**Grandpa’s Head**

Lawrence Watt-Evans

My grandfather was being packed off to the nursing home to die — he knew it, I knew it, we all knew it.

I was doing the packing — most of it, anyway. My friend Susie was helping out with the kitchen stuff and the old man’s clothes, and Grandpa packed a few things himself, but I got to take care of about fifty years of accumulated clutter.

It wasn’t much fun, but it had to be done if we weren’t just going to throw everything away, and it wasn’t really all that bad. I was grateful he hadn’t had a bigger house, and hadn’t been much of a packrat.

A lot of it was just going to go into one of those rent-a-shed storage places and sit there until Grandpa died, when we’d sell it or give it away, and we all knew that, too, though we didn’t say so, any more than we said aloud that he was going off to die.

There wasn’t any point in storing more than we had to, though, so I was sorting through it all, seeing what we could just haul out to the curb with the trash.

I’d finished with most of it, boxing up the newer drapes, trashing the old ones, hauling the broken-down paisley couch to the curb for some poverty-stricken college student to steal for his dorm room, and so on, and had reached the attic, where I found a dozen cardboard boxes and a couple of footlockers.

I figured I’d start with the footlockers, so I found the keys in the collection Grandpa had given me and opened the first one.

And there it was.

There were scrapbooks and newspapers and some old clothes packed around it, so at first all I saw was the lid, which looked like tin or something. I didn’t know what it was, but it looked moderately interesting, so I slid my hands down either side of the jar and lifted it up where I could get a good look at it.

I knelt there, staring at it, for a few seconds. Those seconds seemed like an hour — I know that’s a cliche, but it really did seem a hell of a lot longer than it was.

I didn’t scream or drop it or anything, which is a damn good thing because it would have been a hell of a mess; I just held it, and stared at it, and turned it slightly to get a better look, and then when my hands started to tremble I put it down, very gently, and stared at it some more.

You might think I’d have been confused, that I’d wonder what it was doing there, that I’d want to know why my grandfather had a woman’s head in a jar in the attic, but I wasn’t doing any of that.

I knew, right away, what it was doing there.

I could have tried to rationalize it, tried to explain it away, made up theories about medical specimens, all of that, but I didn’t bother; what was the point in lying to myself?

Maybe if I hadn’t recognized her — but I did recognize her, immediately. Even though I’d only seen her face before in old black-and-white photos, I’d looked at it enough that I knew it was the same face.

This was Constance Happerson’s head.

And Constance Happerson was the family scandal, the woman Grandpa had been dating who had disappeared in 1945, and whose family had always suspected that Grandpa was somehow involved in her disappearance.

And sitting there in Grandpa’s attic with that jar, I knew that her family had been right all along.

What’s more, it looked as if it hadn’t been some sort of desperate impulse or unfortunate accident. You don’t keep a woman’s head as a souvenir if you’ve been overcome by temporary insanity or are trying to cover up a botched abortion — the abortion theory had been the most popular at the time, as I understood it.

If you’re a normal man with a dead body on your hands, you don’t stick a piece of it in a big jar in the attic.

I’d known for years that Grandpa wasn’t exactly a wholesome specimen — I mean, an old man’s supposed to have stories about his wild youth, but Grandpa had more than his share of unsavory ones — but it was still a shock to realize that he was apparently a cold-blooded murderer.

And I had some decisions to make. There’s no statute of limitations on murder, and I didn’t particularly want to be an accessory after the fact, and that’s exactly what I would be if I just ignored that jar.

But still, he was my grandfather, and he was a sick old man, and what good would it do to turn him in now, after all these years?

I couldn’t ignore it, and I couldn’t just call the cops, and that left just one thing to do.

Grandpa was downstairs, talking to Susie, having a little tea; he wasn’t in any hurry to leave the house he’d lived in for so long and rush off to the nursing home, and he always enjoyed a chance to chat.

I went down the steps, brushing off the attic dust, and on down to the kitchen. The cupboards and cabinets were all standing open and empty, and a few boxes were stacked by the door; one box was open on the floor, waiting for the kettle and cups and the box of tea.

Grandpa and Susie were sitting at the table; she was laughing, and I guessed he was telling her one of his obscene war stories.

“Hi,” I said. “Susie, could you do me a favor?”

She looked up, smiling.

“Take the car down to the corner and get it gassed up, okay? We don’t want to get stuck anywhere with all Grandpa’s stuff.”

“Can’t we do that on the way?” she asked.

“I’d rather get it out of the way now.”

She looked at Grandpa, and he said, “Oh, go on. The boy probably wants to talk some boring family business in private.”

Grandpa was always pretty sharp.

Susie looked back at me, then stood up. “Gimme the money, then,” she said.

I gave her a twenty, and waited until I heard the car start before I sat down across from Grandpa.

He was looking at me expectantly.

“I found the jar in the footlocker,” I said.

“Ah,” he said, with a nod. “I thought that might be it. Proves I am getting old, that I didn’t think of it sooner and keep it away from you — wasn’t until I saw the look on your face when you came in here that I remembered I’d left it there.”

I was glad I was already sitting down. I’d known it must have been him, there wasn’t really any other explanation, but to see him sitting there, calmly admitting it...

“You killed Constance Happerson,” I said.

He nodded. “Sure did,” he said.

I thought I was going to faint.

“Why?” I asked.

“For fun,” he said.

And that was absolutely the worst of it. My mouth dropped open and I stared at him.

“Shut your face, boy, you’ll catch flies,” he said.

I closed my mouth, but I went right on staring.

He nodded. “Sure, I killed Constance. With a steak knife. Gutted her. Had a fine time doing it, too.”

I was beyond shock; I couldn’t react any more.

“It was kind of careless, I guess, doing a girl I’d been seen with so much,” he said, “but I just couldn’t resist. I was young and reckless, and there’d never been any trouble about the others, so I chanced it. And she was such a pretty thing, I couldn’t bear to just dump everything when I was done, so I got that jar, and some preservative stuff...” He shrugged. “I used to take her out and look at her sometimes, but I guess it’s been fifteen, twenty years since I opened that trunk.”

“Others?” I said.

“Sure.” He smiled, and for a moment I almost wanted to throw up. “I was... well, nowadays you call ’em serial killers; in my day we were sex maniacs, or thrill killers. I was one.”

“I thought... I didn’t know there were serial killers back then...”

“Oh, crap, boy, don’t give me that. Every generation thinks it invented sex, or at least some kind of sex, and there isn’t a thing a person can do in that department that wasn’t tried back in the caves. You never heard of Jack the Ripper, fer chrissakes?”

“Well...”

He wasn’t listening, though; he was on a roll.

“And H.H. Holmes, only his real name was Herman Mudgett — he built himself a house with his own private glass-topped gas chamber so he could watch pretty young women die. Albert Fish used to torture kids to death for fun — mostly black slum kids, and nobody cared till he killed and ate a white girl. Been going on forever, Jim — there’ve always been men with a twist in the sex drive somewhere, and I happened to be one of ’em. Nowadays they figure maybe it’s some kind of brain damage from being walloped too hard as a kid, and maybe it is, because there’s no denying my ma used to whale on me pretty good, but whatever it is, I’ve got it — isn’t anything that gives me a bigger kick than killing a girl.”

“But it’s murder,” I said.

He shrugged. “Sure it is. But it’s fun.”

I sat there and stared at him and wondered if I was just having some especially realistic nightmare.

“Who else?” I asked. “How many?”

He leaned back and considered that.

“Well, I got started in Italy, during the war,” he said. “I was on leave in Rome, and one of the whores tried to steal my wallet, and I decided to teach the little bitch a lesson, and I got a bit carried away. I figured I’d catch hell, that somebody would report the whole thing and I’d be court-martialed and sit out the rest of the war in Leavenworth — but no one did. No one noticed, near as I could tell. After all, there was a war on — people turned up dead all the time, all over the place. So as time passed I got less and less worried about getting caught, and I remembered more and more how much fun it was, and then I began planning how to do it again — at first it was just sort of an intellectual exercise, y’know, a daydream, but then I got more and more serious about it, and eventually... well, I think there were about half a dozen in Italy, and then the war ended and I was sent home, and I figured that was the end of it.”

“Except for Constance Happerson.”

Grandpa nodded. “Her, and plenty of others. I said I figured that was the end, I didn’t say it was the end.”

“There were others?”

“Sure. The first one back stateside was this girl I picked up in a bar in New York — I dumped her in the alley behind my hotel, and far as I saw, it never even made the papers. I guess that was why I figured I could get away with killing Constance.”

“Jesus.” I just stared at him, trying to make this make sense. He didn’t look any different; he didn’t look like a monster. He was a smiling old man with thinning white hair and liver spots.

But he admitted killing almost a dozen women, just for fun.

“After all the fuss over Connie, though, I stuck to strangers from then on.”

“Jesus,” I said again.

“It was especially easy in the late ’60s and early ’70s, with all those hippies hitchhiking all over the place, but there were always hookers — as long as I never picked ’em up the same place more than twice, no one ever noticed. So I’d go to New York one time, and the next I’d drive out to Pittsburgh, or whatever.”

“How many?”

He shrugged. “Don’t know,” he said. “I didn’t count. Maybe three or four a year, most years; I slowed down in the 1980s, when my health started to go.”

“That’d be more than a hundred!”

“Could be, yeah. Probably more than a hundred. Old Herman Mudgett killed maybe two hundred, they say.”

I just stared at him for a moment, trying to absorb that.

He looked calmly back at me.

“So what are you going to do about it, now that you know?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“If you turn me in, I’ll be dead anyway before they finish all the appeals and crap, and you’ll have to live the rest of your life with it.”

“What, I should feel guilty for turning in a mass murderer?” I burst out. “I mean, you may be family, Grandpa, but my God....”

He held up a hand. “No, no, Jim boy, I don’t mean that. Christ, give me a little credit!”

I subsided.

“I mean,” he said, “you’ll have to live with the notoriety of having me as your grandfather. Think Susie would like that? Think any woman would?”

I thought immediately that yeah, some women would like it — the sort of women who wrote to convicted killers in prison.

I didn’t think I wanted those women interested in me.

He could see what I was thinking; he smiled.

“So it’s off to the nursing home after all, then? Hey, you can send me off to jail any time, if you change your mind — have you looked at the rest of the stuff in that footlocker yet?”

“No.”

“Souvenirs. All the books on serial killers tell you, we like to take souvenirs. Clippings, photos, locks of hair, all kinds of things.”

“Like Constance Happerson’s head.”

“Yeah. I only did that once, though.”

“Why did you do it?”

He shrugged. “Why does anyone keep souvenirs? To help me remember, of course — to remind me how good it felt.” He blinked, then sighed. “I’d let too much slip away lately; I’d almost forgotten some of it. Haven’t looked in that trunk in ages.”

I sat there, not saying anything, again, just staring at him, with his bifocals and dentures and crooked nose, that familiar face I’d seen leaning over my crib when I was a baby, that face that had been there watching at my Little League games, that face that had been so proud when I graduated from college — that face that had been the last thing those women ever saw.

Finally he shifted in his seat and said, “Go ahead and ask; I know you want to.”

I didn’t pretend not to know what he meant. I asked.

“What did it feel like?”

And he told me. He told me details that would never be in any of the books; he told me about doing things I couldn’t imagine thinking of doing. Cutting off Constance Happerson’s head and keeping it in a jar was just the beginning; he’d done unspeakable things to women, alive, dead, or dying. He’d violated every opening, and then made his own and violated those. He’d used knives, saws, ropes, whips, needles, and his bare hands.

Some of the women had lived for days.

“Did you ever kill a man?” I asked.

He nodded. “A couple,” he said, “as experiments, but that just wasn’t as good.”

That didn’t stop him from describing the experiments, though.

He’d gone back to women, reminiscing happily about torture and mutilation, sounding more cheerful than he had in months, when we heard the car pull up. He stopped abruptly — he had been talking about skinning a hooker on a rooftop in Newark. We both turned and watched the door, waiting for Susie to walk back in.

I realized, when I shifted, that I had an erection.

I felt sick, that I could react like that.

Susie didn’t notice, or at least didn’t say anything.

We finished cleaning out the house, and got Grandpa safely installed at the nursing home; I took the trunk of souvenirs home and stashed it safely away, securely locked.

When we left Grandpa at the home he gave Susie a hug, then shook my hand.

And as he did, he gripped my hand with those bony fingers and winked at me, and said, “Bet she’d be a lot of fun.”

I snatched my hand away; I wanted to punch the old man in the face for that, but I resisted.

No one would understand — not unless I told them the whole thing.

I wondered again whether maybe I should turn Grandpa in — but he was a dying old man, and I’d never escape the stigma. What good would it do now, so long after the fact? He didn’t remember most of the names, if he’d ever known them; it wouldn’t clear up any mysteries that still mattered.

Let it die with him, I thought.

But I knew it wouldn’t, because I remembered every word he’d said, and I had the trunk of souvenirs. I knew that memory wasn’t going away.

And that night, in bed with Susie, I couldn’t help thinking what it would feel like if, while we were making love, I were to slip a knife under her ribs. I imagined the convulsive shock, the thrashing under me...

The next day, while Susie was out, I looked through the trunk. I found Grandpa’s pictures, and his diary. I read it; I couldn’t resist.

I’ve never been good at resisting temptation.

And every time since then, when I touch Susie, when I embrace her, I imagine her dying struggles, her gasping for air, her blood spilling out. I imagine her limp and lifeless on the bed.

And every time, I wonder all over again whether I should turn Grandpa in, quickly, before he dies — it’ll only be days now.

And every time, the idea of a scandal seems better and better.

Because my life’s ruined anyway, one way or another — the temptation, the curiosity, grows stronger all the time; at least, if I turn him in, I probably won’t ever dare to act on those horrible imaginings he’s left me. I’d be too obvious a suspect. If I turned him in, I wouldn’t dare to give in.

At least...

Well, not with Susie.

*end*