

Uncle Hand-me-down



Emma Laybourn

This is a free ebook from www.megamousebooks.com

Copyright 2013 Emma Laybourn

Uncle Hand-Me-Down

Chapter One

“Joshua’s got a new football,” said Luke. “He brought it to school today. Can I have a new football?”

“You’ve got a football,” said Mum.

“But it’s old!” whined Luke. “Jack had it before me.” Jack was Luke’s brother – or rather, one of his brothers. Luke had three brothers and a sister; and they were all older than him.

“There’s nothing wrong with your football,” said Mum.

“Hurry up! It’s past your bedtime.”

Luke pulled off his red jumper. He felt hot and cross.

“I hate this jumper,” he muttered. “It’s old too.”

The red jumper was even older than the football. It was a hand-me-down. It had belonged to all his brothers: first Adam, then Wade, then Jack. Even his sister Beth had worn it for a while.

Luke threw the jumper on to his toybox.

“I hate all my toys,” he growled. “They’re all too old.” His toybox was full of battered cars, boxes with no lids, mixed-up jigsaws and games with bits missing.

That was the trouble with being the fifth child in the family. He never got anything new.

His clothes were old. His toys were old. His books were tatty and full of jammy fingerprints. His bike was scratched and battered.

“Joshua’s got a new bike,” said Luke longingly. “Can I—”

“No,” said Mum. “Face.”

Luke trailed into the bathroom to wash his face. When he had finished, Mum took the flannel and did it again, scrubbing all the bits that he had missed.

“Joshua’s got a new racing car,” he began.

“Well, I can’t buy you one,” said Mum, before he even had time to ask.

But then she smiled. “Actually, I have got something for you. Look! Nice new pyjamas, with dinosaurs on!”

Luke stared at them. He recognised those dinosaurs.

“They’re not new at all!” he wailed. “I don’t want those. Wade used to wear them. They’re horrible!”

“Luke! What’s got into you? You don’t usually mind wearing hand-me-downs.”

“I *hate* hand-me-downs!” Luke shouted.

He didn’t know why he felt so cross. Mum was right: usually he didn’t mind wearing old clothes, because if he got them torn or muddy, it didn’t matter too much.

But Joshua had worn a brand-new coat to school. It was so smart that Luke felt like a scarecrow in the old coat that Adam, Wade and Jack had worn before him.

And now he was fed up.

“I’m sick of hand-me-downs!” he yelled.

“What a temper!” said Mum, surprised.

“I’m too hot,” said Luke angrily. “My throat hurts.” Then he sneezed three times.

Mum felt his forehead. “I think you’ve got Adam’s cold,” she said.

“Oh, no!” wailed Luke. “Even my cold’s a hand-me-down. Adam and Jack and Beth have all had it already. Now they’ve passed it on to me!”

It was all too much. Luke burst into tears.

Chapter Two

Luke opened his eyes.

It was morning. He still felt hot and tired and cross, and everything was aching.

“No school for you today,” said Mum. “You’ll have to stay at home.”

“Will you stay at home with me?”

“I wish I could,” she said, giving him a hug. “But I have to go to work. I’ve rung Uncle Harvey. He’s coming to look after you.”

Uncle Harvey was Mum’s uncle: Grandad’s brother. He was very tall and thin, and rather old.

“He looked after Adam and Beth and Wade when they all had chickenpox,” Mum added, “and he looked after Jack when he had flu.”

“Then he’s a hand-me-down uncle!” grumbled Luke.

“Everyone else has had him first.”

“He said he’d bring you a present,” said Mum.

Luke sniffed. “Well, I hope it’s something *new*!”

*

When Uncle Harvey arrived, his white hair brushed the top of the doorway. He had a wide white moustache like an enormous extra smile. He was carrying a long, thin box.

He sat down on the sofa next to Luke.

“Here’s your present,” he said in his deep voice.

Luke looked at the box. "It's old," he said, disappointed. He opened it anyway. Inside it lay a tube.

Luke took it out. It felt cold and heavy. "A telescope! Is it real?"

"It's a real telescope, and it belonged to a real sailor," Uncle Harvey said. "It belonged to your great-great-grandad."

Luke pulled at one end of the telescope and it opened out. He peered through it.

"It really works!"

"That telescope saved a life," said Uncle Harvey.

"Whose life?"

"Your great-great-grandad's. He was a sailor called George, a hundred years ago. George was in a big ship sailing home from China with a hold full of beautiful silk, and china vases, and carved furniture. It had been a long voyage, and the sailors were looking forward to getting home. But the ship never made it."

"Why not?"

"It sailed into a great black storm. The winds blew the ship onto a reef. The jagged rocks under the water tore a hole in its side, and the sea began to pour in."

Luke sat up straight. "What did the sailors do?"

"They shouted, 'Man the lifeboats!' But there wasn't enough room in the lifeboats for everyone. George was left on board the ship. He heard it give a mighty crack, and he dived into the sea just as the ship went down.

“Well, he came up, spluttering, and all around were waves the size of mountains. Rolls of silk were bobbing in the waves, and china vases were sinking down to the silent depths of the sea. George was scared that he would sink as well.

“Then he saw a great big carved wooden cupboard floating on the water. It was made for a palace, with flowers and birds carved all over it. And it floated like a raft. So George climbed on top of it until the storm passed and the waves were still again.

“Then he looked for land. But all he could see was ocean.”

“The telescope!” cried Luke. “Where was the telescope?”

“It was in his pocket,” Uncle Harvey said. “He pulled it out and looked through it. He looked north and south, and east and west, until he saw a little smudge on the horizon. Land!

“So, lying on the cupboard, he kicked and kicked, and then he used a piece of driftwood as a paddle. He reached the land by nightfall. But without the telescope he never would have seen it.”

“How do you know this story?” asked Luke. “Did George tell you?”

“No. He handed the story down to his son Alf, who was my Dad, and Alf handed it down to me. Now I’m handing it down to you.”

“I’m glad George didn’t drown,” said Luke. “Do you know any more stories about him?”

“Lots,” said Uncle Harvey. “George ran away to sea when he was just fourteen.”

And he told Luke stories about sharks and sails and gales and whales, while Luke looked through the window with his telescope. At last he saw Mum coming down the road.

“Here’s Mum! Will you come back tomorrow, Uncle Harvey?”

“If you’re still not well,” said Uncle Harvey.

“Will you bring me a present?”

“What sort of present?”

“Something I can look in, like a telescope,” said Luke.

Chapter Three

Next day, Uncle Harvey brought a present. It was nothing like a telescope.

For a start, it was much, much bigger. Uncle Harvey puffed as he carried it in, and put it down with a thud.

“It’s a dolls’ house!” said Luke, taken aback. “I don’t play with dolls’ houses!”

“Don’t you? Well, my father Alf did,” said Uncle Harvey, “when he was little. This house belonged to Alf and his sister Edith.”

He unlatched the front of the dolls’ house and swung it open. It was made of thin wood.

Inside, there were six rooms, with wallpaper and bits of real carpet and tiny beds and chairs and tables, which had fallen over. Luke reached in to set them straight again.

“Their father George built them this house one Christmas,” Uncle Harvey said. “He made those little wooden chairs and tables, and the beds, and a kitchen stove, and a tin bath.”

Luke pulled out the small tin bath and gazed at it.

“But George didn’t have quite enough time to finish it before Christmas,” Uncle Harvey went on. “When he gave it to them on Christmas Day, it had no carpets! It had no curtains! The beds had no blankets, and the bath had no towels. So Alf and Edith decided to do something about that.”

“What did they do?”

“They took their mother’s best sharp scissors, and they went hunting.” Uncle Harvey’s voice dropped to a whisper.

“First they hunted carpet,” he said. “They cut a square of red carpet from under the piano, where no one ever saw. It looked very nice in the parlour of the dolls’ house.”

Luke looked in the parlour. It did, too.

“Then they hunted curtains. They snipped off the corners of their mother’s dining-room curtains, and hung them in the dolls’ house windows. Next they cut up a pillowcase to make sheets for the beds. They cut pieces out of Edith’s new blue blanket, and they cut a strip off Alf’s white towel.”

Luke peered into the dolls’ house. Sure enough, there were the sheets and pale blue blankets, and tiny white towels. The curtains were pinned above the windows to look like real ones.

“That’s clever,” he said.

“It was very clever. And when they had finished, the dolls’ house looked beautiful! But then their mother noticed that the corners had been snipped off her best curtains.”

“Uh-oh,” said Luke.

“At first she didn’t know who to blame! Then she made the beds, and she found the bits of pillowcase and the holes in Edith’s blanket. And their father looked under the piano for something he had dropped, and saw the carpet.”

“Did they get into trouble?” asked Luke breathlessly.

“No puddings for a month,” said Uncle Harvey solemnly.

“No puddings!” Luke was aghast.

“Well, they were used to that. Alf and Edith were always getting into trouble.”

“What sort of trouble?”

“All sorts!” And Uncle Harvey began to tell Luke about the day they had dug a huge pit in the garden to catch lions, and had caught the postman instead.

While he listened, Luke played with the dolls’ house. He fetched his plasticine to make some people for it, and then made furniture out of Lego until Mum came home.

“Time for me to go,” said Uncle Harvey.

“I’m not better yet,” said Luke. “Will you bring me a present tomorrow?”

“What sort of present?”

“Something I can make, like a dolls’ house,” answered Luke.

Chapter Four

“See what I’ve brought today?” said Uncle Harvey.

He put some things on the kitchen table. They were nothing like a dolls’ house.

A bag of flour.

A tin of treacle.

A tub of margarine.

“That’s not much,” said Luke.

“It’s not much at all,” agreed Uncle Harvey. “But it was all my mother had, the day I invited the football team to tea.”

“Why did you do that?”

Uncle Harvey sat down and crossed his long, thin legs.

“It was when I was just eight,” he said, “right at the end of the war. You’ve heard about the second world war?”

“Yes,” said Luke, “I think so.”

“It had gone on for years. Years of being bombed and scraping by with not much food. It had been such a long, long war that I couldn’t remember anything else. Anyway, I was playing on the bomb-site with my friends and my little brother Tom.”

“That’s Grandad!” exclaimed Luke.

“That’s right. He was only four. We were all playing football, which wasn’t easy on that rubble, believe you me, when my friend Charlie came running up like a bullet.

“The war’s over! It’s finished!” Charlie shouted. “It’s just been on the wireless!” We all looked at each other. We didn’t

know whether to believe it. War was all we'd ever known. Could it really be over, after all those years?

“Grandad Tom stared at me, and said, ‘Does that mean we can’t play soldiers any more?’ And he began to cry. I didn’t want him to cry. I’d told my mother that I’d take good care of him.

“So I said, ‘No! It means we’ll have cake and chocolate every day!’ That made Tom stop crying all right. He began to cheer. So did everybody else. And I must have got a bit light-headed, because I shouted, ‘Cake for everyone! Come back to my house for tea, and there’ll be cake for everyone!’

“Well, you should have heard them cheer at that. We ran back through the streets, shouting, ‘WE WANT CAKE! WE WANT CAKE!’”

Uncle Harvey paused.

“I hardly knew what cake tasted like,” he said. “Food was short in the war. You couldn’t make proper cake.”

“Did your Mum have to go and buy cake for everybody?” asked Luke.

“You couldn’t buy cake, either,” Uncle Harvey said. “Well, we all burst into our house shouting, ‘Cake! Cake! The war’s over and we want cake!’ My mother took one look at us and dropped a whole basket of washing on the floor.”

“‘Cake?’ she cried. ‘How am I going to make a cake? We’ve got no eggs! We’ve got no butter! We’ve got no sugar! I can’t make a cake!’

“Well, we all went quiet. Our faces fell. She looked at us. Then she smiled, and jumped up.

“Come on,’ she said. ‘Let’s see what we *have* got!’ And she looked in the larder.

“We’ve got plenty of flour,’ she said, ‘and powdered milk, and a bit of margarine... and we’ve got *this!*’ She held it up. It was a tin of treacle.”

Luke reached out and held up the red and black tin of treacle on the table.

“Like this one!” he said.

“Just like that,” said Uncle Harvey. “Well, my mother told us, ‘I’ve had this treacle since before the war. But treacle doesn’t go off. We’ll have Treacle Cakes!’”

“What are treacle cakes?” asked Luke.

“I’ll show you. Where’s your mixing bowl?”

Luke got the big mixing bowl and the kitchen scales.

“Now then!” said Uncle Harvey. “We need half a pound of flour.”

“You mean two hundred grams,” said Luke, looking at the scales.

“Oh, dear,” said Uncle Harvey. “I’m not very good at grams. They didn’t have grams in the war.”

“I’ll weigh it out for you,” said Luke. He weighed two hundred grams of flour, and put it in the mixing bowl.

“An ounce of margarine,” said Uncle Harvey.

“Twenty-five grams,” said Luke, and he weighed that too. Then Uncle Harvey showed him how to rub the margarine into the flour until it looked like crumbs.

“Add a big spoonful of treacle,” Uncle Harvey said.

“How big?”

“The biggest spoon you’ve got.”

Luke poured a big spoonful of treacle into the mixing bowl. It dribbled in slowly, looking like a long black string. When it was nearly all in, he licked the spoon.

“It tastes of treacle toffee,” he said. “What next?”

“Add some milk, one spoonful at a time; and mix it all together.”

Luke stirred the mixture. It turned brown and doughy. Uncle Harvey helped him put blobs of it on to a baking tray. There were ten blobs altogether.

“Now we bake them in a hot oven for fifteen minutes,” Uncle Harvey said. He had already switched the oven on without Luke noticing. He slid the baking tray in.

Then he played Snakes and Ladders with Luke for fifteen minutes, until it was time to take the cakes out.

“Here we are!” said Uncle Harvey, sliding them off the baking tray on to a plate. “Treacle cakes! Best eaten hot and fresh!”

Luke tried one. It was bumpy and crunchy on the outside, and hot and soft and sweet on the inside.

“Is that treacle tin a hand-me-down?” he asked.

“No, but the recipe is,” said Uncle Harvey.

Luke ate two treacle cakes while they were hot and fresh, and Uncle Harvey ate one.

“Seven left,” said Luke. “One for each of us at tea tonight. Will you bring me something else along tomorrow?”

“You’ll be at school tomorrow,” Uncle Harvey said. “You look much better now.”

“Oh, no, I don’t,” said Luke. “I’m worse!”

Uncle Harvey laughed. “I might bring myself along, after school,” he said.

Chapter Five

Luke raced Joshua to the school gate. Joshua held his new football under his arm.

“There’s time for a kickabout before we go home!” said Luke.

“I can’t,” said Joshua. “It’s too muddy. My mum said I mustn’t get my new shoes dirty, and I don’t want to get mud on my football.”

Luke wondered. What was the point of shoes, or a football, if you couldn’t get them dirty?

“I’ll bring my ball tomorrow,” he said.

“Yours is ancient!”

“That’s right,” said Luke. “It’s played hundreds of games. Once it spent two weeks up a tree when Wade kicked it too high. And once it sailed down the canal all the way to the lock, and a man nearly fell in trying to get it out...”

“What happened?”

“Sorry, I haven’t got time to tell you now,” said Luke. “Here’s my uncle come to meet me.”

Joshua looked at Uncle Harvey, standing by the gate. “He’s ancient too,” he said.

“That’s right,” replied Luke cheerfully. “He’s so old that he’s jam-packed full of stories!”

And he ran out to meet his Uncle Hand-Me-Down.

The End

*