

The screws – a tale of twists and turns

Grandpa opened his hand. 'Do you know what this is Charlie? Correct! It is a screw, but it is not any old screw. It is one of four that once held a hinge in place. If you look carefully, you'll see that it has a head that sits a bit proud of the plane of the surface. A raised head, they call it. A screw with a raised head does not have a perfectly flat back, like a round head or a dome head. It has a bit of a funnel shape, similar to a countersunk screw. Look, see what I mean.'

The boy sighed and wriggled uncomfortably on Grandpa's lap. It was time for a story, not a lecture on screw heads.

'You want to know how I came by this screw? I haven't told you before, but it is part of your history too. Once upon a time, your great-grandfather, George, had a furniture shop in the high street. You know the place. It is now a nail bar.

He was a craftsman and a carpenter, and he had a workshop at the back. Mostly he sold things from a supplier in Essex, but he produced a few items on his own account. This is one of the brass screws he used to fix a pair of hinges on the back of a box he made the year that I was born.

Don't ask me why, but he wrote the date and time, his name, and the address of his workshop on slip of paper which he stuck under the lining inside the lid. It was like putting a message in a bottle. He didn't tell anyone, and he sold the delicate rosewood box for a good price.

That would have been the end of it if he hadn't been arrested just a few months later. I never believed he was responsible for the murder of my mother's lover, but I admit he had the motive and the means. His workshop was full of sharp tools and the jury agreed: when George found his wife in bed with Frank it must have been the final straw.

How mother managed to bring me up on her own I'll never know. Her lover was dead, and her husband was in jail. Dad protested his innocence, but to no avail. He remembered writing a note and putting it inside a rosewood box on the day in question, but the jury agreed: he could have made that up, and there was no way of finding out where the box was now. By the time the evidence came to light, I was a young man with a life of my own.

Most woodworm prefer damp timber - the moisture makes the wood easier to chew and my father's box ended up in a cellar. It was only when the purchasers moved house, two decades later, that it was found, riddled with holes and falling apart. And that's when the note slipped out. The owners looked up the name and discovered that the author, George Turner, was in prison for murder. The piece of paper stuck inside the lid proved beyond doubt that he had been in his workshop when Frank was killed. The case was eventually re-opened and suspicion fell on my mother, but by then it was too late. If there was any incriminating evidence, it had vanished.

Dad never recovered from his time in prison, and he died soon after his release. They are all gone now: Frank, my mother, and the man who thought of me as his son. Just before she passed away, mother confessed. George was not my real father. She didn't want anyone to discover that Frank was responsible, so she wiped him out and assembled the clues that put dad away. When she told me this she was in a home and quite confused, so no one took her seriously: no one, that is, but me.

I never really knew him, but I inherited what I still think of as dad's tools and a vast collection of screws. So that's it Charlie, now you know the truth about who you really are.

Charlie, who had the concentration of a grasshopper, jumped off Grandpa's lap. Grandpa was always making up stories, but now it was time to play. 'The garage' he yelled. 'Let's go to the garage'.

Charlie's grandfather was nonplussed. Had the boy not listened to a word he'd said? Maybe he didn't care about the past. Maybe it didn't really matter. Back in the garage they settled into their favourite game, sorting through trays of screws and lining them up in order.

