

2010 What Matters? Competition

YEAR 11/12 WINNER

Ruby Bouwsema, Coonabarabran High School

Take Me With You

She was never Nan or Granny to me. She was always Nor Nor to me, for as long as I could remember. Nor Nor, who made the best mince pies and date scones (I thought) in the country. Nor Nor, who rose each day at 5am so she could feed the chooks and start cleaning. Nor Nor, who now can't remember my name, or her daughter's, or her own.

In those long summer holidays at the family farm, my cousin Ollie and I would steal eggs from the chook yard, perpetually barefoot and clothes unspeakably filthy from doing God knows what, but not before glancing over our shoulders to check for hawk-like eyes. We were always so sure we'd never get caught, but for all our painstakingly careful actions we were, unaccountably, always chased from the clothesline downstairs to the car shed shaded by old angophoras, a leather belt hot at our heels, our laughter lost in the air rushing us by.

For so many summers it was the same, Nor Nor in the cottage with the tree-house and the mandarin tree, its permanently thick, sweet smell lingering in the lazy afternoons, separate from the house where my cousins lived further down, but always open and filled with the inviting smell of date scones. I always seemed small enough to fit snugly in her arms, my head resting on her stomach, taking in the clean smell of soap and lipstick. My hands would fish through her apron pockets in search of sweets or knick knacks I could proudly present to my older cousins, whose approval I was always so desperate to earn. I didn't have any inclination for thinking it would ever be any different.

When I was eleven and so sure of myself, I heard my mother having a heated discussion with my Aunt Patty on the phone one evening, and being curious and unable to stop myself, I listened to my mother attempt to explain how Nor Nor's knees were making it harder for her to go down the stairs of the cottage and feed the chooks. At least at the nursing home, she'd be near friends and have staff to help her, my mother reasoned. The silence that took hold as Patty spoke words I couldn't hear was deafening. My mother began shouting, a hysterical note edging its way into her voice threateningly, and words became intangible in my mind. I remember covering my ears and burrowing my way into my bed, so afraid of conflict and the mess it created, and more than anything, the fact that Nor Nor might not be around to make any more date scones for morning tea.

A month later, Nor Nor was placed into a room in the lodge of the nursing home, and six months after that, she was moved to the hostel next door for more intensive care. My mother would try and take Nor Nor out to the farm at least a few times a year, but she steadily worsened, sick and lonely inside her own mind.

When I was fourteen, we went to see Nor Nor at the hostel. I remember she was sitting in a wheelchair in the sunroom, a crocheted blanket draped over her lap and her cloudy blue eyes not really seeing the manicured lawn and towering pine trees outside.

She didn't seem to realise we were there, and as my mother ran outside crying I went to follow, only to be stopped by a small voice, lucid and clear, calling from behind:

"Take me with you."