

“MY NAN.” Word Count 1586

My Nan always looked old. As frail and delicate as best Sunday china, her hair a thinning clump of dry, lank whiteness that revealed glimpses of pink scalp beneath.

Regardless of when we visited, be it summer or winter, she always exuded the cloying smell of camphor. This was overwhelmingly apparent in her dingy bedroom, where should I be sent to get something, I would always have to hold my breath or pinch my nostrils together to avoid the smell or it would tend to make me feel sick. The room never changed, the heavy, musty old curtains were always pulled half way across the windows on the old brass rail so very little light ever filtered into the room, and there was always a glass of water alongside the bed on top of the rickety old white-painted bedside cabinet and packets of tablets sprawled half in and half out of their boxes.

Although Nan was elderly, somehow she never seemed to get any older, but somehow remained constantly at the same age. The only indication that she was ageing were her slow and painful movements as she hobbled around her cramped, tiny third floor flat. Sometimes she would hang onto pieces of dark wooden furniture for support whilst she paused momentarily to catch her breath and make strange wheezing noises. Her twisted arthritic hands struggled to hold certain things and bottles and jars became almost impossible for her to undo or unscrew. Yet somehow she would always manage in her own defiant well-rehearsed way, refusing offers of help with a snappy, “I can manage I’m not an invalid, thank you!”

Nan doted on a moulting, overfed rotund blue budgie called Peter that must have been almost as old as she was; it had been her constant companion for as long as I could remember. An omnipresent ear for a lonely old lady to chat to and pass away the long daylight hours, until she dragged an old tea towel across the top of his cage so he could sleep undisturbed with the advent of night drawing in and she also hoped it would be enough to stop her small black and white television from disturbing him.

I recall on some visits, sitting cross-legged on the well-worn rug in front of Nan’s old armchair that had certainly seen better days. If you turned your head to the side and looked underneath you could see springs and old horsehair stuffing touching the floor and I would puff out my cheeks and blow rolls of fluff in all directions when Nan wasn’t looking. I would sit there as patiently as I could whilst Nan wrapped skeins of wool around my out-stretched arms whilst she repeatedly told me what a good boy I was and how she couldn’t possibly do it without me. And after all my hard work there was a reward of a rich tea biscuit to savour with a glass of orange juice. Despite Nan’s arthritic hands, she still somehow managed to knit brightly coloured hats and gloves that were collected by a member of the Salvation Army and were distributed to grateful homeless people that lived in her parish that huddled in

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cardboard boxes and grubby stained sleeping bags tucked into shop doorways at night.

On other occasions, I shelled peas from a rumpled brown paper bag into a pitted aluminium colander, sometimes joyously finding slender green maggots that were afterwards washed unceremoniously down the tea and beetroot stained, chipped porcelain sink in the murky ill-lit cluttered lino-cracked scullery. If I wasn't careful, sometimes my shoe would snag in one of the holes and a brittle piece would snap off and shoot across the floor like a bullet, and I would look round guiltily and quickly shove the offending article into my pocket to get rid of when we returned home.

I remember I used to fidget relentlessly whilst waiting anxiously for feeding time, when Nan would wrestle the paint starved rickety wooden scullery window open and scrape breadcrumbs onto the flat-felted roof below. Dozens of pigeons would huddle there vying for position and would coo their daily gratitude as they fought and hustled each other out of the way fighting for the titbits. Nan would smile at their frantic antics and wipe her hands down the front of her faded floral-embroidered pinny and then wrestle the window closed again. My dad used his tools to make the window easier to open but the rain always made it swell and then it would just stick again. He said it was like fighting a losing battle all the time, so after adjusting it a few times he never bothered again but Nan would somehow always manage to open and close it by herself. I guess in her own way, she'd perfected a special knack of doing it.

At afternoon tea I would watch and try to suppress my giggles as Nan attempted to eat a biscuit. Her ill-fitting National Health teeth would move up and down in lop-sided fashion as she tried to chew. Then afterwards she would excuse herself and take a cotton hankie from her sleeve and turn to the side and she would remove her dentures and clean and lick off the crumbs and then discretely put her teeth back in with a pretend cough to cover her mouth as they clicked back in.

Sadly as the years moved on, we never took Nan on trips anymore. There were no lifts in her flat and my dad would have to support her down the echoing concrete stairs and it seemed to take ages and I was always wishing they would hurry up but I understood that Nan was old and not nifty and quick like me, and we couldn't always park very near, so the stairs and the walk from her flat to the car would sometimes almost be too much for Nan to cope with. I remember when we first used to visit, we would drive to a large park that had a pond and we would all line up at the pond's edge and break up slices of stale bread and lob it into the water and watch the ducks and swans fight each other for the spoils. They quacked and squabbled, flapping their wings at each other and splashing about everywhere, they could be quite nasty to each other; I guess they were just hungry. Sometimes if I was lucky, there would be two or three older boys there with remote-controlled boats that would zip across the pond frightening and chasing the wildlife and that was always a wonderful sight

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to see, but sadly it only happened on very rare occasions. Nan would always fall asleep on the drive back, leaning with her head against the window with her mouth hanging open like the spring in her jaw had broken, and my dad said, she snored like a trooper and I wasn't sure what he meant so he had to explain it to me.

When it was eventually time to leave, especially being a young boy, I reluctantly had to suffer the awkward slobbery whiskered kiss that habitually heralded our departure. It was sweetened and cushioned however in the firm knowledge that there was always a half-a-crown for me to collect from the brown-tiled mantelpiece in the living room on the way out, and I just used to screw my eyes closed and think of all the gob-stoppers and sherbet dabs I could buy with it when we got home.

When Nan became ill, we never visited as a family again, instead my mum would take the train and stay for a few days leaving dad to look after us. It was never the greatest of times because dad couldn't really cook so we usually had to make do with beans on toast or a bag of chips from the fish and chip shop down the road that my older brother would go and collect and then he would run back with them as fast as he could so we could eat them whilst they were still hot. They were always wrapped in old newspaper and sprinkled with salt and vinegar, neither of which I particularly liked the taste of. Me and my brothers couldn't wait for mum to come back home so we could have proper food again. It wasn't dad's fault, he went out to work and it was mum's job to run the house and cook and clean and it was just something we had to put up with. When Nan died some few months later, I was considered too young to go to the funeral and instead I was left with a neighbour until our parents returned home late in the afternoon, looking red-eyed and exhausted.

It wasn't until I was quite a lot older that I realised that Nan was really my mum's mum, and then I understood why she would go through bouts of depressed silence followed by secretive floods of tears. It's only when you're older that you begin to realise how much grief and suffering goes on all around you and how hard your parents work to protect you from the pain and the loss of loved ones for as long as they can, letting you just enjoy your childhood, until one day the protective parental mantle is dropped and you find yourself having to bear the unbearable and come to terms with death for yourself.