

## **G for Grandparents**

My grandparents married in the year that the old Queen died. They lived all their lives in a traditional two-up, two-down terraced house in Ney Street, Waterloo. My grandfather's hair grew silver, like the pearly bark of the birch tree and his arms were as thick as tree trunks as he raked and hoed his pen or allotment. He was proud of his prize-winning chrysanthemums; their huge nodding heads were wrapped carefully in brown paper bags when the Annual Flower Show was getting near. I loved to spend time with my grandfather at his pen. He had an old shed made from bits of wood, tarpaulin and corrugated iron. I played there for hours, setting up shop, dusting and tidying away nails and screws and mysterious bits of ironmongery into the tiny drawers above the workbench. Grandad ripened small tomatoes in the bottom drawer of his dresser at home and my special treat was to choose a few, like sweeties, red and round, dripping with sweet juice.

There was a truncheon hanging on a hook behind his front door and a 'cat o' nine tails' hung in the kitchen, relics from his time as a special constable.

His bent old fingers struggled to fasten his stiff white collar that he wore to chapel on Sundays. I liked him best wearing his weekday, well-washed blue collarless shirt, always with a waistcoat, a watch chain draped across his chest which left an imprint on my cheek when I snuggled on his knee in front of the fire.

My grandad was good at magic tricks. A penny would drop right through the seat of the wooden bentwood chair when he scratched the underside! And he owned a Magic Lantern!! My Grandmother was usually to be found in her kitchen. My crepe soled sandals would stick slightly to the worn flagstone floor and the single cold water tap dripped languidly into the shallow stone sink under the window. My toe would trip on the edge of the peg rug.

*"Pick your feet up, Fairy Flatfoot"*

I spotted a bit of my green velvet-collared coat, the one that I had new, one Whitsun, and a little bit of blue that used to be John's baby blanket, now woven into the rug.

Grandma always cried when she chopped onions and she would pause to dab her streaming eyes with the corner of her apron. She saved left-over bits of pastry for me to roll out, adding raisins and currants to make fat-cake, delicious when warm from the oven and smothered in butter. One door off the kitchen led down damp steps into the dark coal cellar. I was not allowed down there in case the bogey-man caught me.

Grandma treasured my knitted kettle holder, more holes than stitches, and the tiny china cat and the Welsh Lady, with the apron that changed colour with the weather, which I'd brought back from holidays. They were all in her glass-fronted dresser, ready to be brought out, to admire on wet Sunday afternoons.

Grandma told me that she used to be able to sit on her hair. It was much shorter now but she still plaited her hair every night before going to bed.

Once, when I was feeling ill, I lay on the stiff horse-hair sofa, under a worn grey blanket, the firelight casting long shadows in the room, as Grandma told me the story of the doomed lovers that were chased across the bridge, on her willow patterned plates.

“Hickory, Dickory, Dock...”

The sonorous tick-tock of their grandfather clock could have come straight out of my Nursery Rhyme book.

I could play upstairs in their bedroom if I liked. I would dash through the door, making straight for the dressing table and the silver backed hairbrush and mirror, eyes averted from the stuffed bantam hen that stood forever still, inside a glass dome on top of the wardrobe. Usually the grate was empty and cold, except when Grandma was ill in bed, with bronchitis, and then the fire was lit and the room was cosy and warm.

My Grandad had a small 9 inch screen television, long before we had a TV at home, so Saturday evenings would be spent with him, watching ‘Dixon of Dock Green’ and “Quatermass” before I cycled home in the dark.

One of my little jobs was to cut old copies of ‘The Farmer and Pig Breeder’ into squares, and thread them all on a string, using a thick metal needle to poke a hole through the layers. The squares were then hung on the nail in the outside toilet.

When Grandma came through from the kitchen with the old brown teapot, Grandad would always pour some of his hot tea into a saucer, blow on it to cool it down and drink from that. He loved to dunk his digestive biscuits in his tea and I would have a chocolate marshmallow ‘teacake’ with my glass of milk, as a special treat, whilst we listened to “*The Clitheroe Kid*” or “*Top of the Form*” on the old wireless.

I look back with great affection at the precious time I spent with my grandparents. They seemed to like having me around and never preached at me or told me that things were better 'in the old days' although Grandad could always be relied on for a good story.

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