



Kin

by Elizabeth Haynes

NAN STANDS AT THE CREST OF NOSE HILL, looking out. Fog threatens the city, office towers cling to patches of blue. Buffalo bean and yarrow stir in the still warm wind. Nan stoops to a golden aster. Hidden beneath are two late strawberries. She picks them, eats—they are cold, sweet with the knowledge of autumn.

From her boulder, she ponders the poplars lining 14th Street. Remembers George jumping on leaf piles, scarf black on orange, scarf she knitted, Halloween scarf unwinding. A boy unravelling. She stood at the back door, called ‘come in, sweetie, it’s cold, the wind has teeth you know.’ He laughed and laughed.

Nan watches the swirling grasses. Pulls her old gardening sweater tighter. Stands, starts slowly down, the traffic a symphony then a roar as she descends to the city.

Inside, George sprawls on the couch, smoking, a girl squeezed under his arm.

“What a surprise, I didn’t expect you until..”
“Got a day off. Ma, this is Celia, Celia this is my mom.”

“Hello.” Nan smiles, too wide. “I’ve been mom so long, he forgets I have a name. It’s Nan.”

“Hiya,” the girl mumbles. She has brown, seal eyes. They stare at her son.

Nan, conscious of her wild hair and dirty hands, crosses to kitchen.

“Tea anyone?”

“Celia’s got an appointment in town Wednesday and I gotta get back to the rig. OK if she stays with you?”

“Well certainly, dear.”

When she comes back into the room, the girl’s eyes are wet, though she’s made no noise.

“I’ll be back to get her

Saturday,” says George.



The girl is eating, rhythmically pushing salad onto fork, fork into mouth.

It is 6 p.m. They have established this: that Celia is from Slave Lake, lived there all her life, her dad is a tool push, she quit high school in Grade 11, works in a flower shop. Met George at the I.G.A., frozen food section.

Slave Lake. Nan was there, George was still in diapers, he fussed and fussed, wouldn’t suck in the moving car, her nipples raw and cracked, Frank throwing her looks, ‘shhh, George, quiet now,’ she whispered.

*Hush little baby don’t say a word
Mama’s gonna buy you a mocking bird.*

The girl stares, fork in mid-air. Has she sung it aloud?

Flustered, Nan stands, searches the fridge for something for dessert, finds two peaches and a bit of custard.

“Would you like some tea?”

“No.”

“It must be a big change for you, the city.”

The girl frowns. “Not really.” She stands, saunters into the living room, plops herself down on the couch, pulls Nan’s Texas Star quilt off the chair beside and wraps herself in it.

“I have dessert.”

“No, thanks,” the girl says. Nan hears the low hum of the T.V.

“If you want more volume, the remote is on the coffee table.”

“I always watch T.V. with the sound off.”

Why bother? Nan thinks, pulling herself from the table and the empty congealing plates, to put away the milk and custard, to clear and wash, to fetch linen for this girl’s bed.



She wanted to call him Kim, from Kipling. Kim Donnelly, the boy who would walk on his wild wild own. But George was her father-in-law’s name and her father-in-law had Parkinson’s. So she acquiesced, stuck a peeling nipple in the boy’s mouth, suckled her secret, her wild child.



For breakfast she makes coddled eggs with cheese, toast with strawberry jam and the last of the butter, tea.

The girl frowns at the egg, pokes a fork inside. Yellow runs down the side of the china egg cup.

“Do you prefer them hard?”

“No.”

“How did you sleep?”

“OK.” The girl pushes back her tangled hair, a copse of hair, Nan thinks.

The clock strikes 8. A tree branch scratches the window. It has started to rain.



Nan sits against her boulder at the top of the hill. A little boy runs through spear grass, flushing a family of partridge. He stops to look at some dandelions. Dent de Lion, tooth of the lion. The boy is about five, red cheeked with a cowlick and a little tail of hair at the back.

‘Are they from real lions?’ George asked stroking the yellow petals.

‘Real lions on their way to Africa. They left their teeth marks on the leaves, see.’

This boy plucks the dandelion. ‘Look,’ Nan wants to

tell him, 'blow here, watch the fluff, see how it floats and dances in the air.'

"Taaaaaylooor," a man calls and the boy's off and running down the hill.

Nan looks at her watch—4:30, time to make supper. The girl may be hungry.



Nan's cheque came this morning. She talked the girl into going to the Co-op with her. "We'll go to Brentwood," she said cheerily, over toast and the very last of the butter. "There's a mall there, you could do some shopping."

The girl shrugged and Nan swallowed her irritation, wanted to say 'show a little enthusiasm, a little spirit.' At least that last girl, Gloria, had a bit of spunk to her but this one, Nan just wants to shake her.

Now Nan smiles in a motherly way as she holds open the door to the Co-op. The girl follows sullenly. Nan waves to Edna on 3, selects a cart, heads down the cereal aisle.

"Is there anything special you like to eat?"

The girl shrugs.

"My George wouldn't eat the whites of his eggs, said they looked like rubber."

"Hmm."

"He was such an imaginative child. Loved to finger-paint, I could set him up on the kitchen table with his paints and he'd paint, oh, all sorts of things—suns and moons and horses and dragons and princes..."

"Oh yeah?"

Nan stops the cart at the dairy case—Alpha butter on sale, she'll buy two and freeze one, a block of past-due cheddar marked down a third, milk.

"I drink 2 per cent, but perhaps you'd prefer skim? Or whole?"

"Doesn't matter." The girl picks at her nails. She has peeled strips of skin from around the cuticles, the flesh there is red and raw.

Nan turns the cart towards meats.

"I don't eat a lot of meat, chicken mostly. I thought I'd make a Moroccan stew for dinner."

"What?"

She negotiates a mother and two children.

"Moroccan stew. George loves it. But perhaps you don't care for spicy food."

"Hmm." The girl peels skin from nail.

"Maybe I'll pick up some bacon, for breakfast. Do you eat bacon?"

The girl looks at Nan vacantly. "No," she says. "I don't generally eat breakfast."

"You should have told me, dear," says Nan, resenting the coddled eggs, the waste of butter.

"I don't feel too good sometimes." The girl peels off more skin. A dot of blood appears, rounds. Nan looks at her, the roundness of her face, breasts, belly.



When she was pregnant, Nan had a dream. In the dream, she is walking through her father's field. The hay is neatly stooked, bits of yellow litter the brown. It's a sunny day with a little breeze, no hint yet of the coming winter. Ahead is the house, small and white. Chickens scratch beside the fence. Frank leans on the gate. Nan feels a flutter in her belly. Rubbing it absently, she walks toward him. A wind tickles the backs of her legs. The flutter comes again, a little faster now. Nan stretches arms over her head, feels the good tightening of muscle. The flutter hardens, a pushing now, and Nan thinks it's not time, it's not nearly time and she walks faster, toward the man, but it's not Frank, this man who watches her, this man she wants. And the pushing comes harder, faster as if to burst her skin and then the house recedes, the man fades and she is on her back in the dirt, bits of hay scratching through her shift, a pushing, throbbing pain inside. And as she watches, her belly skin stretches, a hole appears, a tiny finger, clawing.



"How's she doing?"

"George! Where are you calling from?"

"Can you put her on, ma?"

"She's sleeping right now. Do you want me to wake her?"

"No, let her sleep. Look, I should be able to get back earlier, maybe Thursday or Friday."

"Will you stay the weekend?"

"Doubt it. She's not, uh, feeling too good."

"Nothing serious, I hope, dear."

"Guess not."

"How are things up there?"

"OK"

"How's the weather?"

"Snow this morning."

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“My goodness. You’ve got your winter things, I hope.”

“Yeah.”

“It looks like we’re in for a shower here, thunder and...”

“Look, ma, I gotta go, tell her I’ll try and call tomorrow, okay?”

Click.



A cold, gray sky presses down, wind tosses the heads of her marigolds about. Nan is covering them. The radio said frost tonight. She hums:

*And if that mockingbird don't sing
Mama's gonna buy you a diamond ring.*

The girl is sleeping on the couch, under her Texas star quilt.

Nan’s knees creak as she bends, draping flowers with plastic. Protection. For how long? One day. Maybe two. Above her, wind whips the naked poplar branches.

Nan hoists herself, old petard, up. Her knees threaten to buckle.

Drops of rain.

My Kim works on an oil rig.



There is a self-help article in *The Globe and Mail*.

On making lists of things
that make you happy.

**Pressed
against the wall
behind the Co-op, hard
wood rubbing back,
pushing her tongue into his
mouth, her hips into his,
sweet/sour smell of spoiling
fruit in the garbage
beside or was it in
his mouth?**

Nan writes:

- 1) *Flowers: wild, particularly crocuses, Solomon's seal, wood lily, fairy candelabra, fireweed*
- 2) *Books*

She was reading *A Member of the Wedding* the summer

she met Frank Sean Michael Donnelly. That summer. Pressed against the wall behind the Co-op while her father shopped for fertilizer, hard wood rubbing back, pushing her

tongue into his mouth, her hips into his, sweet/sour smell of spoiling fruit in the garbage beside or was it in his mouth?



The girl has woken. Her hair is a wren’s nest around her face, her eyes bruised-looking.

“Tea?”

“No, thanks. Did George call?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“Yesterday afternoon.”

“Is he going to call back?”

“He didn’t say.”

The girl sighs, crosses to the couch, picks up Nan’s guide to Nose Hill Park.

“You might like to go up there sometime, it’s very restful, I can’t tell you the number of times I’ve seen mule and white-tailed deer.”

“Is that right,” says the girl.



Nan empties her compost bucket into the community bin. Egg shells, tea bags, carrot and cucumber peelings tumble out. The smell, overpowering, of rot, mould, sweaty mushroom smell—an old tent...

They are sleeping outside, she and her boy. She can feel his heat, her little engine, hotpot, her curious George.

They lie on their backs, listening to the curri-curri of crickets. Watching the moon rise. A gibbous moon.

In Grade 10 he decided he didn’t want to go to university. He signed up for carpentry and power mechanics. Frank would have been pleased.



Last week Nan watched a woman break down in the Co-op, fruits and vegetables section. Her bangs covered her eyes. One of her shoes was untied. At first, Nan thought she was examining the melons. But then she saw the shaky exhalation. Noticed the private, delicate movement of head and shoulder. Watched as people reached past the woman for cantaloupe, watermelon or honeydew, watched as the woman, girl really, straightened slowly, pushed back her bangs, looked briefly to Nan. Nan looked away, tears, too, in her eyes. Why, if she could cry for that girl, can she not cry for this one?



At the crest of the hill, she waits for the girl. Who saunters, stops, huffs and puffs. Nan thinks, 'I slung hash, every day on my feet, we needed the money, I worked until a week before...'

The sky's a cloudy blue. In a sheltered spot, behind a rock in an aspen grove, it could almost be summer.

The girl catches up, stops, breathes in heavy, ragged gulps.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes."

"I'll slow down."

"Did George call again?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Damn him!"

"He'll be back in two days."

"Right."

"He's a responsible boy."

"He's not a boy!"

"No, I suppose not," Nan mutters. "Let's go to the end of this path, there's a big rock, an erratic we can rest against."

Nan continues on, slower, at the girl's pace, but the girl stays stubbornly behind, her breath on Nan's neck, accusing.

At the top of the hill, sun feathers across the meadow, a small wind pushes at the grass. Nan's stone stands in a pool of sun. She slides down its warm surface. The girl collapses across from her.

"I gotta go downtown tomorrow. What bus do I take?"

"I can drive you."

"It's okay."

"Don't be silly."

"I want to take the bus!"

"Alright. But I know."

The girl folds up her body, picks at nail and skin.

"What are you going to do?"

"Dunno."

"Is it his?"

"Yes!"

"Are you planning to have it? Are you going to get married? Where will you live?"

She shrugs.

"Don't you think you'd better decide?"

A cloud races across the sun, the girl peels a piece of skin at the edge of her thumbnail, peels it down until it reddens, dots, trickles blood, while Nan questions, watches herself question, the girl peeling, her father roaring at Frank Sean Michael Donnelly, 'She's a good girl, my Nan, you son of a b...' shhshh closing her ears, trying not to hear, please be quiet, quiet, we're gonna get married OKAY SHUT UP JUST SHUT THE FUCK UP.

The girl wrenches herself from the earth, runs down the hill, her hair unravelling behind her.



They are gone.

In her dream, Nan is feeding her baby.

Frank comes in from work,

crosses to the stove, sees the

dirty plates in the sink, the

cold stove,

stomps out.

Nan follows him, the baby's

diaper cold and damp against her

hip. It is evening.

Nan pulls the baby

tighter, scans the horizon

for Frank. A cold wind whips her

dress against her legs. "Frank," she calls, "I meant to

do them," she screams. "I was just going to make it!"

Now she is back in the house. A fire roars in the grate, George sleeps on the rug in front. Nan puts down her book, goes to him, rubs his hot cheek, picks him up, fastens him to her breast. The clock strikes 12. He sucks, gentle at first, then fiercely. Nan pushes him to her breast, feels herself ebbing, her boy expanding.



In the dusk at the top of Nose Hill, clouds wheel across the sky. The flowers are gone now, only dry stalks of goldenrod, thistle and broomweed remain. Nan watches a family—man, woman, boy and cocker spaniel—cross the skyline. They take turns throwing a stick, the dog fetches and returns, fetches and returns. The man throws the stick one last time. The dog disappears down the hill. She waits with that family poised on the edge of the rise. Waits with them until they trail down after the dog. She can't see them, only hears their fading calls, "Here, Lion, come on, boy. Let's go home now. It's time to go home."

Elizabeth Haynes, co-winner of the 1995 Western Magazine Award for fiction, has published in literary magazines, on CBC radio, and in the anthologies *Alberta Rebound*, *Boundless Alberta* and *Fresh Tracks: Writing the Western Landscape*. Her first collection of stories, *Speak Mandarin Not Dialect*, was nominated for this year's WGA Best Short Fiction Award.