

## Half-Hearted

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As soon as I saw the chocolate biscuits, the apples and the two sachets of instant coffee on the kitchen table, and my mother running back and forth between the kitchen and the bathroom in just her bra and knickers, I guessed immediately that I could kiss my plans of having a comfortable read in the afternoon goodbye. I could almost hear the sound of our car's engine revving up and in my mind's eye I was already sitting in the back seat.

"It's a good thing you've arrived, don't bother getting changed, we're leaving in a minute," said my mother, stopping suddenly to take a look at what I was wearing with a critical eye. The corner of her mouth twitched almost imperceptibly, a sure sign that she didn't like what she saw. "Did you go to work wearing that?" she said, staring at my trousers, which were a size larger than necessary and so were a bit slack. "Pull your belly in; don't stick it out like that!"

"Mother, I'm not a flat-chested 16-year-old anymore, I was 28 last month, have you forgotten?" I looked at her with a bored expression and bulged out the shameful body part even more just to annoy her. It was the usual argument between us; she just couldn't accept the fact that her slim, teenage daughter had become a normally built woman. Well, perhaps five kilos heavier than normal. It's a pitiful cliché, isn't it? All that stands in the way of happiness and a woman's self-esteem are those five kilos!

"Where are you going?" I asked totally pointlessly, because I knew very well that mother usually went mad like this when she was getting ready to go to the old people's home."

"As if you didn't know. To visit mum," she said, dashing into the living room, which doubled as my parents' bedroom. A few seconds later she emerged with a pair of trousers, and when she had put them on she noted, pursing her lips, that while she usually had to have her clothes taken in at the waist, it would seem that it was time to start letting them out. It's the kind of family we were: everything centred on weight! Woe betide those who don't look their best! As if we should be determined on the basis of how much we weigh!

The only thing more important was the cynical and often jealous observation of others for fear of missing out on who's bought a new car, who's going on holiday abroad this year, or at whose expense we can spread some juicy, local gossip! The all-seeing eye of the neighbours was one of the least heart-warming aspects of life in a small town.

"You could help you know, instead of just standing there!"

She wasn't in a good mood, and to forestall my becoming the object of her anger I unenthusiastically went to the closet and got the basket we usually packed things for granny in. Apart from the things on the table, we also packed some home-cooked food – not as if they



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didn't cook well or enough at the home, but mum insisted on it – three pairs of brand new warm socks and four pairs of woolly knickers. Granny always had cold feet, even in the middle of summer. With the underwear in my hands I stopped to think for a second. Will I be running around in this sort of thing when I'm old, or do only old school pensioners wear them?

I was packing quietly, while mother was running around like a headless chicken. First she couldn't find her purse, then her glasses; next she just couldn't fasten her watch with one hand. Even my father, who usually didn't get involved in the feverish preparations, noticed her nerves.

It was enough for him to ask her what the matter was, and from then on all the way to the old people's home I had to listen to how, if the

price of granny's medicine and the monthly boarding fee went up again, we'd have to have a serious think about bringing her out of there. Dad again had his vote, declaring that he wouldn't consent to it and if granny came, he'd go, or to be more precise would move home to his mother who lived in the next street.

Footnote: according to my experience so far, the further away relatives live from each other, the better their relationship.

Well, we couldn't say the same about ourselves; my paternal grandmother lived practically next door but she saw me and my mother as rarely as if we lived on the other side of the country, and even my mother's mother was enjoying her retirement just two villages away. Enjoying it? I'd argue with that I think. The right word for it would be vegetating.

I'd have just sat there quietly, but I heard mum mention that in fact the reason we're visiting granny for the second time this month is because the home called.

"What would happen if we lived in Timbuktu and they played at this? Dragging us in every couple of weeks just because they feel like it? If there's a problem, there's the phone, why don't they just tell us! This paying for the medicine cash in hand is so stupid too!" I grumbled. "These days everyone does this kind of thing by bank transfer!"

I could have had more sense and knew very well this was the kind of comment that would really annoy mother, but I'd had enough of them using and exploiting her. She may have been 55 already, but she just couldn't say no.

Mum started going on about why they'd agreed on things this way with the director of the home, but I knew very well why she kept giving in to them again and again. Last time, granny hurt her feelings by complaining that while everyone else there gets visitors every week, her own daughter only appears once a month at best.

This was just such a lie that I'm amazed she wasn't swallowed up by the earth when she uttered it. Apart from her, the relatives of the other old fogies only thought of them perhaps once a year, and even then it was usually just a phone call to the charity home to enquire if the "beloved relative" was still alive or not. It was charming how they waited around like vultures for them to pass away so they could finally get their hands on the supposed inheritance.

Mother too had been scorned for being such a heartless daughter to have put her own mother into a home. As an only child it was her duty to take care of her whether she wanted to or not. But mother at least had the courage to see that she could only do her duty at the expense of her job, her family and her own mental health, and so she managed to arrange

to have her accepted in a home that was run by someone she knew.

I was witness to the fact that in the last two years poor granny's health had become gradually worse and unfortunately we couldn't leave her alone because of her increasingly serious senile dementia. We tried home care, but her deteriorating condition required twenty-four hour supervision.

Although we knew why we had made certain decisions, others didn't prove to be understanding, and my granny knew exactly how to play at the strings of my mother's guilty conscience. This was one of the reasons my mother got in such a state when we were getting ready to visit the home. What does granny have in store for us today, I wonder? Will she again bring up how my mother could have done this to her? Or that the nurses keep stealing and her companions are unbearable?

"Just let it go. She does it on purpose because she knows she can hurt you by saying those things," I told my mother. At times like these she would stare out of the window with her lips pursed, from which I deduced that somewhere deep inside she agreed with my grandmother.

I shook my head. If she's made a decision she should just stick by it instead of fraying her nerves away with this continuous doubt: *Did I make a good decision? Was I right to do what I did?* This irresolvable situation will be the death of her one day.

It was with a heavy heart that I stepped across the lime tree lined threshold of the Half Moon Old People's Home. It wasn't the smell of age or the sight of those dilapidated and lonely old men and women that bothered me, not even the crumbling paint on the ceilings, but the fact that I had to face what had become of the active, always in the garden, cake and meatloaf-baking grandmother of my childhood.

She was already waiting for us, leaning on her stick in a dressing gown at the top of the

stairs on the second floor. Her short grey hair was set in pretty curls around her head; she must have had a perm that week, although on the left her pillow had flattened it down a little. Granny had never been tall but in her old age she had shrunk, if it were possible, even more. When I was a child I used to make fun of her a lot because of her belly, because I didn't yet understand that it was my future that stood before me. The women of our family were prone to gaining weight around the waist.

Mother donned her fake smile for her own protection and began to fuss around her. She accompanied her to her room, which she shared with two other old ladies, sat her down on the edge of the bed, unpacked what we had brought, and even found time to talk to the nurses about her condition and any expenses due.

Dad didn't come in to see her; he stayed outside in the car. The home itself was properly tended, but it hadn't been built in the best area. The town lived off mining at one time, and once the pits were closed down poverty became rife. Security wasn't particularly bad, but the devil never sleeps, as they say. He decided that he'd give us a ring if we hadn't come out in an hour's time; that was more than enough. He hoped granny wouldn't have enough time to get annoyed.

After discussing the usual question of what we had brought, she turned her pallid eyes to me.

"You're looking well, Bernadette."

I stayed silent. What could I have replied to that?

"Have you found a job yet?"

She'd gone right for the jugular; granny wasn't afraid of making waves.

"No, not yet," I replied slowly. It bothered me enough already that I was increasing the ranks of unemployed graduates.

"But she's taking part in a public work programme," stressed my mum, so granny wouldn't think I was sitting at home scratching

my arse and living off welfare. With a grimace I nodded in agreement. In Hungary, social welfare for the unemployed was dependent on doing public work, and if you didn't cooperate with the state you didn't get a penny.

"And what do you do?"

"I'm working as an office assistant."

And I was having a relatively good time of it. I knew people more qualified than me who had been forced to sweep the streets.

"She's looking for a job all the time, but she hasn't found one that suits her yet," my mother continued. I would have gladly added that in the profession my mother had dreamed up for me I certainly wouldn't. We had very different views about what I should do with my life.

"Mum's still pushing for me to be a biologist," I said irritably. "She doesn't understand that it's too late now. I got my degree five years ago and I haven't worked a day in my profession, my knowledge is pretty dated by now."

"You could be working as one if you'd listened to me, and if you'd wanted it enough," said mother with a cutting glance.

"Well, we've certainly seen a good example of perseverance and ambition from you: instead of being an archaeologist you ended up a nursery school teacher," I retorted viciously.

"Things will improve girl," said granny, her voice shaky with age. "And, have you got a boyfriend yet? You'll soon be too old to have babies."

Mother swallowed her resentment and replied instead of me to this one too:

"No, not yet. It's hard for youngsters to meet people nowadays."

"You're not a lesbian though, are you?" asked granny, leaning closer, and my eyebrows jumped up high.

"You're wearing trousers now too, I see, and you've so many lovely skirts! And you've cut your hair short too..."

Mum had been sitting with her hands in her lap, but now the wrinkles at the corners of her eyes became deeper and she stared at granny.

"Mother, how can you say things like that?"

I hadn't taken it to heart, I was smiling absently.

"Don't worry granny, I'm as far from being a lesbian as you can imagine. Perhaps if I had less brains and more silicone and style in me, I'd have a boyfriend."

"You would have style, but you don't care about your looks. Your manners leave a lot to be desired too."

"I'm not going to pretend to be someone I'm not."

"Oh, don't! Be proud and single! It's all the fashion anyway, isn't it! When I was your age, I'd been a mother for a good few years; you were already seven."

"So what? When you were my age there weren't even mobile phones yet."

"Now, now!" said granny, raising a finger, "don't talk to your mother like that; she's just worried about you."

"Well she needn't worry; I'll sort things out myself."

"Of course, that's why you're still living with us," mother blurted out, ruining my mood for good. This was the other thing that really bothered me apart from not having a job. Moving back to your parents' house when you were all grown up was more than embarrassing.

"I'm sorry the two months became a whole year, but I haven't got a stack of money saved up to be able to just go and live in some apartment in the city on impulse and start looking for a job and hope I get lucky!"

"Then what *do* you want? There are no opportunities for young people where we live! You should go down to Budapest, you've got cousins there too."

"Screw my cousins!" I exclaimed. "We've never been on good terms. We may be relatives

by name, but otherwise we've never cared about each other! It'd be lovely to start sucking up to them now and asking them for help!"

"Stop shouting! What will people say?" said mum, her eyes sparkling in anger. "Is this why we came here?!" she hissed.

But it was too late to stop me, everything that was on my mind just rushed out:

"And you could stop making oblique references to the fact that you think I should grab hold of some rich husband! I'm not going to organise my life like my second cousins, who only cared about the size of their men's wallets and are kept women! I'd rather live in poverty and keep my self-respect than with a load of money as a whore!"

"Oh Bernadette! Don't use such horrible language!" said granny, covering her mouth with her hands and shaking her head disapprovingly.

I was seething with anger and felt a great urge to tell granny that she would do better to keep quiet. Mum did everything she could for her, but if she had one of her turns, granny would give her a nasty kick at every opportunity.

This is where I decided to end the visit, and stepped out of the room shaking with shame and anger. In time not to have gone too far, although I was sure I'd get what was coming to me when we got home. As soon as I'd said it, I knew I'd have been wiser to have stayed quiet. If my younger sister Petra were here, none of this would have happened, but she worked weekends too and didn't have time to come with us today.

In the dayroom I found myself confronted with seven old people sitting on their sofas. Lonely, forgotten people who hungered for a bit of scandal. It was wonderful, I can tell you!

I went out into the Half Moon's small chestnut-lined courtyard where according to the new smoking laws you couldn't even

have a cigarette any more, not that I was a smoker. I came here to calm down, but it just wasn't happening. In my head, I played the tape of how my mother was going to tell me off, and then dad would get angry too if he heard how I'd behaved. And on top of it all, there was no point to any of it, nothing was going to change.

Would I end up like this too, I wondered? If I ever have a child, get old and they start to feel I'm a burden, will they stick me in a home? Will I even survive long enough to become this old? The age of retirement was approaching 70; I had a better chance of going to the cemetery directly from my workplace rather than living to enjoy my retirement. Not like granny! They held a retirement party for her when she was 55.

I recalled Petra's words, with which we had already discussed this topic:

"If I ever feel that I'm starting to become decrepit, I'm damn sure I'll leave for the happy hunting grounds before I end up unable to look after myself."

"You might say that now, but when you're that old you'll cling on to life with all your strength."

"We'll see. Whatever happens I'd certainly prefer to top myself rather than waste away in an uninspiring home in the company of a dozen other bitter old farts!"

I thought Petra's opinion was a bit extreme, although there was something repulsive in the vision of the future she had painted too.

"If you ask me, the problem is that old people today can't fill the role of wise advisor in families like they used to," she used to say back when mother was thinking of putting

granny in a home. "The generation gap's just too wide. Just look at mum and her mother; even between them. That's the reason for all the misunderstandings."

"I just mumbled something. I rarely philosophised about life's important issues.

"Come on Bernadette, let's go!" barked mother behind me as if she'd swallowed a rake. Instead of arguing she had chosen silent terror, but I didn't want her to know that this was a godsend to me rather than her constant complaining.

When we got in the car and dad asked how things had gone, she curtly replied:

"Your daughter was on form again. She's never coming here with me ever again."

He looked at me questioning through the rear-view mirror hoping I'd explain a little more, but I just shrugged my shoulders and stared out of the window. Mother was quiet all the way home, a rarity for her. Only when we had got out of the car did she look at me meaningfully:

"I know very well that I can't count on any help from you when I get old; Petra's going to have to cope on her own. You've already told me you don't want to have to bother with me if I get sick."

I felt an immense emptiness in my chest. Not because I was deeply offended by what she had said, but because I knew things really would have been that way. Wherever I stood in my private life or my career, and no matter how much I loved my mother, I would never give up my life so I could take her in when she needed looking after.

Is admitting being selfish a good or a bad thing, I wonder?