

The Window

by Janelle Lynch

My grandmother stood in front of the kitchen window. A cigarette with a long unbroken ash hung from her lips.

Look, Jel,” Nana said, when she sensed me nearby. The ash crumbled and fell. Nana stepped sideways in her loafers to make room for me on the blue throw rug. She was usually so withdrawn. It was strange to see her enraptured.

Nana and my grandfather, Nanu, helped my mother raise me. When I was born, my mother was twenty and not ready to parent. Nana’s maternal care was as consistent as the brown spirals of hair she bobby-pinned on either side of her face every morning; as comforting as the subdued palette of her jumper-and-blouse ensembles; and as reliable as the meals she cooked each week: Monday stew, Friday fish, Sunday *succo*.

I needed Nana solidly grounded next to me—not transported. But I was also excited by the rare invitation to be close to her. I leaned over the sink on tiptoe, looking to see what had so captivated her: two grazing deer.

Outside my family’s white aluminum-sided home, groomed grass met shaggy brush and stern pines. In the afternoon, the sun crested over the trees in Jamestown, New York. To block the light from her eyes when she worked at the sink, Nana drew the shade and curtains, yielding a frame similar to the 8x10-inch viewfinder of the camera I would use later in life to photograph landscapes.

When I began school, Nana sent me off in the morning with a quiet goodbye. When I came home she was waiting for me. In cold weather, the door would be closed, but I could see the top of her head through a pane of glass. On warm days, the door would be ajar and Nana was the shadow behind the screen. We often met there to gaze across our property, a different vantage from the kitchen window. For me it was another opportunity to be close to Nana.

When we shared these moments, we rarely talked. Sometimes I could tell what she was fixated on—a rabbit nibbling, or dandelion seedpods carried by the wind. Other times, I struggled to see what she saw. One time, I tracked her line of sight, but couldn’t decipher anything outside. Then I took in, simply, the warm hue of late summer light. Another time, I scanned the horizon to realize that she was watching the rain. Nothing moved Nana more than what grew from, fell upon, or roamed the earth. *Only Mother Nature could make that,*” she would say, referring to the blossoming apple trees or lilac bushes that perfumed our second-floor bedrooms each May. But she didn’t like to go outdoors. Her connection to nature was usually through glass. My connection to nature was through Nana. I remember finding a cracked robin’s egg on the porch steps. I was arrested by its distinctive shade of blue. I had internalized Nana’s sense of awe.

By the side of the house, a bold oak shaded the playroom that Nana had built for me when I was four, just before he died. The tree was nearly twice as tall as our two-story house and functioned as its landmark. In our rural surroundings its rustling leaves were sometimes the only sound.

I felt Nana's presence in my playroom, and in his black-and-white portrait that hung on the living room wall. Nana would stand in front of his image and whisper to him.

Other than me, my grandfather's greatest pleasure was photography. When I was seven years old, I discovered a case of his cameras deep in my bedroom closet—a trove of formats, flashes, and film. The intrigue was laced with thrill because they were Nana's and because I couldn't be caught. Nana wouldn't have approved. Children shouldn't play with such valuable objects.

For my tenth birthday, my mother surprised me with my first camera, a Kodak Disc, much simpler than those in Nana's case. I took snapshots of family, like I watched Nana do when I was younger, though his were candid and mine were posed. I didn't start photographing the landscape until I was in graduate school, many years later. I tried other subjects first—couples, constructed spaces—but the land had the truest resonance. It embodied the love and wonder that Nana silently conveyed when we stood together looking at the countryside.

When I was twenty years old, I moved to New York City to study and often went home to see Nana. We would sit at the kitchen table in our usual chairs: Nana faced the door and I faced the window. When we spoke, it was about the life I was building in my new home and how to protect the life that Nana was losing to dementia. She hoarded empty boxes in my bedroom closet and left an open flame on the stove. She imagined men watching her in the night. Little girls with cats, she said, wandered the house in the day.

Nana spent the last year of her life in a nursing home splayed in a mauve geriatric chair wearing vibrant tropical-print dresses. She no longer knew what covered her skin and bones. Her view was the dropped ceiling, not the beauty of the outdoors. Her pink scalp added color to her otherwise gray complexion. Though my grandmother was barely recognizable, I still didn't want to lose her. I was afraid her death would be the end of our bond that fortified me.

The last time I saw Nana alive was in July 2007, right before I moved to Barcelona. She didn't see me. Her eyes stayed clenched shut, her body shuddered beneath my touch. *I love you, Nana,* I said. Over the years, as her cognition failed, I relied less on our mother tongue of silence. *I came to say goodbye, Nana.*

When I left for Spain, I took Nana's pie spatula, its red paint always chipping into the desserts I served, and a small cardboard book of her gold-eyed sewing needles. Out of the original fifty, there were nine left. A constellation of pinpricks dotted the paper—a code of absence. I wore her wedding band that she gave me when I moved away from home. Once I settled in Barcelona, I took my camera into the landscape around the Llobregat River and found a tree like the one that shaded my childhood playroom. My camera's antique viewfinder was framed in stained wood like our old kitchen window. When I ducked under the dark cloth to sharpen the focus, there was Nana.