Postcards

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Agnes

Your father's mother was Agnes. She came from a rural townland, all vowels and phlegm to say. Her home house was a series of small boxes stacked one upon the other; a neat and God-fearing establishment, with nothing in the way of show. So many weans went through that wee house they ran out of good, Protestant names to give them, so the last was called after the first who'd died young of something you could cure with antibiotics now.

Your granny was a weaver of linen. No different from all the other Agnes' tending loom in Lisburn, Belfast and Portadown. She took her lunch in her hand each morning and walked a dark mile there and back. She did not see herself party to something significant. Yet each morning she took the raw yarn in her hands and, though it was as old lady's hair or horsetails caught up in knots, she saw only what it could be: a handkerchief, a Sunday shirt, a finely embroidered tablecloth paling over a big house table. She lifted her shuttle and wove the future into each tangled strand and did not stop 'til the mills began falling down around her.

Picture your granny, every day from eight 'til six. First in Ross's Factory, aged thirteen all the way up to the age you are now. Then, later in the Phoenix which was farther to walk, but more money. Picture her lame in the foot from a dropped shuttle. Picture her wearing her retirement watch to church, hoiking her sleeve up to show the gold of it off. Picture ten thousand woman like her: spinning, weaving and stitching, leaning against mill walls, smoking. Tell yourself there was nothing remarkable about your granny, and this is why you never asked.

Gladys

Your mother's mother was Gladys, the first syllable of which is, Glad. This sat sweetly with her face which was always smiling, always parting its lips in praise. She was born at the smarter end of the Cliftonville Road, in a red house, with a pitched roof and windows. When the Blitz descended upon Belfast, the windows came in and everyone was under the table praying. It seemed, for one long night, like the world was ending right outside her front door. She told you this for a school project, and how she was sent to Bangor for safekeeping. You have a picture of her paddling in the sea. In this picture she looks exactly like Anne Frank. Serene. Striking. Miles away, behind the eyes.

Your nana was not the sort of girl who worked in mills. She did not work at all, but married well, and stayed home playing piano and knitting. Sweaters were her thing. She knit you itchy ones for school and Girls' Brigade, a softer yellow number for your fifth birthday. It had a horse on the front with loose strands of brown wool, knotted into a mane. It stretched with you, all the way up to Primary Six. You also recall hats, mittens and blankets for other people's grandchildren. A cardigan, with mother-of-pearl buttons, winking through the Mohair like tiny, open eyes. Sometimes people still say to you, 'your nana was a great wee knitter.'

Picture your nana in an armchair by the fire. Slippers on. Teapot stewing on the hearth. Note the click, fidget, click of needle meeting needle, the way her fingers do the looking for her, the chubby eights of double knit in pink, lemon, and palest blue, rolling across the carpet towards the door, like tendrils stretching for the light. Picture her singing in time with the stitches: hymns and choruses, romantic songs by Jim Reeves. Your nana knit until her fingers turned to thumbs and it hurt to pull the yarn tightly. In the end she forgot what her fingers were for, though they still flew backwards and forwards across the bed sheets, as if she held phantom needles in her hands, as if the stale, hospital air could be knit into one last sweater.