

# The Last Container

"Here we are!" Svend said joyful as he opened the main door.

"Welcome back home, Grandpa," we all said, including those whose familiar binding was another.

Grandpa – yes, he was really *my* Grandfather, since I was the son of his son, the previously mentioned Svend – was empathetically moved. "I never thought I should pass the threshold of this door again. It has been a tough period of my life. Thanks everybody for the impressive reception."

"Please, here are your house-shoes," aunt Erna, his daughter said.

"But these are not mine," he protested.

"No, of course not. The old ones were too shabby. We have bought some new ones."

Grandpa seemed as happy for the new house-shoes as a ballerina receiving new ballet shoes for the premiere. "I am certain that the old ones would have sufficed for my remaining days," he murmured. Erik, aunt Erna's husband, nodded; fortunately without being seen by grandpa.

"Let me take your coat, Grandpa," Lene, cousin, said. "It has become springtime, quite suitable for your return from the hospital."

"Come to the festival table, we have coffee and a cake ready," I added.

Grandpa was getting tears in his eyes when he saw the large cake with the many Danish flags. "Thanks, dear children, it is really too sweet of you."

"Perhaps Grandpa should first have fresh pampers," 5-year-old Marie suggested, probably with the best intentions.

Grandpa stalked. "It is more than 80 years ago since I had some kind of pampers, as you call them. In your case, it is not so long ago. Even your mother had new pampers from my hand and if desired, I can change them again."

Lena got a red face, the other adults laughed but Marie started crying. Grandpa noticed what his remark had caused to his relative. "Dear Marie, I did not want to insult you, come and kiss me, then we change the subject, it disturbs the appetite on the delicious cake." Marie and Grandpa were reconciled and we could proceed to the next topic of the welcome ceremony.

"Please sit down in your favourite chair, father" my mother, actually his stepdaughter Stephanie, said. "We took it from the sitting room, we needed some seats for the big company. Except for the small Henrik all shall join the table." Henrik was Marie's small brother. He had just become two-years-old and required surveillance constantly. This is the age when parents are about to regret the pleasure they once felt when their child started to walk around.

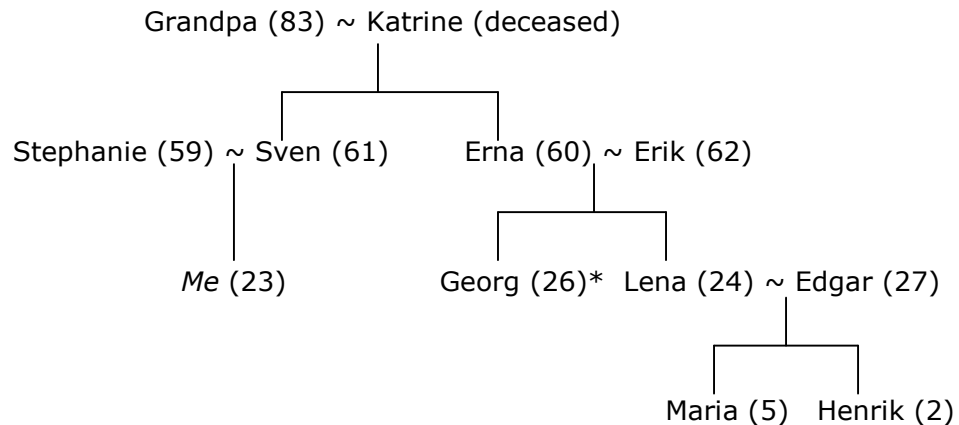
"Marie, you must sit at the piano chair," her father, my uncle Edgar, said

"Georg could not come, he is flying to India tonight," Lena, his sister, said.

Now I have introduced all my family, which on this sunny day in April received Grandpa as he came home after three months in the hospital. The reader may have some trouble to order the many names, so driven by pity for this mental weakness, so frequent in advanced age, I have inserted a pedigree below. The age of each member is enclosed in hyphens. Regarding age, my grandmother, Katrine, who died last year, always had a precise knowledge of the familiarly relations. After her death, my grandpa's health deteriorated rapidly until he suffered a stroke just after New Year.

It looked very badly. Instantly, of course, we hoped for a rapid recovery. As the first weeks passed without any beneficiary progress, some members of the family – I shall not mention any names – openly expressed that the best, which could happen now, was that he died soon. He did not follow the invitation. The pessimists elaborated their judgement: rather get an end to it than be transferred to an old people's asylum with a debilitating paralysis and without being able to articulate himself, whatever might go on in his head. As if intended to contradict also that prognosis, Grandpa woke up after more than a month. He was, however, now foreseen to be discharged to the asylum, it was quite impossible to come back home with this paralysis, the doctors had said.

Having said so, however, also the paresis slowly disappeared and Grandpa learned walking again, 82 years after he had learned it the first time. Still, the doctors insisted on the asylum, but Grandpa had also a word to include for that decision; the word was "NO!" Tat had surprised us all, after we had accepted fate (his fate, by the way), but as his family we felt an obligation to support his decision so here we were.



*The pedigree of our family, with our current ages in brackets. \* Georg, the lucky guy, was absent as Grandpa returned from the hospital.*

"I may be old and strange, and such a stroke is not exactly healthy for the memory, but I do not remember these cups."

"Have you forgotten that we presented you a new set for Christmas?" Erik asked.

"Strange, I remember last Christmas quite sharply. You had kindly invited me to participate the four-generation's feast. How glad Maria turned for her doll's kitchen while Henrik could not quite grasp the meaning of the plastic car, Santa Claus brought him. Is he driving it now?"

"Not yet," Lena said, "but Santa Claus has made a big impression on Maria. She keeps talking about him." Gratefully she signalled, for the children invisible, to the old Santa Claus.

"Of course, he is also an impressive old fellow," his replacement on this part of the Earth continued. "He must be several hundred years old, one should think. But back to my own presents: I remember the pipe from Stephanie and Svend, which I hardly tried, and now the doctors have even prohibited smoking, or I may not reach an old age; and then there was the sweater which Erna had created herself. But new cups?"

"Not just the cups," Svend explained. "All the plates are new, too. We had ordered it as a joint present from all of your family, but it only arrived after your illness." That was, of course, an emergency white lie, but who could imagine that Grandpa's memory was that sharp after the serious event? A strange mixture, symbolising various phases of his life, covered his demand for cups and plates. There were hardly three parts of identical origin for everybody else than Grandpa, these items would appear worthless, so they landed in the first container some weeks ago. Surprised by the message some days ago, that Grandpa was coming home, we had immediately bought new services, of course not a very expensive one but for the first time in later decades, it was possible in this house to serve up to twelve guests from identical plates and coffee cups. And now, already, this well meant detail was possibly discovered. Erna led the attention masterly in another direction.

"You shall have the first piece of the cake – I've bought it myself!"

"Probably better so, you have never been good at baking one yourself," Grandpa commented. "Fortunately, you are able to compensate the lacking abilities by financial means. We were happy to get you married before Erik got any suspicion. Yes, I am indeed looking forward to taste 'your' cake."

Erik was always seeing the positive in complex matters. "Fortunately, Erna has many other good abilities – and not everybody can select such delicious cakes."

Grandpa agreed and started tasting. "It is indeed wonderful to be together with the whole family, I am very grateful for this exceptional welcome. It is just a pity that Katrine can experience it. Would you please give me the box with the last photos that I haven't ordered into an album?"

"Eh, where do you keep these pictures, daddy?" Svend asked.

"In the sleeping room, beside the bed – at least, that is where I kept it until I was brought away." Grandpa knew where he had kept the things. Last year, as his wife had died, he had moved down to the small guestroom so that he was only seldom going upstairs in the huge old house.

Svend had probably a bad feeling but pretended he was searching for the box. "Somebody must have cleaned the room, there is no box left there."

"In that case, bring me the last album, which is in the other room, just adjacent to the television." Contrary to the remaining family, Grandpa kept his pictures in order, until the death of his wife, all were attached in albums with comments to when and where the picture was taken. My parents had a minimal order in boxes with five years of photos, waiting for better times, which would never come. My personal pictures were taken with a digital camera. With a computer-breakdown, I had already lost a year's pictures; other years were stored on CDs for the eternity although I had read that also this storage was unreliable after a few years. But back to Grandpa's admirable photo-albums:

"I believe I have seen them somewhere else," Edgar cried and rushed out of the room towards the main entrance. He closed the door to the eating room so that we could not see that he ran out in the garden. Shortly afterwards, he returned with 6 albums which were showing signs of being kept along with a chalky powder. He dried it off with his shirtsleeve while his wife was looking critically. "I believe this is the last one."

"Yes, that's true, but why is it so dirty, and so cold?"

"Father must have taken it from the last container," Maria said.

"Hush!" several said. I thought to hear many toes scratch along the bottom of the shoes.

"Of children and drunken people you shall hear the truth," Grandpa quoted bitterly. "If there is a 'last container,' there must have been a first one, too, perhaps even some in-between. I am suddenly inspired to inspect the other rooms."

Painful, utterly painful, but there was no way to stop it. Grandpas proceeded to the living room, once dominated by marvellous antique furniture – which had been sold for a fortune. He swallowed as he saw the empty room.

"We have modernised a bit," my mother clumsily commented. Just then rang the telephone, which was standing on the floor. I rushed in but Grandpa had already taken it.

"No, you must have dialled a wrong number, the house is not for sale – as far as I know." He ended the connection and went back to the coffee table.

"I shouldn't have come back again. Call the asylum and tell them that I shall anyhow come after all. Anyhow, the small rest of my life that still remains shall be spent in unknown surroundings." He took another album and looked at the pictures and his comments. "What a terrible waste of time," he said in a low tune.

These were Grandpa's last words. His head sank down upon the half-eaten peace of cake. He was not returned to the hospital, neither was he brought to the asylum; instead he was taken directly to the cemetery where the undertaker had a cooling room for preservation of the deceased until the funeral.

While the family was occupied with the painful departure, I grasped the six albums from the table and stored them in the back of my car. Then I went to the container – the last container – and found the rest. The mentioned box was disposed of long time ago. When I came back home, I cleaned all albums with a humid blanket and was happy to determine that it had not rained since they landed in the container.

That was five years ago. I keep them as a unique memory of my grandparents on my father's side. By the way, isn't it time to start looking into them?

### ***In Memory of the Memories***

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