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opening extract from

Granny was a Buffer Girl

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Celebrations

'Hurry up, Grandpa!' I shouted. 'We're celebrating tonight.' Grandpa waved. He hadn't heard what I'd said. He was playing bowls with the old people. He'd known some of them nearly all his life. He nursed his bowl as he waited to roll it, then he stepped forward on to the black disc, hitching his trouser leg as he bent his knee and showing an incongruous flash of red sock. When he'd released his bowl he stood with his feet turned in and his veined hands dangling free, as a child might, watching as it whispered over the soft turf and smiling when it clocked against the jack.

I moved away from the green, hurt suddenly to see how old he was. The sky was rushing to early sunset. The clouds were tinged with apricot. I could see our house from here, and the spread of Sheffield away from it, with street lights already pricking out the way the roads went. I was on the top of the Bole Hills, the windiest green in the world, Grandpa told me. There was a quarry here once. Some people say it's really 'bone hills' because it was built on an old tip, and when I think I'm standing on the bottles and

bones and crumbling waste of long-dead families I feel dizzy, as if this tiny moment of the present and all the moments of my future are slipping away fast from me. But Grandpa tells me it's 'bowl hills', because there's a bowling green on the top, and that seems much kinder to me.

'Time to go then, Jess, is it?' Grandpa came up behind me, the bowls knocking together in the little bag Mum gave him for Christmas.

He's smaller than me.

'Are you coming down for tea, Little Man?' I asked him.

'I won't say no, if it's worth eating. You haven't cooked it, have you?'

'Not this time, Grandpa.'

'That's all right then. I'll risk it.'

He grunted as the path steepened down, and I waited for him. He wouldn't want me to help him.

'Was it a good game?'

'Grand. I'm better than any of that lot now, I reckon. Bridie should have been there. She always says I don't send them right, but I do. She'd be surprised. I've just played the best game of my life.'

He always talks about my nan as though she's just slipped out to the shops for a bit, and will be back home soon. Perhaps he's forgotten that she died a year ago.

'If you're winning at bowls today you'll be able to

celebrate, Little Man,' I said. 'Along with the rest of us.'

'Why, what are you celebrating? Not getting married, are you?'

I'd just said goodbye to Steve. Just.

'Not yet, Grandpa. I'm not that daft.'

'What's happening, then?' He stopped, taking deep, slow breaths. I shouldn't walk so fast when I'm with him.

'Well, for a start, I'm off to France tomorrow for my year abroad.'

'How come?'

'It's part of my university course. You know that. I'm always telling you.'

'Well, this is a real celebration, then. We're getting rid of you at last.' And then he fumbled round in his pockets for a handkerchief and blew into it noisily. 'I'm sorry J-Jess. I didn't mean to say that.'

'I know that, Little Man. We're always saying things we don't mean.'

Perhaps it was something to do with the manner of my nan's going. She hadn't been ill. She just didn't wake up one morning. Everyone said it was the best way to go, but I couldn't believe that. Surely she'd have wanted a minute or two to remember her seventy years, and to say goodbye? And my mother had said a strange thing as we were walking away in the sunshine from the Catholic cemetery at Rivelin.

She'd said, 'Now we've another life to celebrate.' *Celebrate!* So we'd had the celebrations at our house, and afterwards Dad had sent up all his pigeons for her, and Grandpa Jack had stood with his cap in his hand, watching them and watching them, till they'd all fluttered down and clustered back into their loft.

His house is so quiet now.

By the time we reached home Mum had already drawn the curtains. The garden smelt of bonfires, and Dad's wellingtons propped each other up by the step. My brother John came to the door as we opened it and took Grandpa's bag and cap to put with the coats, and John's girlfriend Katie gave Grandpa a hug as if she was one of the family already. She was my best friend at school.

'Where's Steve?' she asked, surprised. He's her brother.

'I didn't invite him to tea,' I said. I looked past her at John. I hadn't wanted Katie to be here, either. Perhaps John and Katie were closer than I thought. Perhaps they would stay together.

'Is he coming on later, then?' Katie asked. We went everywhere as a four usually.

I shook my head, doubt making me unhappy again. 'I've already said goodbye to him,' I said.

Little Grandpa Jack had made his way into the front room to join my other grandparents. Granny

Dorothy was coughing over a glass of sherry. She'd had her hair newly permed and dyed for tonight, and was wearing the bluebell-coloured dress that she always keeps for these occasions. Grandad Albert pulled the ring of a can of beer back so it was foaming ready for Grandpa Jack as soon as he found his chair. I went to set the table. I could hear Mum and Dad in the kitchen, arguing about the gravy. I was already feeling nervous.

'Ready!' Mum shouted.

John and Katie brought the old folks in and settled them in their chairs while Mum and Dad served out. There was wine – Dad's home brew from a kit. It always gives me hiccups. It always makes me sad.

'Here's to Jess!' Dad said. 'Off to see the world!' Mum squeezed my hand.

'I left home when I was your age, Jess,' Dad went on. 'Your grandad said it would make a man of me.'

Grandad Albert laughed. 'What did Dorothy use to say? You'd end up a dirty old man with no stamps on your National Insurance card ...'

'I don't suppose Jess is too happy about going away now,' Granny Dorothy said. 'Not if she's leaving her young man behind.'

'Grandpa Jack's got something to celebrate,' I said quickly. 'He played his best game of bowls today.'

'I did,' he said. 'I think it's because I've had my hair cut. I can balance better now.'

'There's nothing there to cut, Jack,' Grandad Albert said. 'It'd be easier to pluck it out!' His own hair is thick and white, and he's a big man, like my dad, like John is becoming. 'If we're boasting today, them's my chrysanths on the sideboard. Look at them. Big as your fist.' His flowers are the colour of marmalade, heavy and sullen. 'Like lions,' he said. 'Beautiful.'

'Granny ...'

She was coughing again, wheezing and spitting into her handkerchief. It took her a long time to get over this bout but she came up smiling. 'I shouldn't drink wine,' she said. 'It goes straight to my windpipe.'

'What are you celebrating, Granny?'

'Celebrating?' She held her glass out for Dad to fill again. Mum frowned at him. 'Well, getting our Louie into a home, I suppose, if you can call that something to celebrate. I know she'll be better off there, but I still feel it's a terrible thing to do to her. I do, Albert, it's no good arguing. I've only got one sister now, and I feel as if I've let her down. That awful marriage she had. She's only had five years to enjoy herself. Go on, Michael. Fill my glass. Fill it up.'

Dad pulled a face at my mum and did as he was told. 'Anyone want to know what I did today?' he said. 'I ran as far as Rivelin Dams. That's the furthest I've ever done. I think I'll go in for the Sheffield Marathon next June.'

'I think we'll join you, Dad,' said John. 'What d'you think, Katie?'

The look she shared with him excluded all of us. 'Better than sitting down doing nothing all day.'

'It gets you, running does,' Dad warned them. 'It's like a fever, or a drug.'

'I might have a go myself,' said little Grandpa Jack. 'I've heard of chaps older than me doing marathons.'

I cleared away the dirty plates and stood in the kitchen listening to their chatter and laughter. Dread lay in the hollow of my stomach. I wished they'd get this bit over with and get on with the important thing. This was their ritual, a gentle nursing back towards the old, bad memory. I could hear Katie's laughter among the rest. John must love her, then, to have brought her tonight. I wasn't ready to share it with Steve yet. Maybe that was how you could tell whether you really loved someone or not. I'd said goodbye to Steve at the bottom of the Bole Hills, just before I'd set off to fetch Grandpa down. He'd been on his bike, bending down to me because he was so much taller than me and because the wind was playing havoc with our voices.

'Can I come to the station to see you off tomorrow?' he'd said.

'No. I'd rather you didn't.'

'You're glad you're going, aren't you?'

'Course I am. I'm excited.'

'You know what I mean. Away from me. You're glad.'

'I'll be home for Christmas,' I reminded him, helpless. I don't know why I hadn't been able to say goodbye to him. It was nothing to do with wanting to hurt him.

'You'll find someone else by then,' he said quietly, not looking at me, and then he drove his pedals down and rode off, head down into the wind.

'I'll write, Steve. I'll see you soon,' I shouted.

I was a snake, shedding its skin; a glistening, fleshy thing; a jewel in dark grass. I shuddered, thrilled, scared.

'I don't know if you'd call mine a celebration or not,' Mum was saying as I took the tray of ice creams in. 'I've been offered a full term's supply teaching. If it's anything like the last school I'd rather not have it.'

'Money's good though, on supply,' Dad said, and his look said 'You should be glad of any job these days.'

'But that's all it's worth, at a school like that. The money. There should be more to it than that, especially with a job like teaching.'

'Like growing flowers,' said Grandad Albert. 'I know, Josie. There's some jobs you can't put a price on, not when you love doing them. Money's a bonus.'

'I hate the stuff,' Granny Dorothy said. 'Money. It rots you. We've never had much of it, and I'm glad. I wanted to be rich once upon a time. Not now.'

'You hadn't much chance, marrying me,' Albert laughed.

'It's not money that matters, anyway. It's your health,' said Katie. That was because she was an outsider, and didn't know how we do things in our house, and what all this chatter was about. But even before her words sank us into silence my dad had brought in the bottle of special wine, and had filled up all our glasses again and stood with his own raised. 'Don't let's forget the Birthday Celebration,' he said, smiling with the mood of the party talk, his traitor voice low and thick. 'Let's drink to Danny.'

And we all stood up, and were silent.

After the meal I went into the downstairs room we still call Danny's. My record player is in there, and John's dartboard, but we don't go in there much. Mum wants the room to be used more. She keeps her typewriter in there, but she carries it into the living room to use it.

There's a photograph of Danny on the wall. Just his face. He's got his head back, laughing. He's about ten there. I only ever see that photograph face. When I try to think of him as he was last time I saw him, that laughing face slides in front, getting in the way.

I put a record on. It's a special song that reminds me of someone I met at a disco once. I sat on the bed that used to be Danny's and sang the words softly to myself. I could see our cat, Paddy, on his twilight prowl around the apple tree. The fruits gleamed silver, heavy among the silver-green leaves and the dark branches.

Mum looked in on her way down from the bathroom and put the light on. 'OK, love?' she asked.

'Of course I am. Why shouldn't I be?'

She came in and drew the curtains. 'Thinking about Danny?'

'Isn't that what today's all about?'

'That, and other things. D'you know what I've just been thinking? I'm going to have two empty rooms in the house now. Perhaps that's a metaphor for middle age, Jess. Empty rooms.'

The record clicked as it finished. We sat in the silence.

I wanted to tell Mum something that I'd never been able to say to her before. If I left it till I came back home I might never be able to say it. I might be a different person.

'I want to say something about Danny.'

She waited, sad.

'I said a terrible thing to him, that day.'

'I know,' she said.

'Would he have heard me, Mum?'

She shook her head. 'It was already too late.' She pressed her eyes with the tips of her fingers, the way she sometimes does when she takes off her reading glasses; tired. 'I'll tell you a secret, shall I? I said a terrible thing once. I was in the park near the children's hospital, by that little pond. Your father and I were watching Danny throwing bread to the ducks. I knew what was going to happen to him then. I was trying to protect him from his own future, I suppose, and I was trying to protect myself, and I said a terrible thing. We mustn't be ashamed of what we say at times like that. It's about love.'

'Katie's going, everyone,' John called from the kitchen.

'Mum, what *did* you say?' I asked. She patted my hand and stood up to see her guest out.

'Bye everyone,' Katie shouted. 'Jess! You're going tomorrow!' She came in to hug me.

'Give my love to Steve,' I said.

Mum went in to talk to the grandparents while Dad and I cleared away the rest of the dishes. I couldn't catch Mum's eye. At last John came back from seeing Katie home. He'd run from her house and came in panting. You could feel the heat steaming off him. He flopped into a chair.

'You ran to Rivelin Dams, Dad?' he said, gasping. 'I don't believe it!'

Dad grinned, proud.

'I wish B-Bridie was here,' said Grandpa Jack. 'How she loves a party. They used to have singing and dancing and storytelling all through the night at her house.'

'Dad,' my mum said. 'Tell us about you and Bridie.'

'That'd be giving secrets away, Josie,' he said. But he looked wistful, as if he was longing for the storytelling days of his youth.

'You tell your secrets, and I'll tell mine,' said Granny Dorothy. 'I'll tell you something that Albert doesn't know, even. My best secret.'

Mum did catch my eye then, and her look promised me that I wouldn't be going away from home without sharing all its secrets, all its love stories, and all its ghost stories too.