

**2,113 words**

## **A Letter To My Grandson**

**By Michael Percy**

Seeing you in your cot just a few hours after you were born made what I must do today almost unbearable. I must leave you. But although you will never have your own real memories of your grandparents I want you to know something about your grandad and me, even if it is only a few lines on a scrap of paper – these lines, this paper.

Your life will not be easy and I would give anything to change that fact. When you are older I am sure you will rage against people like me who knew what they should have done but failed. Failed you and all our children. When I was born, sixty-two years ago, this tragedy was already written but for us the world was a beautiful place and it was impossible to imagine anything that could stop that beauty continuing forever.

There were problems but they seemed to be within our control. You will learn about the collapse of Soviet communism in your history lessons but when I was just ten years old I watched the television pictures of people smashing the Berlin wall and how excited my parents were. It seemed like an important victory. A year later a man called Nelson Mandela was set free marking the end of the dreadful apartheid in South Africa. But looking back, the signposts to catastrophe were there: in the same year the Allies went to war against Iraq and your history books will call that The First Oil War.

What you will never find in history books is this: Jessica Fairweather met Neil Tennant on June 15<sup>th</sup> 1999. I actually remember the time, it was three o'clock on a glorious sunny afternoon. We were at university together, I was studying to be a teacher and Neil an engineer. I had finished my lectures that day and was on my way to halls. Neil marched up to me and dumped a picnic hamper at my feet. The other girls were as stunned as me as he pulled open the hamper. "I've spent my whole month's food money on this," he said. "If you don't come and eat it with me I'll throw it in the bin and starve until July". How could I refuse? I was just twenty and Neil was twenty-two. Within a few months we were totally committed to each other and that lasted for forty-two years. Until this year, 2041.

In my last year at university I spent more time than I should have with a womens' protest group at a nuclear weapons base called Greenham Common. It was the year 2000 and amidst the celebrations for the close of the millennium and the start of a new century, we celebrated the end of the peace camp at Greenham Common after nearly twenty years of protest. We sang together and danced next to the wire fence as the base closed and the weapons were moved away. It seemed like another victory but the following year the Twin Towers were destroyed in America and The Second Oil War began when The Allies invaded Afghanistan followed by Iraq then Syria. As you will learn, that conflict devastated the Middle East for twenty years. As we endured the war, joining protests whenever possible, and suffering endless suicide attacks at home, your grandfather and I tried to build a life for ourselves. There was still so much to put right in the world and when we began to hear the phrase 'global warming' it simply joined a long list of world problems to be solved. And we thought we could solve them.

Government after government lacked the courage to take more than half measures in energy production and use. But it's not fair to put all the blame on the government: the people squabbled about so called unfair greenhouse taxes and accused other nations of causing the problem. Very few nations reduced air travel and businesses continued to guard their profits at all costs. It began to occur to me that the human race does not deserve this beautiful planet and that it will only truly blossom when we are all gone.

Through these years of war, Neil and I struggled to build a life into which our own children could safely be born. Thomas, your father, was born in 2011 while we were still living in London. Watching you in your cot takes me back all those years – you look so much like him. We knew he deserved the best possible chance of a happy and peaceful life so we sold everything and bought a small-holding in Devon and began learning to live off the land. It was hard but at the time we never fully realised how important those few acres would be to our family's future.

Those were the happiest days of my life. Despite the shadow hanging over us we seemed to have found a brief shaft of sunlight. I wish you could have seen Brindiwell Farm in those days. The house was in the lea of a small hill so we never suffered the worst of the winter winds. Every morning I looked out of my bedroom window onto our land, our fields of hope, spreading out from the house, flat and fertile. There was a stream running down from the hill and of course a well. Your

grandad put wind turbines on top of the hill for electricity and we learned to plough and sow and harvest.

My beautiful daughter Laila, your aunt, was born after our first year at Brindiwell. It was a hard life – we were either working or asleep – but through it all we were able to watch your father and his sister blossom like our crops in the red Devon soil.

The new century began with ten years of war – the Second Oil War - which brought with it ten years of price rises. Oil was far from exhausted but supplies were unreliable causing rising prices for everything that was made from oil or used it as fuel. The rise in transport costs had its most devastating impact on the price of food making life in cities unsupportable for people on low wages. By 2035 large parts of the cities were abandoned and many thousands of people were living in temporary camps surviving on tiny food rations. If ever you go to a city try to picture what it was like when I was a young woman. Those rusting car wrecks were the gleaming pride of the city. At night the streets were lit like daylight and the shops were crammed with people – happy people. I dream about those city nights but when I wake I can't help but weep for all those lost lives.

Science offered replacements for oil but nothing was as versatile and none of the options were cheaper – why should they be said the businessmen? There was a rush to use coal but that added to global warming. Massive wind farms were planned but industry did not have the capacity to make the turbines at the same time as the tanks and guns needed for the war – the tanks won. In the end it was not a lack of oil that brought the world to its knees but simply the fear of oil's end, and greed.

Some believe that the Water Wars were just an extension of the Second Oil War, the shed blood simply flowing in ever widening rivers across the world. Whatever its name, warfare spread and the barren deserts grew. In 2022, the armies held their breath as they watched Israel destroyed by Iranian nuclear missiles followed by the American retaliation on Iran. Over five days twelve million people died, but the dreadful irony was the destruction of the Iranian oil fields. When the armies breathed again they realised the most precious commodity on earth was not black oil but clean water and so the Water Wars began.

Through all this we tilled our land and watched it change in a reflection of what was happening to the world. Our summers grew longer, the rain less frequent

and the soil more dry. When we first moved to Brindiwell we were able to sell much of our produce but after just a dozen years, we were struggling to feed ourselves.

When Laila was eighteen she announced she wanted to become a nurse or even a doctor but in those times the only organisation that offered training was the National Defence Force so our baby girl became a soldier. The signs had been there when she was small – her dolls were not mummies and daddies but doctors and patients. Your father stayed on the farm with us and the happy news was that he met your mother Amy and she came to live with us at Brindiwell Farm.

The warmer climate meant we had to learn about new crops. The stream from the hillside behind the house ran dry in 2036 which became known as the Dry Year, although more arid years lay ahead. It is strange how people remember years by the bad things. We could have called the year Laila's year because she qualified as a doctor. But forever we will say that Laila qualified in the Dry Year.

Everyone who was trained by the NDF was required to give five years military service before returning to civilian life so our little soldier went to war, but to save life rather than take it. Laila changed in those years. She never told us what she saw and experienced but we knew it was scarring her deeply. She served in Eastern Europe and Spain and witnessed the Cordoba gas attacks. She volunteered to go to Mexico and was caught in the struggle to halt the anthrax epidemic. On the rare occasions she returned to Brindiwell Farm she looked grey and old. After resting for several days she would sit for hours on the hillside reading the books she loved as a child. After a week she could smile again but as the time approached for her return a black mood descended like a winter mist.

We lost Laila in 2039. Killed on active service was all we were told, not even where or when. The practice was to bury soldiers where they fell and the letter of condolence from the NDF promised that we would be told where she was buried when 'the current hostilities ceased'. That time never came and I have never seen my daughter's grave.

You woke just now and I went to pick you up to save your mother's sleep. But you were hungry and soon Amy took you and fed you. I am writing this as I watch you snuggled at your mother's breast, your small arm raised so the tiny fingers can caress your mother's lips. Amy is smiling down at you. This little tableaux has made me weep, but with happiness. You are the future and my husband, your grandfather, will live on in your name – Neil.

I began this by saying I wanted you to know about your grandparents and I am afraid our story has a sad ending. Grandpa Neil was murdered just a few months ago by raiders who stole the last of our goats. Your mum has a picture of us both which I hope you will treasure along with this letter. One day you will inherit Brindiwell Farm and when that time comes I hope things have returned just a little to what they were when we first came here nearly thirty years ago. Growing our food is hard in the dry brown fields that now surround the cottage but Thomas works miracles to keep us all alive.

Now I am watching the sun rise on what will be another scorching day. What was once a vista of green trees reaching down to the river is now a flat and featureless brown wasteland. Before the house wakes I will collect a few things and leave. I am now sixty-two years old. I have trouble walking and cannot work in the fields. If I stay another day, if I look once more upon your beautiful face, I know I will not have the strength to leave. But I played my part in spoiling your birthright and so I want to do the only thing I can to lighten your father's burden. My tears are blurring the page as I write this last line. Goodbye my love – we know we let you down and it is too much to expect forgiveness but try to love us as I know we would have loved you.

(End)