

Molly Remembers

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IT WAS QUARTER past six in the evening and Molly shuffled through the kitchen. The smell of rosemary and thyme wafted from the oven and steam rose from a pot of vegetables, pooling on the ceiling and fogging up the windows. She reached over to a cupboard above and took out some teacups, setting them out on a tray. She took an iron kettle and held it under the tap, tilted, until it poured from the spout. She set it on the stove and then checked the roast below. The chicken skin was lightly bronzed and the potatoes were soft beneath her fork. Five more minutes.

It had been too long since her daughter's last visit. Six months, maybe seven. Molly was eager to see her grandchildren too; two boys, born a year apart, eight and nine years old respectively. They bickered and fought, but they smiled and had security which is all she could have wanted for them at that age. When Molly was even younger than her grandsons, her life had been full of trials and sleepless nights. She walked into the lounge and switched on the radio. Set to her favourite station, classical music danced through the room, as did Molly, swaying forward and back with whom she recognised as Vivaldi.

The doorbell, the oven timer and the kettle all sang together. Molly shook her head in the confusion of sound and rushed to the kitchen, turning all the buttons to *off*. The doorbell rang again. "One moment," she called, though unlikely heard. She patted her apron down and opened the door. She hadn't realised it was raining, but the patter echoed through the hall. "Come in, come in and get out of the rain."

First her daughter Liz stepped in, wrapped tightly in a large grey jacket. Following her were the two young boys in matching yellow raincoats, Liam and Chris. “Hey Mum,” she kissed her on the cheek, then turned to her two boys and told them to kiss their Nanna. Molly slowly leant down and gave them each a peck and waited for them to do the same. Reluctantly they did. Only a couple of years ago she would have lifted each boy up and hugged them, but they were too big now, and her too old.

Molly asked Liz to help her in the kitchen and told the boys to head into the lounge. They did as they were told and before she could even pour tea, the television was on and the radio was off. She took out the roast chicken, while Liz strained the peas, corn and carrots. Molly took out four plates and then tore at the chicken, putting generous pieces on each plate and ladling potatoes next to the other vegetables. To finish, she poured the left over juices on top. They ate on portable trays set out in front of the television. Molly had wanted to eat at the dining table, but Liz shook her head. The boys would have kicked up a fuss, she assured her.

She ate sparingly. After seeing the boys completely engrossed by the large explosions and machine gun fire of the movie on screen, her appetite vanished. She looked away and asked Liz to change the station, but the boys protested. They were enjoying the action. Liz understood though. She changed the station to a random game show and told her sons how their grandmother was there when that war happened, and she didn't like to think about it. With confused expressions, the boys could only ask, “Why?”

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Many decades had passed since Molly was a little girl, curled up in her mother's lap, oblivious to what was going on in the battlefield outside. It wasn't something she ever wanted to reflect on, but her grandchildren didn't understand. They had grown up in a world that glorified old battles, twisting wanton slaughter into mindless heroism and patriotic fallacy. When questioned, the memories reappeared; vivid, like a Hollywood film playing behind her eyes.

She remembered the walls shaking, the windows shattering, the smell of sulphur and metallic tang, the sound of alarms; loud and unyielding, somehow still drowned out by the whistling of falling mortars. At the

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time she hadn't known what it was, only that the whistle would lead to a boom, and then to screams and crying.

Even though the threat had been approaching for some time, people had gone about their daily lives in denial of the whole thing. Only her father had taken action, converting their cellar into a makeshift safe house. In the cellar she was surrounded by family, most of which had faded to simple grey visages as she tried to recall their faces. A few neighbours were present as well, some with children, some alone. Every time the walls shook, her sobs would start anew. Her mother would cradle her head, holding her so tight, Molly could barely breathe.

It had been weeks since she had last seen her father and when she questioned her mother, she would only say, "He's fighting for his country." Molly didn't understand then why her mother was silent as she cried; fighting for one's country was considered an honourable thing. The radio would broadcast stories of valiant soldiers and snappy posters would ensnare the young and gullible to join the ranks of the *righteous*. Once they realised war was hell, it was too late to leave. Looking back it was all so obvious. She hadn't seen her father since.

When the enemy drew closer, her heart would beat in time with their machine guns; the rapid fire madness like hail and rain. The roar of Tiger tanks and their grinding treads, followed by the lightning flash of their barrels and the immense thunderclap that completed the storm. In one brave moment she poked her head above the barred window frames and witnessed the carnage they all hid from. It was only once, but one sight was enough as a tower ignited and debris fell onto soldiers below, their cries carrying far along the wind, the image forever burned in the back of her mind.

Molly remembered thinking, *please don't find us here.*

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Molly felt the boys frantic tugging at her pants and heard the clicking of Liz's fingers in front of her face. Molly took a deep breath and blinked a few times. She'd been crying. She apologised profusely. "To think I'm like this over something so long past."

Liz sighed with relief and wiped her mother's eyes with her sleeves. "Don't be sorry. I understand. Do you boys understand?"

They nodded, but still looked unsure. "Oh dear, I hope you two know this wasn't your doing. Your Nanna sometimes cries is all. Do

smile.” Molly went and fetched some butterscotch sweets from a lounge cupboard, took one for herself, and opened the pack wider for the boys to grab. They smiled as they each took a handful. “It’s getting late I’m sure.”

“You’re right. Got to get these little ones to bed,” said Liz. She pulled on her jacket and told the boys to do the same. “Love you, Mum. I’ll try visit more often.” She gave her mother a soft kiss on the cheek.

“Bye Nanna,” the boys recited as they shuffled out the front door.

Molly decided against making them kiss her goodnight, she’d embarrassed them enough tonight. Once they were gone, the house was deathly quiet. Molly put on her apron and stacked the dishes under a steady stream of hot water. The steam did little to hide her tears. The stitches of her memory had torn; the old wound dripping once again.

She abandoned the dishes, half-done. Wiping her eyes on her sleeves, she switched the kitchen light off and went into the lounge. She turned on the radio and sat down on the couch. Beside her, soft light emanated from a lamp. The sound of violins filled her ears. She reached into her pocket and took out the butterscotch sweet. Slowly she unwrapped it and gently placed it on her tongue. The taste was comfort, and Molly allowed herself to smile.