard sucked butter off his fingers, giving Victoria the evils.

Grandad sucked at his spoon.

I let out a snigger of relief and Leonard gave *me* the evils.

Grandad gazed out of the window, spoon in mid-air, his cornflakes turning to mush. I groaned to myself.

It was as if he'd never seen our back garden before, the long, moss-free lawn, the wicker garden furniture arranged in a circle Grandad said the builders of Stonehenge would have envied. He was staring past the Den, his big work shed with its curtained windows, down to the weeping willows and our old rowing boat, *Little Swift*, hauled out on the riverbank. I watched a look of confusion glaze his face. All of a sudden he sprang up from his chair and went over to the patio door, his fingertips pressed hard against the glass.

I chewed my cornflakes slowly.

I knew Grandad was getting worse.

It had started small. Lost keys. Not knowing where he put his glasses. Lights left on. A window gaping open, the front door unlocked. Then breaking a glass and leaving the pieces lying there, eggs boiling dry so the pan got scorched. Then last night…

I felt cornflakes scrape the inside of my throat.

I covered up for him. Found his lost keys, his glasses, turned off lights, closed the windows, bolted the door, got rid of the glass, switched off the gas. Watched him whenever I could. But last night was different. That was the worst thing he's ever done. Setting fire to your pillow is not good at the best of times. Especially not good when the smoke detector on the upstairs landing's on the blink and you live in a big thatched house with Tudor timbering.

Victoria's mobile started its irritating ringing. She sighed. 'Not another call! She stood with a hand on her hip. 'Nine fifty-five by the war memorial, Darling! No, not the chip shop!'

I looked at Mum, then back at Victoria. You could see where my sister got it from. Her looks too – blonde hair, blue eyes. Just like Mum and Sophie. Leonard's the spitting image of Dad, especially when he scowls.

Me? You can't test family resemblances out on me.

Grandad was still staring out of the window, his profile grim. Who was he like? None of them. He was an outsider. Like me.

I saw his jaw twitch. 'He's there again,' he said.

Victoria rolled her eyes at Mum.

'Is it Moggy, Grandad?' asked Sophie with interest, scrambling over to the window. 'Oh, yes,' she cooed. 'There he is! We should stop putting so much milk down for him, Grandad. He's getting fat!'

At first I thought he was joking with Sophie when Grandad first mentioned Moggy. But that was before I found him in the garden in his pyjamas, calling the cat's name over and over.

'Not ruddy Moggy,' said Grandad with irritation. 'That man. The one that's watching me. I told you. Don't you remember?'

'Sit down and get your tea, William.' Mum pushed a mug in his direction.

I looked out. There was no one I could see.

Sophie started meowing at the top of her voice.

'Boyfriend again?' Leonard fluttered his eyelashes at Victoria who was thumbing a text.

'Grow up!' she hissed.

'*Three blind mice,*' sang Sophie. '*See how they run…*'

'Martin Dawes,' pouted Leonard, making a swipe at her phone. 'Oh, Mar-*tin*!'

'Mind your own business, Toe Rag!' Victoria screeched, storming from the room and stomping upstairs.

'*Twinkle, twinkle, little star!*' squawked Sophie.

I sank my head into my hands.

'Knock it off, can't you?' Grandad turned sharply, leaving ten oily fingerprints on the glass, and there was a patch where his breath had been, fading to nothing. I looked at the soggy mess in Grandad's bowl and let out a long, quiet sigh.

'Come on, Sophie, Darling. Finish your breakfast.' Mum clanked jars of jam into a canvas bag. 'You and I are leaving for the Fête really soon. Remember you promised to help me wrap the prizes for the Lucky Dip? If we're quick we might see Lia there.'

Leonard turned to me. 'Yeah, Alex, how is that girlfriend of yours?'

I didn't even bother telling him for the three millionth time that Lia Barker wasn't my girlfriend, she was a mate from my class. Not that he'd know anything about having friends.

Sophie started a full-blown shriek, making lethal swipes with her wand and losing a sequined shoe. '*London's burning, London's burning, fetch the engines, fetch the engines…*'

'*Fire, fire, fire, fire,*' Leonard sang as he went by me on his way to the door. He brought his face right up close to mine and said, really quietly, so only I could hear. 'Don't think I don't know about last night.'

My jaw dropped.

'Just wait till I tell Dad. What will you do then, *Bosnia Boy*?' He pinched my arm hard between his fingers and I tried to elbow him away. 'What'll you do when the loony van comes to take Grandad away? That'll teach you for trying to mess up our family.'

I grabbed at his back, but he was already gone.

I gulped down my tea trying to take in what Leonard had said. I watched Grandad strike a match, pipe in mouth. That stupid pipe of his.

'In the garden, William!' shrilled Mum. 'How many more times? And remember we're counting on your photos.'

He shook the flame out and looked at me. 'Ready for the Den, Alex?'

I managed to nod back.

'You will watch Grandad, won't you, Darling?' Mum whispered to me anxiously, pressing a tenner into my hand as we filed past. 'Promise me.'

I remembered last night. Waking up from a bad dream. Smelling smoke.

'Don't worry, Mum,' I said, my heart thudding.

I'd got rid of the pillow. Buried it under the willows at the end of our garden.

We went out through the back patio door. The air smelt of grass cuttings and sunlight and the sea.

'Freedom!' Grandad lit his pipe and a fog of grey tobacco smoke rose and lingered over his head. 'Feel like I've been let out of a ruddy cage!'

I kicked at the grass as we walked down the lawn. How had Leonard found out? I asked myself. He must have been sneaking about, spying. What if he told Dad? Would they send Grandad away? I knew for a fact that Mum and Dad had once discussed getting him on a waiting list for an old people's home. I knew for a fact that Grandad would rather be dead than go in a place like that. But could they force him to go when they found out what he'd done?

I was sure about on thing. I had to talk to Leonard. Or Grandad was in big trouble.

We stopped outside the Den, Grandad finished his pipe, then I watched him unlock the padlock. As we went in, his toe caught on a saucer by the door, spilling milk all over.

'Ruddy Moggy!' he said affectionately.

Moggy. Grandad's cat. Not a problem in itself.

Trouble is, Moggy died fifty years ago.