Skirl

The smell? Like unlit tobacco … and wood polish? And Auntie Ina's old sickly-ponging wardrobe … what did she call it … moth balls? To keep bugs away from clothes?

My hand is shaking … because I know this is not allowed.

Tingles run through my arms and chest.

Breathe, you fool! … and I suck in more of this strange sniff.

The case lid is only partly open … but I'm frightened to lift it further.

I listen for sounds in the house … but everything is quiet. They are all out!

Just me … at home … with the snoozing ginger cat … and the case – old, wooden, grey painted, a few dings in the sides and corners, stained with something … but scrubbed … two polished brass spring locks and a worn leather handle … … and this old-fashioned smell.

Mum had told me never to touch Uncle Joe's old case. He'd be angry … but I'd heard the oldies speaking quietly about it, recently. I knew it was important. And I was watching through the crack of the door, that wasn't quite shut.

They were whispering. Uncle Joe was dabbing his eyes. Auntie Ina had her arm round his shoulders. Mum was holding his hand to comfort him.

What was this all about?

And this old grey box was on the wee table in front of them all. It wasn't usually there.

'Mum, is Uncle Joe alright?' I had asked later. 'He looked upset before.'

'You shouldn't have been looking. But yes, dear. Everything is fine. Just fine. Just old memories … that sometimes … 'She stopped suddenly.

'It's that box, Mum. Isn't it? What's in the box?'

'Just memories, Son. Don't you go near it. It is very precious to Uncle Joe … but he'll need to tell you about it … maybe … someday … when he's ready.'

I shut the case quickly again. I shouldn't have opened it.

Uncle Joe is sitting near the fire, smoking his pipe. He often rests like this after a long day in the *smiddy* – he is the local blacksmith.

I'm sitting quietly with him on the other side of the fire, with a wee picture story book, as I often do … knowing that I shouldn't speak unless spoken to.

He'd let me watch him at work more often these days … at the furnace with the bellows and bashing the metal on the anvil. It was amazing what he could twist and join with all that hot glowing iron.

When he was sure that I wouldn't do anything dangerous or stupid, he would tell me what he was doing, what he was making and who he was making it for.

I knew he was helping me to grow up … to understand.

I like Uncle Joe … especially when he is smiling and gentle … and I think he likes me … because I'm polite … keen to learn. I would like to be a blacksmith when I'm older.

Uncle Joe smiles at me and asks about my day. I tell him what I've been doing and what I'm reading. I get lots of helping jobs around the village when I'm not at school. I'm nearly nine now.

He seems happy and relaxed … and able to talk. Even the ginger cat is stretching, comfortable in front of the fire.

Should I risk it? Should I ask him about the box? Would he be angry like Mum said? I remember seeing my Uncle with wet eyes being comforted by Mum and Auntie Ina.

But I care about him too.

'Uncle Joe, what's that grey box on the wee table?'

There! I've asked the question … and I wait for the anger to burst open.

'The grey box?' Uncle says slowly, his eyes distant. 'What do you want to know?'

'What's it for, Uncle?' Oh, I hope he is not going to be upset. He's not often grumpy with me now … at least since I have shown I can be safe around the workshops. We've been getting on fine at the *smiddy*. He has been answering all my questions about the metalworking techniques.

But he's not saying anything more to me just now. He takes a long suck on his pipe and then … slowly … very slowly … as he is watching me … he says, 'Open it. Very carefully.'

Now, I'm suddenly scared. What's so important in the case? Is something going to fly out at me? So, I hesitate.

'Open it,' he says again. 'Just flick the brass catches. It's not locked.'

Now, my world is just this little Scottish cross-roads village with a store, the post office, the school house, the smiddy, the woodyard with the joiners' workshops, our few houses and the surrounding farms.
Mum looks after me in Uncle Joe's house … and, with the other kids from around, we attend the little one-teacher school.
I never knew my Dad. Mum said he died before I was born. Quite a few other kids don't have dads either. It's never talked about – just normal – the war is understood but not mentioned.
I think Auntie Ina is my mother's cousin. It's all very strange. Good people are just called Auntie and Uncle, even if they aren't. I've learned to respect that we don't talk about past times or people. We just live in ***today****, here in this year of 1925.*

I flick the locks … as I had done earlier and the same smell hits my nose. I look at Uncle Joe and he motions for me to open the lid up.

'Wow'. I'm stunned. 'What is this?'
I'm looking at some black wooden tubes and some tartan cloth over a squashed bag.

There's a name written in black ink on the inside of the lid:

Pte Ross Fraser 354721

Uncle Joe gives me a gentle smile … and a sad shrug.
With a deep breath he says, 'Maybe it's time now for you to learn a little of beyond where we live. These are bagpipes in the case. Ross Fraser was my younger brother.

'He was a piper in the war. He played music for ceremonies and to inspire the soldiers as they advanced to the enemy. Pipers were also stretcher bearers who had to bring the injured men back from the battlefields for medical treatment.'

Uncle Joe's voice stops as he swallows hard.

'Ross was at a big battle called Passchendale, over in Europe, carrying a wounded man back from harm's way when a shell exploded near him … killing him and the man he was carrying. We were both over there. I survived it all.

'His pipes were returned to me as family. They are a precious memory of times we had together. I get them out from time to time … but I couldn't bear to play them.' He pauses and shrugs again. 'It was all years ago now. We don't want any more wars in the future.'

What can I say? I'm stunned. No-one speaks about the war, especially around us. We live in the present.

At school … it's about counting, writing, reading and behaving. Does my teacher, Mrs Muir, know about all these things in the past? She must! I've never thought to ask. Mum never talks of things before I was born. The older people try to smile around us as we learn how to be useful, polite and safe … as if there is nothing to worry about in our world.

'You were in the war too, Uncle Joe?'

'Yes … but I was a blacksmith. Ross joined as a piper and a soldier. It was a crazy hell-like place. I wish it had been me who died instead of Ross. He was fine piper … much better than I ever was.'

I sit silent as the words soak into me. So sad. So confusing. So little I know. I don't know what words to use.

'Sorry, Uncle Joe. So sorry for you.' I can feel tears starting to roll down my cheeks … matching his fast-moistening eyes.

He beckons me across to sit on his knee … as he puts his pipe on the ashtray.

I feel his strong cuddle. So unusual for him to do this … but it is like Mum always does with me.

And then Mum comes into the room!!

'What's going on?' she says, as she sees us both cuddling and crying.

She sees the open bagpipe case and rushes to join our hug. And now Mum is gushing with tears too.

Auntie Ina runs in to see what is happening.

Uncle Joe quietly says, 'I asked him to open the case.' He sighs, wiping his eyes. 'It's time he knew. Too many old secrets. Time he knew. Don't you think? He's old enough.'

I feel myself looking at them all. 'Know what?'

Then the cogs start to fall into some weird connection. How stupid am I? How stupid have I been?

I look at Mum.

She says, 'Sorry!' through her tears. 'We thought it was best to just forget and move on! At least till later.'

Auntie Ina pulls us all together with her jutted chin. She holds Mum and me so tightly. 'Well **later** has just arrived.'

I am so simple. I ask tremulously, 'Who was Ross Fraser?' as some form of truth, I think, is dawning slowly.

Auntie Ina says to Uncle Joe, 'Will you play the pipes for us please, Joe?'

I've never seen bagpipes being played. I watch as the instrument is carefully removed from the case. Auntie Ina is holding Mum and me very close.

Joe's big blacksmith hands fix the tartan bag under his left arm, with the long pipes over his shoulder. He grabs the small pipe with holes at the bottom of the bag.

'This is called the chanter,' he says to me – always explaining.
He blows air into the bag and squeezes to get a wailing sound. 'I haven't played in years and I could never play like my brother … but here goes.'
A beautiful marching rhythm emerges … and we are all crying.

'It's called *'Highland Laddie'*. It's the tune that most pipers learn early and play often. The inspiring skirl of the pipes,' Joe says, still gulping with emotion.

'Thank you, Joe,' my mother says, sobbing and hugging me tight.

Uncle Joe nods slowly as he lays the pipes down on the case.

'It's the least I could try to do for my brother's son … at long last. A product of a happy opportunity in the madness of wartime.'

My head is whirling.
I had assumed my surname was because I was living in Uncle Joe's house. Now I'm starting to understand more clearly a little of the pain that so many older people have been carrying so secretly for so long.

Why? Why did it have to be like that?