

A Perfect Day

Even though it was summer, she still felt cold. “It must be all this sitting around,” she thought as she shivered a little and pulled the shawl further around her shoulders, and soon felt warmer.

There was a knock on the door. “Come in,” she called. The door opened, and a young woman came in. It was Ruth, her granddaughter.

Emily smiled; she was always glad to see her granddaughter. She reminded her so much of herself when she had been Ruth’s age. It had only been a week since Ruth had turned nineteen.

Ruth sat down and smiled back. She loved visiting her Nan. They sat in a large room that had a bed in one corner, two armchairs, several small tables between them, a sideboard, and a wardrobe. Light streamed in through the large, single window.

“How are you?” she asked.

“Oh, I’m alright, dearie. It’s only a summer cold, but they keep telling me that at my age I have to be careful,” she said, and then continuing in an almost whisper, “It’s easier not to argue.”

Ruth smiled again. Her Nan had always had this hint of a rebellious streak about her that Ruth found very appealing. She liked to think that maybe she had inherited it.

“You wanted to see me, Nan?” Ruth asked.

Suddenly her Nan was much more serious. “Yes, I did, but first I have a task for you. Go over to the sideboard and tell me what you see.”

Ruth stood up, wondering where this was leading as she went to the sideboard. Framed photos covered it. They used up every available space on the sideboard.

“I see lots of photos, Nan, as per usual,” she said.

“Yes, dearie, look at them a little harder and tell me what you see.”

Ruth looked at them again. “Well, there’s Mum, Dad, and me. You’ve got pictures of me when I was born, as a young tot and even last week from my birthday,” she said.

“Keep going, Ruth,”

Ruth’s curiosity piqued now, for her Nan usually only ever referred to her by her name when she was trying to tell her something she considered important.

“Well, there is you and Grandad Robert, and there is Uncle John and Auntie Alice.”

“Yes, yes, keep going.”

“Well, everyone is here. I don’t see what you…” She never finished, for at the back, almost out of sight amongst all the others, was a photograph. It was old. She carefully reached in and picked it up.

“Do you mean this Nan?” she asked, showing the picture.

“Yes, dearie. Bring it over here, please.”

Ruth gave her the photo and sat back down. Nan looked at the photo and gave an involuntary sigh.

The photo showed a fisherman with some kind of triangular net, working on a beach. He was standing on the shallow edge of the tide where it came up on the beach and poured around the feet of anybody wading. He was using the net to catch something. There was a group of six children watching the fisherman as he worked. A wooden pier could be seen in the background.



“Who are these, Nan? I don’t recognise anyone,” asked Ruth.

“I have kept that photograph since 1916, and now it is time for its story to be told before it is too late,” Emily said. Ruth saw a change come over her Nan. She was serious now, as if she were talking about something of great importance to her. What Ruth did not know was that in her mind’s eye, her dear old Nan was seeing herself as a young woman of Ruth’s age in 1916.

“Don’t talk like that, Nan, you’ve got years yet,” Talk of death always unsettled her. She dearly loved her Nan and could not imagine life without her.

“Hush girl. I’ve seen two world wars and even a man on the moon. It’s nearly my time.”

Ruth did not know what to say, so she stayed quiet and let Emily continue, “I was your age when I met my Frank and we fell in love. We were very happy.”

Ruth’s face lit up in surprise, for this was the first time she had heard mention of a ‘Frank’ in her Nan’s life, let alone anyone in the family. It was also hard for her to see her Nan as a young woman.

“Then we committed the cardinal sin. I became pregnant and was not married. My parents were ashamed of the whole affair and wanted to send me away. They did not approve of Frank. When I refused, they threatened to disown me.” Even after all these years, Ruth can still see the pain on her Nan’s face.

“Oh, Nan! What did you do?”

“The only thing we could do, dearie. Frank and I ran away. We were married at the first opportunity, and then we moved to Bridlington. Frank became a fisherman like the rest of his family.”

“Our first child was a girl we called Alice, and then later I had another that we called John.”

“Auntie Alice and Uncle John!” Said Ruth, now very surprised.

Emily nodded. "We were so happy, and then the Great War came."

Her manner changed. She became quieter, almost matter of fact. All men who could fight were needed, so Frank signed up with his two brothers late in 1915. He went off with them for training early in 1916. I heard from him whenever he could find the time to write. The three of us got by thanks to Frank's army pay and support from his family, but it was a tough time.

She stopped momentarily as the memories flooded back, then with an effort she gathered herself and continued. "Then one day in June 1916 he's back home and says he has leave for two days and then has to go back because they were going to the front line for the next big push; France."

Tears ran down her face. I passed her a tissue. She wiped her eyes and continued.

"We decided that the day before he was due to leave, we would have a family day out. We would picnic on the beach. I will forever remember that day. I can no more forget it than I can forget my own name. We borrowed a Brownie camera from my sister-in-law and took loads of photos, but that is the only one remaining."

"So, who is who?" asked Ruth, looking at the photo.

"Well, the girl with the hat closest to the fisherman, holding on to her shorts, is your Aunt Alice, who was 5, and the little boy next to her is John, who was 4. They're both watching their dad."

Ruth's eyes lit up. "So, the fisherman is Frank?" "Yes, dearie, it is the only photo I have of him."

There was a moment of quiet. Ruth was thinking her Nan had finished, but she was just catching her breath.

Every time I look at this, it all comes back. What a day, Ruth! The weather was a perfect June day, cotton wool clouds moving across a beautiful blue sky. We spent the morning peering into rock pools with the children. Frank wanted to show them everything. When it came to beaches and the sea, he was so knowledgeable. He could name all the crabs, shrimp, and little fish that the children found. The sand was so perfect, so we took our shoes and socks off and waded right to the edge of the sea. Then we had our picnic lunch on the sand. We were so happy. I think the children must have had sore faces from all the laughing and smiling, from having their father back and being able to spend the whole day with him.

In the afternoon, Frank said he would show the children how he caught brown shrimp. He had brought his net and went to the water's edge and used it like a plough, disturbing the bed of the beach underwater, and then the shrimp, feeling the vibrations, would make a run for it and Frank scooped them up into his net. Frank's net filled with shrimp, crabs, and small fish, amazing the children. He soon had an audience of other children watching. Time after time he would empty his net into a bucket he had also brought.

"That was when you took the photo, then, Nan?"

"Yes, dearie. I wished that day would never end. I can remember it as if it were yesterday. It was a perfect day."

Another moment of quiet, and then she continued. There was a wobble in her voice as she struggled to keep control.

“The next day he left and rejoined his unit. That was the last time I ever saw him. I received a telegram informing me that the enemy had killed him in action on July 1, 1916. That was the first day of the Battle of the Somme. You know, I never knew where he fell, as they never recovered his remains.

Ruth hugged her Nan as both wept together.

“What a pair we are crying over old history, dearie,” said Emily, smiling through her tears.

Ruth nodded, smiling through her tears.

“When did you marry Grandad Robert?”

“Oh, your Grandad Robert and I met and married a couple of years after the War ended. Don’t get me wrong, he was a lovely, kind man. He took in the three of us and made a home for us all. He truly loved me, but Alice and John now consider Bob their father, and no one ever mentions Frank. But I am grateful because we had your Mum.

Nan’s head nodded as she said this for her eyes were struggling to stay open as she drifted into sleep. Ruth could see how telling this story had tired her.

“So many memories of Bob and so few of Frank,” she murmured as she fell asleep.

Ruth kissed her Nan on the forehead. “Thank you for telling me, Nan. I promise I will never forget Grandad Frank.

She found a rug and placed it around her Nan to keep her warm while she slept, and then left her in the chair as shafts of sunlight streamed through the window, catching motes of dust as they danced in the warm currents of air.

Emily walked down the steps onto the beach, and there was her Frank waiting for her. It seemed to her that he had not changed at all, and then she realised she was no longer old but young again. She ran towards him, and they embraced.

“You waited for me all this time,” she said.

Frank just smiled; not saying anything, but just took her hand in his and led her away, following the shoreline of the beach until they disappeared from view.

Many years later, Ruth’s daughter came to visit. She was grown up now with a family of her own. Ruth went to put the kettle on, and Emily, who was named after her great-grandmother casually looked at the dresser in the living room while she waited. It was littered with photos of the family. Emily smiled as she saw old pictures of herself as a youngster. Then she noticed an old sepia photo of a group of children on a beach looking at a fisherman holding a net. It puzzled her, for she recognised no one in it, and yet there it was in the middle of all the family photos. She picked the photo up and went into the kitchen.

“Mum, what’s this all about? I’ve never seen it before and I don’t recognise anyone in it.” She said, showing Ruth the photograph.

Ruth smiled, “I’ll just make the tea, dearie, and then I have a story to tell you.”