

You loved your last book...but what
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

In the Midst of Life

Written by Jennifer Worth

Published by Phoenix

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

IN THE MIDST OF LIFE

JENNIFER WORTH, SRN, SCM

Clinical Editor

David Hackett, MD, FRCP, FESC

Consultant Cardiologist



PHOENIX

A PHOENIX PAPERBACK

First published in Great Britain in 2010
by Weidenfeld & Nicolson,
This paperback edition published in 2011
by Phoenix,
an imprint of Orion Books Ltd
Orion House, 5 Upper Saint Martin's Lane
London WC2H 9EA
An Hachette UK Company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Jennifer Worth 2010

The moral right of Jennifer Worth to be identified as the author of
this work has been asserted in accordance with the
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in
any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior
permission of the copyright owner

All efforts have been made to trace copyright holders.
The publisher will be pleased to correct any omissions.

The acknowledgements on page 410
are an extension of this copyright page.

This is a work of non-fiction, and the events it recounts are
true. However, the names and certain identifying characteristics
of some of the people who appear in its pages have been
changed. The views expressed in this book are the author's.

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-7538-2752-9

Typeset by Input Data Services Ltd, Bridgwater, Somerset

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

The Orion Publishing Group's policy is to use papers
that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and
made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging
and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to
the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

www.orionbooks.co.uk

1956

A NATURAL DEATH

My grandfather died in 1956 at the age of eighty-six. I loved him deeply and was very close to him. I saw very little of my father during the war, and in the years after. Every girl needs a man in her life, and my dear grandfather gladly filled that role. I treasure a Bible that he gave me for my twenty-first birthday, shortly before he died, with a loving message carefully penned by a shaking hand, unaccustomed to writing. He was barely literate, having left school at the age of eleven to work in a builder's yard, and was the oldest of thirteen children, born in 1870, when every child in a working class family had to labour from an early age. At fifteen he lied about his age and joined the army, 'So that one of my brothers could have my boots,' he told me. He had about him a quiet simplicity and wisdom that greatly influenced my childhood, and therefore my whole life.

I remember his tenderness throughout my early years; going for long walks in the countryside, my grandfather pointing out and naming birds, trees and flowers. I remember going to his allotment to dig potatoes, him pushing me in the wheelbarrow and me shouting 'Faster, faster!' I remember helping him to polish shoes, clean the windows, clear out his garden shed, clean the grate and chop the wood and get the coal in. And I remember him growing old.

It was a gradual process. First it was the wheelbarrow. However much I shouted, he couldn't go any faster.

'I am getting old,' he would say. 'You get out and run. Your legs are younger than mine.'

As I grew older and stronger, he grew older and weaker, and, after a few years, I was the one pushing the wheelbarrow. Soon,

digging for potatoes became too much for him, so I dug up the golden white globes. I had always been told that Grandad was hard of hearing, but I had never noticed it when I was little. I prattled on and he always seemed to understand me. I noticed that his nose dripped.

‘Why is your nose dripping?’ I asked, pertly.

‘Don’t be saucy, little madam,’ he replied, taking out his handkerchief and wiping the offending organ. From an early age I remember pulling his skin and watching with interest as it settled slowly back into place. I pulled my own skin, and it bounced back.

‘That’s as it should be,’ Grandad said. ‘When you are as old as me your skin will be like mine.’

‘I’m never going to grow old!’ I shouted confidently as I raced down the garden path to his shed, which was always a place of wonder.

My grandmother had died in 1943, of a heart attack, I was told. My grandfather and my mother were with her when she died. My mother told me that he held her in his arms during the last half hour of life, tenderly stroking her face and kissing her. She had died as she had lived, in the protection of her husband’s love, and, after her death, he lived alone. They had had eight children, and four of his daughters, including my mother, regularly attended to his needs. Cleaning became a problem. I recall my mother saying,

‘Dad’s getting very dirty. I found two pairs of dirty underpants hidden away in the back of his drawer.’

And, as I grew older, I was aware that his smell had changed. I had always thought of him as a lovely smell of earth and leaves and smoky old jackets. But it changed. Later on I realised the change in the smell was urine. He was never really incontinent, but most elderly men have prostate problems; it was gradual, and never so noticeable as to be offensive.

Two of his daughters had a small sweetshop at the end of the road. At first, after Grandma’s death, they had let Grandad serve in the shop. He enjoyed meeting the customers, and ‘it gives him something to do,’ my aunts said. A few years later he could not be trusted to give the correct change, and, worse still, he did not seem

to notice when his nose was dripping, so in the end he had to be steered gently away. He missed the shop, but said acceptingly, 'I'm getting old, now. You young people must take over.'

My grandfather was a Boer War veteran (1898–1902) and he was, therefore, offered a place as a Chelsea Pensioner, but he refused. He preferred to stay with his family – and how grateful I am that he did. My development towards adult life would have been very different, had he accepted.

The doctor came to see him from time to time. My grandfather didn't really need medical treatment, but he got 'chesty' in the winters and so the doctor ordered cough linctus, which probably had no effect. He said, 'There is nothing wrong. Your father's quite healthy. He is getting old, well past his three score years and ten. He will just potter on until he fades away.'

In those days, doctors accepted that people die of old age.

'He shouldn't be smoking that pipe,' said my aunt.

'Let him,' replied the doctor, 'if he enjoys it.'

For years, my grandfather had smoked a briar pipe filled with a villainous black tobacco called Twist, which he cut up himself with a penknife. I remember poking the shards of tobacco into the bowl of the pipe and lighting a coloured spill from the fire, holding it over the bowl as he sucked hard to get the thing going. The smoke was prolific and the odour pungent (to this day I adore the smell of a man with a pipe). The doctor was right. My grandfather enjoyed it, and it certainly never did him any harm, until the day when my aunt found a large burn hole in his bed! After that he was supposed to smoke only when one of his daughters was present. I doubt if he obeyed.

'He won't eat properly,' my aunt said. 'I cook a nice dinner and he only picks at it.'

So the doctor advised a pint of stout a day. My grandfather seemed to live on this, plus a bowl of bread and milk, which he made for himself each night. I wasn't aware of any other treatments prescribed for his failing strength.

Tragedy struck the family when my grandfather's eldest son died at the age of forty. I remember the old man weeping at the funeral.

‘Why could it not have been me? My life is over. My only wish is to join my dear wife in her grave. But he, my son, he had everything to live for.’

He was visibly smaller. It was not merely that I was growing up and getting taller. He had been a guardsman, well over six feet tall, and he shrank by several inches until we were the same height. His proud, military bearing seemed to fold in on itself, and his confident step became an old man’s shuffle.

He felt the cold more, and needed several layers of woollies to keep him warm. He had a coal fire every day, except in the hottest weather, and always kept a good stock of fuel in the grate, but chopping wood and carrying coals became harder as the years passed, so he made lots of journeys to the coal house, carrying a little at a time, and someone else chopped the wood.

We still went to his allotment on sunny days, he and I, me pushing the wheelbarrow, he prodding the pavement with his stick. But the weeds grew higher and higher and could not be controlled. Eventually, we dug his last crop of potatoes, and he had not the strength, nor indeed the interest, to plant any more.

My grandfather seemed to be withdrawing into himself. He became deafer, which cut him off from conversation, but he seemed perfectly content to sit in the luxury of silence, puffing his pipe, and thinking his thoughts. Sometimes he chuckled quietly to himself. Occasionally one saw a tear in the corner of his eye, but if anyone asked why, he did not respond. He had never been a talkative man, and, as he drew towards the end of his life, speech became even more of an effort, something he did not want to be bothered with. When he had to speak, his words were slow and measured, and somewhat distant, as though his mind was a long way away, and had to be coaxed back into the world around him. Sometimes he spoke of death, saying, ‘I will soon be going to my dear wife.’ On another occasion he spoke of seeing his dead son again. He also spoke of the Angel of Death approaching. This is an old-fashioned concept, but was very real to former generations.

It was obvious that he was fading away, although he was never particularly ill in the medical understanding of the term. The

regular pumping of his heart, which circulates the blood, conveying oxygen to all parts of the body, was becoming irregular, but he never had any pills to control the heartbeat. Without adequate oxygen supply, the internal organs gradually lose their efficiency, and eventually cease to function. The tide of his life was gently ebbing away.

The last week or two of his life came suddenly. One day, he was pottering about as usual, and the next he couldn't be bothered to get up. 'Let me bide,' he told my aunt who tried to chivvy him out of bed. He more or less stopped eating, and took only sips of fluid.

I was nursing then, and lived about forty miles away, but I came back as often as I could to see him. It happened that I was with him on the day of his death. I had seen quite a lot of people die, all nurses have, and I knew what to expect. As soon as I entered the room I could see the change, which is obvious to the experienced eye. In the last few hours of life something mysterious happens, which can best be described as a veil being drawn. The dying person looks the same, but is not the same. Breathing changes, skin colour changes, the eyes change, muscle tone all but vanishes, speech becomes virtually impossible. The nearer one approaches death, the less one has the strength to resist it.

I told my mother to call the rest of the family. By a miracle of public transport, they all arrived, and he died in the evening of that day.

The doctor was not called until afterwards, and then only to sign the death certificate. He asked if we wanted a woman to come in to lay out the body, but I said no, I wanted to do it myself. And so I prepared his body and put a shroud on him, in readiness for his last journey to the grave, as I had been taught in my first year of training.

I do not know what the doctor entered on the death certificate. He knew, and we knew, that the cause of death was old age. But he could not put that. Legally, death has to be the outcome of an illness.

For everything there is a season,
A time for every matter under the sun.
A time to be born, and a time to die.

— *Ecclesiastes Chapter 3, verses 1 and 2*