

Douglas Bruton

Walk Don't Run

When a girl, my grandmother gutted fish. She has black-and-white photographs in wooden frames on either side of the mantelpiece clock, the pictures turning yellow, pictures of her standing with other fish-gutting girls whose names she chanted to me when I was a child. In the pictures she's fourteen, my grandmother then looking like me now. The girls are outside in the pictures, the sky grey above them and the thick arms of fishermen at their waists, the sculpted folds of their skirts hiding their legs. They're all smiles, the young men and the girls. One of the men might be my grandfather, though he died before I was born so I do not recognise his smile, not like I recognise hers and all its uncertainty. Her name was Julia then, my grandmother, and Julia is my name now.

My grandmother told me once, about the fish, about the sharp knife slicing into the soft underbelly, sliding mouth to tail, and then scooping out the shit and the slime-slippery guts, a pink black mess that the gulls screamed and fought over. She used that word: shit. I remember looking across at my mam to see if she'd heard it too and to make sure it was all right to be still listening. My grandmother's voice did not falter as she told of the fish packed in ice or salt and loaded onto carts and driven to shops and hotels in places she could name then – but not now. And afterwards the fish-silver on the palms of her hands, and she a fisherman's bride. Too soon, she once said, too soon a bride; I did not know why it was too soon.

Now she's old, her fingers turned into knots in her shallow lap, folded there like the curled legs of dead spiders or like the clutched feet of dead birds. And her skin dark, like old wood. I have to look after her some days. I should love her, but she's old and never speaks, not like before when I was a child at her knee adrift in her stories. She sits in a high-backed armchair, one of her eyes cloudy like the eye of a grilled fish, the other watching the world moving around her. And she does not speak.

I have to look after her, most weekends, days when I'd rather be smoking cigarettes with Johnny at the café, holding his interest, one too many of my blouse buttons undone and mam's disapproval a voice in the back of my head. And Johnny not leaving my side and saying nice things to me. Only I'm here with my grandmother, watching the clock on the mantelpiece counting down the minutes and the hours of my day, the minutes and hours of her day.

She sleeps mostly in her chair, her head tilted back like a child's and her mouth slack, open so that I can see her teeth, not straight and not white. I counted them once, her teeth, when she slept. Nine on the bottom and eight on the top. It didn't seem enough to me. She smells of lavender and roses, and underneath faintly still of fish, I think, the smell catching in my nostrils and at the back of my throat so that I almost retch.

When she wakes she doesn't talk. At least I never understand the sounds that she makes. I ask her if she wants a cup of tea and from her reply I cannot guess if she does or she doesn't, so I don't always bother. I stay till six and then someone else takes over: sometimes my dad, sometimes my mam. They're never late, and I should be grateful for that.

"Did you talk to her?" my mam always asks.

And I do talk to her, even though I'm not sure she hears. I tell my grandmother stuff, things I wouldn't tell anyone else, secrets of sorts. Even if she does hear I know that she will not tell, not ever. It's like talking to myself, like thinking my thoughts out loud. I told her about Dad and the woman next door, how I caught him with his hand under her skirt when he was supposed to be helping her with her decorating, and the look on her pinched face and the sound that she made, like she couldn't breathe. They didn't know I was watching, quiet, through a crack in the door, come to tell Dad there was someone on the phone for him.

I have to dust and clean while I'm at my grandmother's house, wash any dishes that get dirtied and keep everything just so. It doesn't take much of my time. There's just my grandmother and she never moves from the chair, not unless I help her. I take her to the toilet several times a day, just in case. Not the upstairs one, never upstairs now. Even her bed has been moved down to the ground-floor spare room. I take her, supporting her arm and moving so slow I sometimes think we aren't moving at all. I lock the door

from the inside even though there's only us. The air in there is sickly sweet with air freshener, something with the thick sticky scent of freesias hanging in it. I steady her in front of the toilet, lift her dress, ease her pants to her ankles and sit her down. It was something she used to do for me when I was little, it is something the same but different now that she's the smaller of us. I sit on the edge of the bath and talk to her until she's finished. [...]

Then I wipe her, there between her legs. If I told the girls at school they'd make faces of disgust and I'd admit to them that I don't know how anyone could. But I do it, and it's no different to wiping clean the kitchen surfaces now that I'm used to it. Then I pull up her pants and she shifts her weight from one hip to the other to help, like a slow dance or a fish wriggling its very last. I wash her hands and mine, then dry them, and unlock the door and walk one careful half-step at a time back to her armchair in the living room.

She knows I smoke, my grandmother; she knows, but my mam doesn't. Sometimes I imagine my grandmother telling me not to, giving me advice like she did when I was very young, my grandmother's hand on my arm, keeping me back – always look both ways before crossing the road, and never run with scissors in your hand, or a knife. Now it is getting warmer again I go out into my grandmother's back garden, stand by the open window so I can still see her, and light up. Every now and then I ask if she's okay and I think she nods a little. And I tell her what it's like outside, on the other side of the glass.

The daffodils are fit to burst into colour, the swollen ends bent like the heads of diving birds and showing yellow beneath the green. The snowdrops have melted away and the air is hung with birdsong, one child-blown whistle laid on top of another. The tufted grass needs cutting and weeds are beginning to spill out of the borders. My dad'll do the gardening soon, during the Easter holidays, my grandmother's garden getting more attention than our own. And the trees at the bottom of the garden are sticky with buds. I remind her of the jars of pussy willow¹ we used to set on the windowsill in her kitchen, and the sprays of blossom from the flowering cherry and how they went quickly limp and brown at the edges and the water turned green.

At eleven o'clock I bring her tea and some biscuits. Two chocolate digestives on a small side plate. I break each biscuit into four and feed them to her a piece at a time, and I hold the cup to her lips so she can drink.

I tell her what I am getting for Mam's birthday. Mam wants a coffee-making machine, one of those silver ones with black plastic buttons and attachments for making cappuccinos like you get in the coffee shops. I've saved up the money they've paid me for looking after Grandmother at weekends. Four pounds an hour, I get. My dad thought I should do it for nothing, that looking after my grandmother was a duty. I thought he should put his hand under Mam's skirt and not the skirt of the lady next door and that was something like a duty, too.

For a moment there I thought she laughed, my grandmother. Not out loud, not what you would call a laugh, but a soft gargle in her throat, as though she was swallowing something she hadn't chewed properly. I wipe a silver thread of spittle from the corner of her mouth and feed her another quarter piece of biscuit.

Sometimes we sit with the television on. My mam said my grandmother likes to watch the news, so we watch the news. My mam is still pretty for all her years and she looks like my grandmother in the black-and-white pictures. They say I look like her too, but I think they just want me to believe that, so that I feel part of something, part of them. [...]

At lunchtime I heat soup from a can, a mixture of lentil and tomato, half and half. I warm it up in a battered aluminium pan, not too hot, not so hot that it'll burn her mouth. Mam says I should make her sit at the table, but that's too much trouble. I arrange a tea towel over her front and feed her there in the living room.

I ask my grandmother questions sometimes. Is the soup just as she likes it? Does she want some bread with it? Shall I turn the television up? She nods to everything, at least I make believe that she does. I don't think she really understands. Was Grandfather a good man? Was he gentle with her? And tender? Like a lover in the books my mam reads?

¹ *pussy willow*: a type of willow tree with furry white buds

95 I tell my grandmother all about Johnny at the café. He's gentle, sometimes, when we're alone in the park. He's almost seventeen, three years older than me. He says I'm a looker². He whispers my name in my ear, his breath warm on my neck. And he kisses me – on my cheeks at first, his hands cupping my face and his eyes open. I ask my grandmother if that was what it was like when she was a fish-gutter and Grandfather was a young man on a boat with the sea in his hair and "Julia" a taste in his mouth. I ask her if
100 Grandfather's kisses are something she remembers still, his lips pressed to hers, and the roughness of his chin that has not seen the razor for two days. Johnny puts his tongue in my mouth sometimes. It does not make me sick. And once, his hand was under my blouse, touching my tits, squeezing them so that they hurt a little. I asked my grandmother if Grandfather ever did that to her, if he ever put his hands between her legs, inside her pants. I told Johnny no, and he swore and took away his kisses. I couldn't bear that, not
105 having him kissing me in the dark of the park, his breath on my neck and my name soft as a prayer on his lips.

My grandmother sleeps again in the late afternoon. I'm talking to her and she sleeps through what I have to say. I tell her again about Dad and the woman next door, and her face screwed as though she was in pain, only I know from the sounds that she made that she was not hurting. And Dad's hand there, as
110 Johnny's hand was under my skirt. Johnny said it was normal, that everybody did it. I heard Joan talking about it to someone at school, talking to Deborah, or Chrissie who smokes where the teachers can see her. I tried not to listen. Johnny said maybe I was just a child. I didn't like it when he said that. He swore again and left me to walk home on my own. But the next day he said he was sorry and that he loved me. It would be okay, he said. [...]

115 Next time I think I'll let him, I say. It's a decision of sorts. Then he won't swear and I won't walk home alone. I say that out loud. But she's not asleep, my grandmother. Her hand reaches for me – the hand that once gutted a million fish settles on my arm, and I look at her face and she's crying.

I ask her what's wrong and she mutters something. Her lips move and I lean in close, only I don't really hear. I wipe the tears from her face with the flat of my hand – silver in my palm now – and I tell her it's all right, that I am here. I tell her my name just in case she's confused, my name which was her name once. I
120 feel the weight of her hand on my arm, a bird-weight, light like something remembered. And I hear again the words of advice that she gave me as a child: always look both ways before crossing the road and never run with scissors in your hand, or a knife. And I don't understand, but somehow her words make sense still.

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² someone who is attractive