

Sapphire Rees 10Z

My grandfather is well known in the family for being a hoarder. Almost every inch of his house is covered with bric-a-brac, knick-knacks, items gathered from second-hand shops and jumble sales, or rescued from the bin bags of less sentimental family members. For as long as I can remember, one such item has always held a sort of magic for me. It is a small brass lantern. To the untrained, adult eye it may be unremarkable, but when I was a toddler it was captivating.

I remember visiting my grandfather, dressed in an uncomfortable dress, and tired from the car journey, sitting on the hard leather sofa, feeling the lantern pulling my eyes round to it. My sticky fingers grabbing it, warming the cold metal, the metallic aroma filling my nose. I would run to garden, leaving the adults to whatever less interesting activities they were engaged in, their minds filled with weather and holidays, new babies and old friends, their existence dragged down by the inescapable prison of reality and acknowledged responsibility.

Out the garden the lantern shone for me, showing me the way to the fairies, the dragons, the wizards. I am an explorer. I am a princess. I am magic. Crawl through the jungle, climb the mountain, look for the lost key. I kick off my shoes and feel the grass under my feet. The cold moisture seeps between my toes and turns my cotton socks a muddy green. I do not care. I run to the shed and heave open the heavy, wooden door, still clutching the beacon. The shed smells of leather and oil and paint, and I breathe in, recognising the smell from many other such expeditions. I sit on the concrete floor, surrounded by cans and pots and brushes. I trace the engraving on the lantern; brush my hand against the darker parts where the metal has become tarnished by time. It is cold in the shed, away from the weak sunlight that hovers outside. I skip back into the garden, barefoot now, my socks lost in some earlier game.

Back in the house, I am just a little girl in a muddy dress who has lost her shoes. I have been bad, and I won't be allowed any pudding now. Am I happy? Do I understand why she's angry? Why can't I be a big girl? I curl up on the sofa, and the lantern is replaced on the mantle piece, where it stands silent for the rest of the visit.

My grandfather still owns the lantern, and it stands on the mantle piece, full of the magic of children's games.