

Mirror mirror

When Nana came to live with us we got kicked out of the TV room. It wasn't a good start. She was a little old lady with a blue rinse perm and brown stockings. Paisley dresses in summer and pastel twinsets in winter. Hat and gloves for church on Sundays. Every day she tottered up to the letterbox posting letters to her friends. Otherwise she sat in "her" room in knitting baby clothes and watching "her" TV with the sound turned down. That drove us mad. Mum hated it that she drank tea.

"Bloody Christians!" she'd mutter under her breath and take her another cup.

Nana thought we kids were all spoilt rotten. Maybe that's why she never shared her biscuits with us, or the chocolate coated caramels she gave the dog. I don't remember her ever joining in the fun or chatting, she just pouted.

Mum said, "Ignore the old biddy."

Nana had lived through the Depression and then the War, seen children of poor families stitched into their winter clothes, lost her house in a bushfire with four kids on her own and, although Col did come back, he was never the same and eventually died of Malaria. Now all she wanted was to be with him in heaven.

"Don't marry someone older than you," she said, "You're a long time on your own when they die."

I thought it was funny to catch her with her teeth out when she'd finished in the bathroom, and try to make her talk with her mouth caved in. One day I found a photo of her in her twenties and ran in to show her. She looked a lot like me.

"Enjoy it while it lasts," she spat, "I look in the mirror and can't even recognize myself."

One day she gave me a copy of Rose Lindsay's memoir, 'A Model Wife' which told me, too late, there was another side to her. Maybe she'd seen something of herself in me

after all? It was a pretty risqué story of an artist and his muse. According to Mum the old bitch never gave her anything so in more ways than one it became my guilty secret. We were all relieved when she decided to leave.

Twenty years later I went to see Nana in a nursing home, and found a tiny old woman, curled up in foetal position, her hair white and straight. She was almost unrecognizable except for the familiar plea, "Let me go, let me go. I just want to be with Col." When the nurse delivered a cup of tea, I watched my Nana suck greedily from a baby's tippy cup.

When she finally died at 98 she left us each 65 dollars. It took me a long time to decide how to spend her money. And now I have my 'Nana pot', a pastel blue paisley teapot. Mum hates it.