

Visiting home

“Nanny is in a different world,” Mum says. “She goes to a different place”.

“I want to be with her,” I reply. We are walking back from school. Hot. Sweaty vest. Itchy shoes. Sticky palms. The folds at the bottom of my fingers, even more sticky. I flap my book bag at my face.

“Park?” Mum asks.

I look at my hands, no ice-cream. “Do they get ice-cream where she goes?”

Mum smiles at my plan, my *tactics*. “Well, she gets to eat ice-cream quite often. Probably every day. But she is old and venerable. She has earned it. You—because you’ve worked *very* hard at school for a *very* long week—can have an ice-cream when the van comes on a Friday. Today is not Friday.”

Ven-er-able. Mum’s hand is resting on my shoulder. It’s nudging me towards the park. “What does that mean, Mum, *venerable*?”

“You know a venerable person when you see one. They are all wrinkled up like that dog’s face, rumpled and furrowed like an old apple. Though sometimes you need only to listen to know someone is venerable. They talk in deep, crackly voices as if they were speaking to us through a bad telephone signal from outer space. But all this is a sign that you should listen to what they are going to say, because it will be all full of wisdom, very wise.”

We walk through the park gates. I know that word, *wisdom*. I screw up my face. “But Mum, that means clever, is that what clever is, in the place where Nanny goes—all those things she does now? All those things she says?”

I can’t understand Mum’s expression. Her phone rings and she squeezes my hand. “I’m sorry, love. I have to answer this. It’s Nanny’s new house. Why don’t you go to the swings? I’ll be there in a minute.” The phone rings are running out. Mum kisses my cheek and prods me off. I’m walking to the swings, trying to listen to what she says. I hear the first words. She sounds like my friends, shocked to realise there’s another lesson before lunch. “Bruising? *What*?”

The higher I swing the slower it feels. Lean up. A breath at the top. Glide softly down. Nanny had to move house: I knew that. Mum thinks it’s so she can go to different place. A different *world*. The up-down of the swing makes my thoughts wander. Today would have been different if Nanny didn’t have to be in her new house. My hands would be sticky with ice-cream if she didn’t have to go to that different place. We would have sat on the grass, even though she worried about her white trousers, and I would have got ice cream all over my face to make her laugh. She would have played along, wiping it off with a paper tissue from up her sleeve.

“I think it’s like she’s dreaming,” Mum says. “She goes to a different world—like a dream world.” We’re bumping along a wide road, while other cars go past faster. There’s a dog in one. In another someone eating a sandwich. Mum carries on: “I can’t know her dreams. Do you think I can know what you dream about?”

“I can tell you,” I say.

“That’s true. But only if you stop dreaming.” She reaches over and squeezes my hand. “If you’re asleep, I don’t know what is inside your head. I don’t know where you imagine you are. I don’t know what will make you laugh or what you are afraid is behind your back. I don’t know who you think you are, or who you think I am.”

Not long ago I could have asked Nanny these things. Not that I needed to. I knew what made her laugh. I knew what she’d been up to. Church. Biscuits. Walks. Getting ready for me to arrive. Waiting until I come next. I say to Mum: “She still speaks to us. Do I speak when I’m dreaming?”

“Sometimes. Sometimes you smile. I’ve heard you laugh when you’re asleep: you must’ve been dreaming about something good. Sometimes you wake up with a start and must have been dreaming something bad, because you come looking for me.” I feel funny in my stomach. I’d woken Mum up this morning.

“I think where Nanny goes is a bit like that. Sometimes, whatever dreamy place she’s in, it’s a good dream. Like your good ones, they make her laugh and smile. When I saw her last week, it was full of ice cream, chocolate and music, and friends to talk to. I try to imagine the world she’s in from the scraps she tells us, but it doesn’t make much sense. I’d much rather that, though. Sometimes she has a bad dream like you do, but she can’t wake up and look for help. It’s full of fears which I can’t understand let alone protect her from. Hidden horrors that make her pick her skin and shout for help. And sometimes, I am the threat, and that breaks my heart.” Mum is talking to herself, I think, she’s speaking too quickly for me to say anything back. I look out the window instead, and remember one time I knew that Nanny was unhappy. She did things she would have told me not to do. She’d had her top on the wrong way round and she’d *snapped* at Mum when Mum had tried to help. Nanny never snapped.

Mum squeezes my hand a bit harder this time. “But you mustn’t worry about all that. I’m sorry. Those are my worries. Listen to Nanny, talk to her a little. That will make her happy. She loves you.”

Mum puts on the radio. I look in my bag for something to do.

We stop in a parking spot with ‘visiting’ painted on it. I look up at the flats and Mum and I walk in. There are two big doors with codes Mum knows. Inside, it is hot like in the car before we put down the windows. I wipe my sweaty hands on my trousers. As I rub I notice the smell. It’s like sweets, and that stuff Mum puts down the toilet when it is blocked, mixed up together.

Mum stops to speak to someone in a uniform. I carry on a little up the corridor. There are lots of decorations. I wonder if this used to be a school. All the colours are the same. Bright like playdough. Just the black-and-white photos of men in suits with greasy hair are different. School for old people. I thought the prize for being old was doing what you want.

Mum puts her arm on my shoulder. She smiles but doesn’t look happy. “Shall we go and see her?” There are yellow flowers on a door to the left with Nanny’s name on it.

“Hi Mum,” she says. “Are you okay?”

Nanny doesn’t reply. Mum fusses. She opens the curtains, closes the bathroom door, and moves the bedclothes and pillows around. There’s a muddy vase and Mum pulls out the old flowers and magics fresh ones. From her coat pocket comes an old photo in a frame which she puts next to others on the windowsill. I stand watching Nanny. Mum hasn’t looked at her yet.

She’s sitting on a blue plastic armchair wearing t-shirts and cardigans that look funny and don’t match. She looks clean, as if she’s brushed her hair, but there are scabs on her hands like the ones I yank off my knees. Her face is the same, soft wrinkles around big eyes and thin purple lips. But I don’t like her expression. Her half-open eyes look at me like I’m in trouble. Her mouth is an angry crossing out in the middle of her face. Her head has dropped down towards her shoulder. I imagine that she must have woken up from a nap, but has forgotten how to lift her head back up.

After she runs out of jobs Mum stops and looks at Nanny. Mum smiles—one like I force for a photo—and asks: “Why have you got yourself all bent up like that?”

Mum sits down on the bed next to Nanny’s chair. She looks at me, standing like a lemon, and pats the bed next to her. She puts her arm round Nanny, and looks at her face. As I sit down Nanny says quickly, in a high-pitched voice: “Don’t want it—no—no—why do they do that?” I want to do something to help—whatever Nanny’s dream is now, it is not a good one—but I just sit there as Nanny pulls away from Mum. “I don’t want them to do that—I don’t want it—my parents won’t want it—drat! My Dad will

help—he’s nice—not like *you*.” Nanny sounds like switching between TV channels. She’s moved so far back I think she’ll fall off her chair, but Mum catches her.

“Don’t say that, Mum, please. I’m sorry you’re upset.” Mum adds quietly to me: “Do you want to find the kitchen, love, and I’ll meet you when I’m finished?” I shake my head. I can’t sniff the kitchen from here. And the other people in this place are like Nanny.

Nanny pulls away from Mum again. “Get off! It’s not friendly.” She slaps Mum away and I sit on my hands. Nanny’s looking away from us the whole time, down at the floor. “They come here, you see, they shouldn’t be here! I don’t like it. They should be”—Nanny lifts her head (*finally*, good) and points at the wall like she’s crazy (*bad*, I think)—“they should be over there—not here—you’ve come to hurt me.”

I mumble something about needing the toilet. Mum nods. I’ll wait in the bathroom until she’s done. I can still hear Nanny through the door: “I don’t want *you* here—you’re a *nasty* piece of work—*get out*.”

I haven’t gone to see Nanny again, but Mum has. She’s back today. From the stairs I hear her crying. She’s sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of tea and her glasses are steamed up.

I ask Mum: “Was Nanny having a bad dream again?”

“Yes, love, she was.” I give Mum a biscuit from the jar. She smiles and carries on. “Although the people in the home tell me that sometimes she’s happy, it’s been bad dreams every visit this month. Last year, or maybe two years ago—it’s a blur—she couldn’t remember our names. But these moods are new. She forgot us, and now she’s forgotten herself. The change is slow, you can’t tell from one visit to the next. But it’s also so complete. When I look back and remember her as she was two or three years back, I hardly recognise my own mother.” Mum kisses my cheek. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t worry you. It’s just, love, you remember what she was like”—Mum breathes in deeply to stop more crying—“and you must miss her too.”

“I wish I could go into her dreams,” I reply. “Then we would understand what she goes on about. And I”—I jab my finger at my puffed-up chest—“I would save her from whatever she’s scared of.”

Mum dips the biscuit in her tea. She bites off the soggy end over her mug. After a while she replies. “Yes, me too, I would fight off all those things that make her afraid. Today, first, she wouldn’t talk to me. When she finally did, she screamed, like she was being attacked. I left her—I didn’t know what else to do—with her face down on her bed.” Mum continues quietly to herself. “Inane and happy is difficult enough. But her anger and resentment: that is hard”.

Mum cries three times that week after visiting. Once Nanny hadn’t spoken to her at all. Another time Nanny had cried and asked why Mum was stopping her seeing her parents. The final time Mum was called at work because Nanny had hurt another grandparent locked up in that house. When Mum tells me, I want to get into Nanny’s dreamy head and make it happy.

Staring out the car at the rain on the window. I turn back and forth between radio stations until Mum tells me to stop. I fiddle with my seat-belt instead. I’ve asked to see Nanny. It’s weeks since I saw her. Not every visit, Mum has said, was as bad as the last one I came to. Mostly Nanny’s been moody. But sometimes she has—Mum says—been “thoughtful, even cheerful, with an occasional smile and once even, she laughed.”

The same place to park. The same corridors. The same smell. The same heat. Mum pushes Nanny’s door open. Nanny is sitting asleep.

“Mum,” says my Mum, lightly squeezing Nanny’s shoulder. “Look who’s come to see you.” Nanny doesn’t answer. I think: here we go.

“Mum,” my Mum says again. “How are you feeling?”

After a long pause looking grumpy, Nanny replied. “I don’t like it. Its unfriendly—I want to go.” I watch as she stands up quickly and walks over to the window and knocks on it and says: “I want to go.” But, I think, no one will answer her knocking, and I stand there pushing my hair around for something to do, then put my hands in my pockets. After a minute Nanny sits down with her back against the radiator under the window.

“What shall we do?” I whisper.

Mum shrugs. “Let’s sit with her.”

We do. After a while Mum says to hold Nanny’s hand. She doesn’t pull it away. And so—for what feels like hours—we sit leaning back on the radiator. I yawn and straighten out my legs. I run one foot up and down the carpet. I think about what I’ll do later—eat dinner, watch TV, sit in the garden, climb the tree.

Nanny breaks the silence. She speaks gently this time. “It’s not all bad, this, this—going on. I like the music. They bring it—we dance—I like it.” She looks up and smiles at Mum. Mum smiles back sadly. I yawn again.

“There’s a silver sea out there—fresh, warming. Fish—they’re happy in the sun. I’m there too—in a big boat, you see, floating, floating, floating, drifting, drifting, drifting.” Nanny is speaking to Mum, who nods encouragingly. My eyes close. I feel like there’s a hazy cloud over my head, and I’m drifting myself, and Nanny keeps talking.

“A soft ship, the silver sea. Bobbing, bobbing, bobbing across it; yes, slowly, with a red sail, and nuts and bolts, holding out the water.” I sway in my fuzzy boat. It feels warm, there are stars warming me. I know there’s something I should do and in a little time I’m pulling up a red net full of biscuits and ice-cream.

Nanny’s voice again: “we eat that here, yes; I like that. All good for me, no worrying, fresh from the sea.” Under the stars I share what I’ve caught for us to eat. I look out over the sea, the waves pushing my boat up and down, catching the light of the night, blue all the way to the sky.

“It’s lighter near the horizon, light blue, dark clouds above it—yes, the waves dance below. In this sea it’s time to go—we should go, you see, to find it again.” I feel that urge too, and so I jump and land in warm water, with my mouth open, my hand closed around something, and, feeling a wrinkled hand, I open my eyes.

I blink now sitting against the radiator and Nanny says, “there, you see—there’s a lot nice in this going on—biscuits and sea and sky and music and dance. We’ll go one day.”

I rub my eyes and rock my head from side to side. Mum looks at me. “You’ve been snoring. What did you dream about?”

I find myself crying. “I’ve been into Nanny’s head,” I say. “I’ve travelled a long way. She took me there.”

Mum reaches across and holds my hand. “Remember it,” she says. Nanny looks over and smiles. I stretch my legs as far as they’ll go, and we sit there quietly, Mum, and Nanny, and me.