

For all the women and girls who have been made to feel shame

It was the shame, you see. The shame I brought on my family. Sometimes it is easier not to believe than to accept something so awful could have happened. That is why people bury things far beneath the surface. Deep down, out of sight and out of mind. Though not out of my mind. I carry the shame with me always. The shame and the guilt. They do not go away. If anything, they weigh heavier on me now than they did back then. Dragging me down, clawing at my insides. And when people say that what's buried in the past should stay there, they mean they don't want to have to deal with it. They're scared of the power of secrets to destroy lives. But keeping secrets can destroy you from the inside. Believe me, I know. And even the best-kept secrets have a habit of forcing their way to the surface.

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The house appeared to know that its owner was about to die, shrouded, as it was, in early-morning mist, the downstairs curtains closed in respect, the gate squeaking mournfully as I opened it.

If there was such a thing as a nice house in which to end your days, this certainly wasn't it. It was cold, dark and draughty, perched high on the edge of the village, as if it didn't really want to be part of it but was too polite to say so. Behind it, the fields – criss-crossed by dry-stone walls – stretched out into the distance. Beyond them, the unrelenting bleakness of the moors.

I shivered as I hurried up the path and let myself in.

'Grandma, it's me.' The first thing I thought when I didn't hear a response was that maybe I was too late. She'd been weak, drifting in and out of sleep when I'd left the previous night. Perhaps she hadn't made it through till morning.

But when I entered the front room – in which she'd lived, eaten and slept for the past year – she turned her face to give me the faintest of smiles.

'Morning,' I said. 'Did you manage to get some sleep?'

She nodded.

'It's not too late to change your mind, you know. We could get you to hospital, or the hospice said we could call them at any time.'

She shook her head. She'd remained adamant she would leave the house only in a coffin. She'd also refused medication to relieve the pain. It was as if she thought she somehow had a duty to suffer.

'Well, at least let me stay over tonight. I hate the thought of you being on your own.'

'I won't be here tonight.' Her words were faint and difficult to understand. She'd taken her teeth out several weeks previously and refused to put them back in since.

'Come on. You've been saying that for weeks.'

'I'm tired. It's time to go now.'

There was something about the look in her eye as she said it that told me she meant it. I sat down on the end of her bed and took her hand. Her skin was paper-thin, revealing the bones and blue veins beneath it. She'd once said she liked me coming to visit because I was the only one who let her talk about death without getting upset or pretending it wasn't going to happen.

'Is there anything I can get to make you more comfortable?'

She shook her head again. We sat there for a while saying nothing, listening to the ticking of the clock and her shallow breaths. I tried to imagine what it must be like knowing you are about to die. I would want my family around me, I knew that.

'Do you want me to give Mum a call?' I asked. She managed to raise her eyebrows at me. It was as near as I'd get to a telling off at this point. She had always been very accepting of their distant relationship. It was me who struggled with it.

'I could ask James to bring the girls over.'

She shook her head again and whispered, 'I don't want to upset them. They're good girls. Anyway, I've got them with me.'

She gestured towards the mantelpiece. Every school photo they'd ever had – Ruby on her own at first, all toothy grin and straggly hair, then, a few years later, with Maisie's elfin face of delicate features and porcelain skin, next to hers – until last year, when Ruby had started secondary school and they'd had separate photos. Ruby's grin was now replaced with a self-conscious upturn of closed lips. It was as if someone had adjusted her brightness control. The contrast with Maisie's confidence and burgeoning beauty was obvious to see and unspoken by all. Except Grandma, who had said it was a shame you couldn't show the size of someone's heart in a photo. And had remarked how much Ruby looked like me in her uniform.

My own school photos were still up there on the cabinet. And Justin's, poking out from behind them. I suspected I had arranged them like that myself years ago, without her ever realising it. Rows of little frames covered with dust. In a way, she was surrounded by her family, a cardboard cut-out version.

'Justin sends his love,' I said. That was a lie. I'd texted yesterday to tell him she didn't have much longer, and his response had been to ask me to give him as much notice as possible about the funeral so he could book a flight to come over.

I wondered if it bothered Grandma and she was good at hiding it, or if she'd simply never had high expectations of her loved ones. Maybe coming of age in the war had something to do with it. Perhaps it taught you not to take anything for granted.

I passed her the glass of water and she managed to take a tiny sip through the straw. I put it back on the bedside table, glancing at the wedding photo of her and Grandad, as I did so. 'Does it help to think he'll be there for you?' I asked.

'He'll have given up waiting and gone off down pub,' she replied.

I smiled. Grandad had never been big on patience. He'd never been big on shows of emotion, either. The wedding photo was the only time I'd ever seen them holding hands. I wondered if Grandma had minded, but concluded that now wasn't the time to ask. She was quiet again, her breaths shallower still. I squeezed her hand. 'I'll be here with you until the end,' I said. 'I'm not going anywhere.'

She looked up at me. 'I'm leaving you the house.'

I frowned at her. 'But what about Mum?'

'She doesn't want it.'

'Has she told you that?'

'She doesn't have to.'

I felt somewhat unworthy of such a huge bequest. 'Well, Justin, then.'

'He doesn't need it.'

It was true, though it felt wrong to acknowledge it.

'Thank you,' I said, barely able to speak. 'It'll make such a difference.'

'I know,' she said. 'The girls can have their own rooms. And you always wanted a garden.'

It suddenly occurred to me that she thought we were going to live here. That this would be our home. I didn't want that. It was such a bleak house. The obvious thing was to sell it, so we could afford somewhere bigger than our little two-bedroom terrace in town. Maybe even with a garden. But I didn't want to tell her that. I didn't want to say anything to worry or upset her at this late stage. I smiled and nodded, patting her hand.

'Leave it to Ruby when you go,' she added. 'It belongs in the family.'

I opened my mouth to say something but nothing came out. I couldn't start arguing with her. It wasn't right to pick a fight with someone on their deathbed. If those were her final wishes, I owed it to her to listen graciously and go along with everything she said.

She shut her eyes. I wondered if this was it. I'd never been with a person when they'd died. I didn't know what to expect. I wasn't even sure what to do or who to call afterwards. I swallowed, glad at least that I was with her. That she hadn't died on her own. Ninety was a good age. That was what people would say. And she'd lived a good life, been free from any major health problems until the last couple of years. But it still seemed empty somehow, her slipping away in this house with only me for company.

I looked down. Her eyes remained shut, but I could see her chest rising and falling ever so slightly. She was still with me, but surely not for much longer. I slid my hand away, tiptoed out of the room and shut the door behind me, then took out my mobile. I didn't think she could hear me, but it still seemed wrong to speak within earshot. I went through to the kitchen. It was a strange collection of assorted relics from past decades. An old-fashioned kettle on the hob, which she'd refused to get rid of. A seventies breakfast-bar stool, which was now positively retro. None of it matched, none of it fitted but, as with the rest of the house, it was all unmistakably Grandma's.

I called Mum. She took her time to answer. When she did, it seemed from her tone that she was expecting the worst. She didn't say anything more than hello, waiting instead for me to break the news.

'I don't think she's got long.'

'Right. Is she in pain?'

'She's doing a good job of covering it up if she is. She said it was time to go.'

There was a pause at the other end. I thought for a moment that Mum might change her mind and say she was on her way. She didn't though.

'OK. Well, let me know any news.'

'That's it?'

'Come on, Nicola, don't make this any harder than it already is.'

'She's about to die without her only child being there.'

'We've gone through all this. It's not that simple.'

'Well, whatever it is between you two that needs saying, now's your last chance to say it.'

'I'm not about to upset her on her deathbed.'

'Maybe she's waiting for you to say something. Maybe that's why she's hung on so long. And you'll regret it if you don't. It'll be like that bloody Mike and the Mechanics song.'

'I don't think so. It's best this way. I know you don't believe me, but it is.'

'Best for who?'

'Look, I'm thinking of you, all right? And I'm grateful you're there with her but I can't come over.' Her voice broke and she hung up. I put my phone back in my pocket and blew out slowly.

At least Justin had the excuse of being in Ireland. Mum was only a few miles up the road in Halifax. All I could think was how I'd feel if Ruby and Maisie weren't with me at the end. If they couldn't be bothered to bury the hatchet with me and come to me on my deathbed.

I went back into the front room. For a second, I thought she'd gone while I'd been on the phone, but her chest was still rising and falling. I sat down next to her and put my head in my hands. I had been sitting there for quite some time, maybe twenty minutes or so, before I heard her voice.

'There are babies.'

I looked up. I hadn't expected to hear another word out of her. I took her hand again. Her eyelids flickered open.

'Babies? Where?' I asked.

'At bottom of garden.'

I frowned at her. She'd been coherent all the way through. Maybe this was a sign that she was at the end now. Then something clicked, and I realised what she was talking about.

'No, Grandma. Fairies,' I said. 'You've got fairy statues at the bottom of the garden. The ones I used to dance around when I was little.'

There wasn't a pause on her part.

'Not fairies, babies,' she said firmly. 'Look after my babies for me.'

'What do you mean?' I asked. 'What babies?' It was too late. Her eyes shut again and a second later she was gone. It was as if those words had taken the last breath out of her. I felt for her pulse, just to make sure, but there was nothing. I screwed up my eyes and let my head drop, feeling the tears coming but wanting to stave them off and gather myself. Aware that I was the responsible adult in the house now, no longer the little girl dancing around the fairy statues in the garden while Grandma cooked tea for me. I gulped as the tears arrived in a rush. A life snuffed out. The memories, experiences and stories gone with her. Our family reduced to three generations, not four. And all I could think of as I sat there and sobbed was the last thing she told me. I had no idea what she meant. Maybe she hadn't been with it. Perhaps she'd even been dreaming. She might not have been talking to me at all. But she had sounded so certain of what she had said. what she had asked me to do.

I realised I should call someone. Her GP to start with. Presumably they'd be able to tell me what I needed to do. I stood up, my legs a little shaky. I'd always thought that when someone

died they'd look different in some way. But Grandma seemed pretty much the same. Though maybe there was something about her face. Maybe something had lifted. Because she finally did seem at peace.

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A few hours later I stood on the front step of Mum's house, waiting for her to come to the door. The freshly signed death certificate was in my bag, the image of Grandma's body being taken away still fresh in my mind. I wanted to go home to James and the girls, but I also knew that, despite everything, it was right to tell Mum in person. Maybe I was hoping to see an emotional reaction, one I might have missed on the phone. But when she opened the door and saw me there, she just nodded, her face expressionless. I stepped inside and shut the door behind me.

'I'm sorry,' I said.

'Did she go peacefully?' Mum asked.

'Yeah. She was talking, on and off, and then she was gone.'

'Where is she now?'

'The undertaker's. Dr Atkinson came over, signed the death certificate and got it all sorted.'

'She's a nice doctor, I've always said that.'

I shook my head.

'What?' asked Mum.

'Are you not even in the slightest bit upset?'

'We all knew it were coming.'

'Yeah. I've still bawled my eyes out, though.'

Mum shrugged. 'It'll probably hit me later. When I'm on my own.'

'Or maybe you're not that bothered.'

‘Nicola, please don’t start.’

‘It’s not me who’s starting, though, is it? It’s you not behaving like a normal daughter.’

‘Come on. That’s not fair. Everyone has their own way of dealing with these things.’

‘These things? You mean the death of your mother?’

Mum looked away. ‘It’s more complicated than you realise.’

‘So you keep saying. What would be more helpful is if you actually explained what went on between you.’

Mum started to walk away down the hall.

‘I take it that’s a no.’

‘You should get back to your girls,’ she said, stopping and turning to face me. ‘Give them a hug from me.’

Mum’s eyes were glistening. Sometimes the wall she’d built came perilously close to falling down. If I pushed at a brick, it might topple.

‘She said something just before she died. Something I didn’t understand.’

‘What?’

‘She said there were babies at the bottom of the garden. She asked me to look after her babies.’

For the first time I saw Mum’s face crack. Her eyes widened, and her bottom lip trembled. ‘I wouldn’t take any notice of her. She were probably losing her mind by then.’

‘She wasn’t, though. I asked her if she meant her fairy statues, but she was adamant they were babies.’

‘She were probably thinking about angels. She used to believe in angels, you know. She told me once her angels would be waiting for her at the end.’