

Negatives

It looked like the Post Office had shipped it on a lorry that had overturned several times during its voyage from England to the Netherlands. Small tears and the dull, useless ends of too much parcel tape decorated the cardboard box. I pulled at the pieces of tape before I gave up and hacked it open with scissors. On top of the bubble wrap was a small 'thank you' card, with a border of rainbow-coloured pansies. I couldn't remember having done anything for anyone recently.

You left before I could give you this to take home. She'd hid it in a biscuit tin, and no one knows what's on it. I know how much she adored you, Katie. She'd want you to have it. Mum.

I took the scissors and excavated a single roll of 35mm film buried in the middle of the mound. I touched it with my nose. It had the unmistakable whiff of stale custard creams. I put it back in the box. As if there wasn't enough paid work for me to get on with. Still, my curiosity compelled me to carry the parcel to my darkroom. Darkroom is a bit rich; it's a coat cupboard painted black with a dog-shaped draught excluder and red cellophane melted onto the lightbulb. With an eye loupe shoved into my eye socket, I examined the first negative of the roll. Underneath the heat damage and crumb-inflicted wounds, I could almost make out the face of a woman I once thought I knew. Nana. Face much younger, teeth much brighter. Although I pretended to mull over whether I would disrupt Nana's privacy or not for a second, I had to develop them, right? The only way to uncover the mysteries surrounding her smile, hidden for years in an ornamental biscuit tin, would be to develop the negatives, blow them up, and set them free.

My makeshift darkroom offered enough space for four developing baths. I emptied the chemicals and plucked the prints still hanging from the piece of washing line. Sliding the film out of the tin, I unspooled the first four charged negatives and snipped them off one by one. I inserted the first negative into the enlargement machine and looked at the projection on the printer paper. Two people, one of them Nana, maybe indoors. Looking at the soft outlines of her face was like walking past a primary school teacher in the supermarket, or a neighbour who moved away. I had fond

memories of them, once. When all four negatives were enlarged, I dropped the prints into the developer baths where their haze would become much sharper and clearer in thirty minutes or less. I leaned back on the cold brick wall, wishing I had a packet of chocolate digestives to binge on while I waited in the dark for the negatives to bring me into the light.

My parents both worked full time, so I spent every school holiday at Nana's house. She would brew cup after cup of tea for me, and I was allowed to dunk as many Jammie Dodgers as I fancied. Mum and Dad would try and fail to make a cup of tea as good as Nana's. I later learned she added a few drops of cold water so I wouldn't scald my tongue. And two teaspoons of sugar. I always thought the Jammie Dodgers made it sweet, but it was her. She would enter the living room while I was watching Nickelodeon on her Sky TV and proclaim, 'Oh no! Not *Kenan & Kel* again!' before parking her bum and settling on the settee next to me and a tub of Family Circle. If we weren't watching TV or eating biscuits, we were taking photographs.

Nana was the photographer of family events. Throughout my childhood, she snapped with an old Canon EOS 55, until she realised that it was easier to capture her gaggle of grandchildren all looking the same way and not picking their noses, with a digital camera and limitless retakes. It hung around her neck like a mayoral chain. She liked to take moody artistic landscape shots and portraits of her cream-coloured Westie called Carnaby. She bought me my first camera when I was five years old. Fisher Price. Blue plastic body, yellow cord, red details. She taught me how to insert a roll of film and wind it up each time I pressed the shutter. She taught me the rule of thirds, and how to keep the horizon straight. The horizon must always be straight, without exception. She was a photographer in London, and quite a good one, mum says, before she met my grandad and moved up north. I used to ask loads of questions about what London was like, or if I could see those old photographs. I can't remember if she ever answered me, or if she showed me a single print.

When I was fourteen years old, I became a vegetarian. Every Boxing Day, we'd visit Nana's house. She would escort me to the kitchen to point out the vegetarian platters among the buffet. She'd

gesture to a dish and say, 'The quiche, that's vegetarian. The potato salad, that's vegetarian. And see those sandwiches? They're egg.' She would look at me from above the rims of her glasses, 'Those are vegetarian too.' Together, we would set up her camera on the tripod and manhandle our family like a teddy bear's picnic, arranging them for the shot. She'd place me last at the front, saving a space for herself by my side. Although I saw Nana less and less through my teen years, on Sunday afternoons she would sometimes pick me up and drive to the beach so we could take photographs of the sunsets and of Carnaby. Carnaby was named after the street in London, where she 'misspent her youth', as she'd say. When Nana saw my lip piercing for the first time, paired with black eyeliner and a thin veneer of teen angst, her mouth hid the horror in her eyes. 'Oh! I see you've got your warpaint on.' Later, when I passed my GCSE exams with full marks in Art, she bought me my first DSLR camera. I promised to not tell any of my cousins that she'd bought me a fancy present. They probably received £10 in a greetings card and a pat on the back. My grandad died of cancer when I was a toddler. She never remarried, and I never met my dad's parents. They were, in his words, 'Not worth knowing'. It didn't matter, at the time. Being her favourite grandchild was enough.

There was no extravagant gift when I turned eighteen and went off to university. Maybe studying overseas was one step too far. Nana sometimes made little digs if I left it more than one week without visiting. I used to think she was joking. I'll admit I was enjoying my independence too much to call her very often, though I thought she would at least be proud that I chose to study photography. But then there was Elsje. I thought first loves only transitioned into forever loves in cheesy American movies but somehow it happened to me. I'd come out to my family and friends on A Level Results Day and imagined an awkward introduction to lesbianhood via dating apps, asking 'Are we friends, or do you fancy me?' to every girl I liked. Elsje was another student in my Introduction to Photographic Principles class. She had blue hair and black nails, and she saved me from all that confusion. They call it 'U—hauling' these days. On our first date, we watched a 40th anniversary re-release of the François Truffaut film *The 400 Blows*. I brought her back to my studio flat and she never seemed to leave. Only for class and late-night falafel kebabs. I never questioned why Nana never called me, as I

rarely called her. I'd see her on Boxing Day, at least, like always, and was planning to bring Elsje home. Elsje grew up with Dachshunds and owned a Canon F-1 in mint condition. I couldn't wait for Nana to meet her.

Nana did not single me out and parade me around the buffet table pointing out which vol-au-vents, sandwiches, and other beige party staples were vegetarian-friendly. She did not speak to me at all. The few times I caught her looking at me, she would busy herself with eating, tidying, fussing. If I thought the North Sea was a great enough distance between us when I moved to the Netherlands, it was nothing like the carpeted canyon between us in her living room. Elsje didn't notice, but how could she know anything was wrong? She chatted away to my dad about betting and match-fixing scandals in European football. Maybe nothing was wrong. Maybe I was being paranoid.

I waited until everyone had finished their Viennetta desserts to grab her tripod from the pantry to take our annual family photo.

'Oh, no, no, Katie!' She leapt off her seat, snatched the tripod out of my hands and brushed past me to the kitchen. I followed her.

'Are we not taking the family photo this year, Nana?' I asked. She hunched over a drawer at the back though nothing seemed to be stored there.

'Erm.' She dragged out that 'erm' so long it sounded like she was flatlining. 'No, I don't think it's necessary.'

She closed the drawer and turned around. 'Everyone is enjoying themselves. Well, we've got plenty from other years.'

'Yeah, but we take one *every* year, Nana. That's the point.'

'Well, we're not going to take one *this* year.' Her arms were swinging by her side.

'Is everything okay, Nana? I don't know if you're avoiding me. I'm sorry I haven't called -'

‘Oh, psssh,’ she waved a dismissive hand over her face. ‘Don’t be daft. Grandchildren never call their Nanas.’

‘But I did. I used to call you loads.’ Nana started shifting a tin of beans on the shelf. I shut the door behind me. ‘This isn’t like you, Nana. This isn’t like us. Why do you not want to take the photo?’

She sighed, and looked at me. ‘It’s a family photo, Katie. For family *only*.’

‘Who isn’t family?’

‘Your Dutch friend, of course. The person you met at university, whatever she’s called.’

The heat of two bodies trapped in a cupboard made it hard to take a breath.

‘Elsje, Nana. You know her name is Elsje, and you know how to say it. Why don’t you want her in the photo?’

Nana flared her nostrils. ‘Katie, I love you, but I don’t want to open my Christmas photo album and be reminded of the year you brought your ‘phase’ home.’

‘My *phase*?!’

Whatever Nana had been keeping down with scotch eggs and whiskey before poured out of her now. Her eyes started to water, and she held me by the elbows. ‘I thought I’d heard everything when you declared that you were a lesbian but when your mum said you were bringing her into *my* home... What happened to my little protégé, Katie?’

I felt like I was six years old again when Nana held me after I dropped my Fisher Price camera on the sand at the beach. ‘I love her, Nana,’ was all I could choke out.

‘*Love* her? You can’t love a woman, Katie! It’s not biologically possible’. She almost laughed, as if it was true. ‘When you find the right man, you’ll realise that. When you give birth to your first child, when you meet your first grandchild, you’ll learn what *real* love is.’

After that, I spent my Christmases with Elsje's parents, and we'd fly to England at New Years to spend it with mine. Nana didn't call when Elsje asked me to marry her, so I didn't call when she broke her hip. I attended her funeral out of guilt, though I couldn't tell you what I was supposed to feel guilty about at the time.

Not expecting to see much more than blurred blacks and greys, I glanced over at the first bath and saw a sharp, developed photograph, despite the damage. Nana, before she was my nana, was dolled up in cat eye sunglasses and a sheer blouse, posing in a restaurant with a glass of wine in one hand and a cigarette in the other. She's laughing and looking at the woman sat beside her with strong shoulders in a button-up shirt, short curly hair, and her hand on Nana's forearm. I tweezed the corner and hung it to dry on the line. I stepped over to the second bath. It was a photograph of the women with the curls again but in a club, not a restaurant. I had an inkling of who was behind this expertly framed portrait. I tweezed the corner again. Looking down at the third bath, I almost tipped it over and spilled chemicals down my jeans. It was another portrait of the curly-haired woman, but she wasn't in the club. She was naked. Her fleshy thighs were crossed over to protect some of her modesty, but the rest of her oozed over the bedspread, her arms free. I clipped the print to the line. My eyes shifted to the fourth bath before my head dared to turn. It wasn't the shock I thought it would be, and yet it was. Nana was sat on the edge of the same bed, with one hand on the curly-haired woman's thigh and the other holding a wired camera remote up in the air, like an Olympian holding their gold medal. As the other woman planted a kiss on her cheek and held her bare body tight with both arms, she was wearing the same sunny smile I saw every day when I was young.

I stared at each one in turn like a detective would security footage, trying to decipher a timeline of events, looking for clues in my past that would explain everything, explain this. There were thirty-six negatives in the roll, and while I would later develop every one, they only offered more questions.

Doors opening and shutting and the sound of tiny footsteps tapping on the kitchen tile alerted me to Elsje and Lexi's return. Leaving my past developing in the dark room, I entered the kitchen and

scooped up the noisy two-year-old before kissing my wife. The ‘thank you’ card was on the dining table where I left it. I gave Lexi the card to hold and took a selfie with my family, sending it to my daughter’s Nana. I promised I would call her later.

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