

Chicken  
House

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*In memory of  
Grandma-in-Connecticut  
and Grandma Pie*



**W**ill didn't know the jumper was magic at first. It seemed dead ordinary. It had a round neck, long sleeves and stripes the width of bicycle tyres in navy blue, battleship grey and racing green. The only odd thing was a stripe near the bottom, which had bits of sparkly gold running through it. But only if you looked hard.

‘Would you like something to help you remember Gran by?’ Mum asked. ‘You can pick anything you like.’

They were at Gran's house. All of her cupboard doors were open, and her belongings were heaped in piles. There were

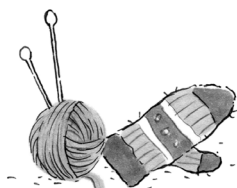
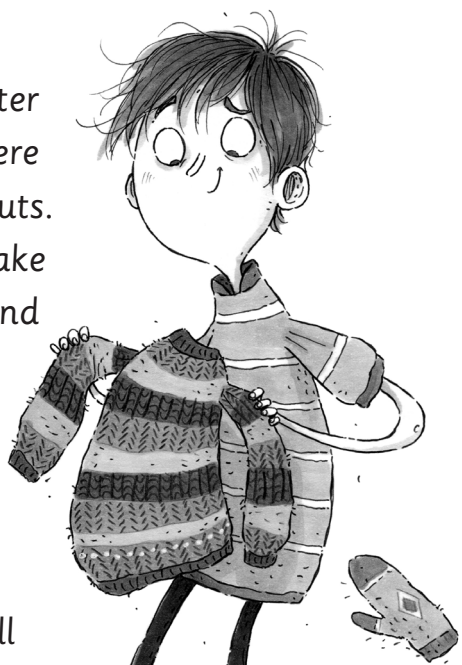
flower-covered dresses and flower-covered handbags and flower-covered rain hats. There were teapots shaped like cottages, and sugar bowls shaped like cabbages, and plates with pictures of the Isle of Man on them. And, of course, there were great honking hills of knitting.

Gran had knitted pincushions, tea cosies and shawls. She'd knitted coats for dogs, cases for glasses and hats for dolls. She'd knitted bathing costumes, dressing gowns and opera capes. She'd even knitted an umbrella once. If you'd asked Will if he'd like to have any of these things while Gran was still alive, he'd have said, 'Not bothered, thanks.' Will wasn't sure why it was different now that Gran had died.

The jumper lay on top of a mountain of mittens that Mum had poured on to Gran's kitchen table. With its arms spread wide, it looked as if it wanted to hug him. Will wasn't always keen on being hugged, but the jumper reminded him of things he'd forgotten, like

coming to Gran's after school, back before there was rugby and Scouts. He'd helped her make chutney and pickles and jam. He'd built cities out of saucepans and spindles while Gran told him stories.

'That'll be too small for you, Bilbo,' Mum said when he reached for the jumper. But Will wouldn't let go of it. Instead, he put it on. 'Look! It fits!' he said. It was surprisingly soft.



‘How funny!’ said Mum, her eyebrows flying up. ‘It’s absolutely perfect.’

Suddenly Will felt much, much better. In fact, he felt downright happy.

‘Can I pick something for Sophie?’ he asked. Sophie was his little sister, who was five. ‘Maybe there’s a dog.’ More than anything else in the world, Sophie loved dogs.

‘You’re very thoughtful all of a sudden,’ said Mum, stroking his hair. They found a knitted corgi with a green pom-pom for a nose, then started home for lunch.

Will’s house was on the other side of the river that ran through the middle of Knittington. He always went to Gran’s by the wooden footbridge hidden between the old mills lining the banks. It wasn’t really a shortcut, but it felt more secret than going over the stone bridge with the cars, and it smelt of ferns and wet stones.

As they stepped through the daisies in the

cracked car park though, a rumble erupted from the first of the big stone buildings. A cloud of dust puffed out of the open door.

‘Oh look!’ said Mum, stopping to see. ‘Someone’s fixing up that old woollen mill.’

There were vans parked next to the building, full of drills and screws and clamps. Coils of thick orange electrical cord spilt out of them. A lorry packed with crates and boxes stood open at the back. Wedged in the middle of the crates, Will could see a wire cage, with pointed pink noses poking in and out between the bars, twitching in the warm air.

‘Are those weasels in that cage?’ Will asked.

‘Ferrets, I think,’ said Mum. ‘People use them to sniff out rats in old buildings.’

They came around the building towards the river, but yellow tape barred the path to the footbridge. NO TRESPASSING, read the signs, and BUILDING WORKS.

‘But the new owner doesn’t own the river too,’ said Will, ‘do they?’



‘No,’ said Mum, ‘though they might be allowed to use the water for power.’

The building rumbled again and there was a blast of sound, like a hundred showers turning on at once. It drowned out the mossy rush of the river.

They had to retrace their path through the car park and then cross the river on the stone bridge. Will looked back down at the old mill as he and Mum climbed the cobbled street on the other side. The tall trees that grew along the riverbank blocked the view, but a breeze parted the branches for a second. Was that a face in the top-floor window? Ghost-white, it was looking down at the rushing water. Then the leaves hid the building again.

‘I wonder what they’re going to make in that old factory,’ said Mum. ‘Probably not jumpers and woolly hats any more.’

‘Is that what they used to make?’

‘A long time ago,’ said Mum. ‘It’ll be good for Knittington to have something made here again, whatever it is.’

‘Unless it’s asbestos,’ said Will, who liked logic. ‘Or poison. Or nuclear waste.’

Mum smiled. ‘Don’t worry,’ she said. ‘But the town won’t let anything harmful be made here.’

‘I’m just saying,’ said Will. ‘Not *everything* would be good.’