

A STRANGE MADELEINE

My paternal grandfather was a dentist and set up his practice before the First World War in his parents' home at 222 Linthorpe Road in Middlesbrough. The house had a workshop at the bottom of the garden for the dental technician and, eventually, he opened satellite surgeries. His parents later moved away from the town centre but the rooms over the dental surgery remained residential for decades and my widowed grandmother, 'Nana', lived there when I was a child.

Our dentist uncles took over the practice and would let us play downstairs, making the surgery chairs go up and down, and we would look through glass cupboard doors at plaster casts of teeth and pink new dentures. There is still a particular smell in dental surgeries which takes me back to childhood; my madeleine, I suppose, a strange one.

The house is one of the places where my own memories start. We would visit Nana in the upstairs flat for tea or Sunday lunch. Her sitting room was on the first floor at the front and there was a bay window with an armchair where she would sit to watch the street below. Curtains hung on a pole to block the bay off from the rest of the room and we children could hide there in our tiny, cold, private space as if we were backstage in a theatre. In front of the curtains was Nana's sofa, close to a gas fire and with contrasting textures, soft and squashy itself but covered with a bristling, checked rug that features in family picnic photographs. She had a huge radio next to the sofa, a mahogany box with a lighted dial and round Bakelite knobs. At the other end of the sofa was a low, wooden-framed chair with caned sides and back and a rectangular brown velvet seat cushion. Nana kept old

calendars under the cushion and my first action on visiting her was always to burrow into the chair so that I could see the familiar photographs of seascides, woodland, bridges, and country towns and check that they were all there, just as I remembered them.

Nana liked to sing. For some reason, I used to think *The Hippopotamus Song* went way back. Before I checked, I thought it was one of those long Victorian story songs. Maybe my grandmother had been taught it as a girl and maybe she got my Dad and his brothers to sing it at Sunday lunches to recall their childhoods? We children would half-listen to the grown-ups talking round the table. We could never understand why the adults didn't like the chocolate biscuit cake and Carnation Milk ice-cream she served at those lunches. We loved them.

But digging into the sources of my memories turns up the trivia that the song was from the 1950s, from a revue in London. And I'm in another world of long purple suede gloves lying on a white tablecloth by a black beaded evening bag and my mother, strapless, laughing up at my father. In a world where cigarette smoke curls up over a dinner jacket to a smiling, blond, Brylcreemed head. And maybe they heard it on a rare trip to London and came back to sing 'Mud, mud, glorious mud ...' at the top of their voices, chasing us children into the bathroom, us giggling not only at the song but at the silliness of parents.

Or maybe it was later, because the song went on into the sixties, my uncles cheering us up, doing their best with 'Mud, mud ...', and 'I'm a gnu, I'm a gnu ...'. I can remember that feeling of constriction in the throat, looking down, not wanting

to laugh but the giggling being pulled out of me and flowering into joy at thoughts of the bold hippopotamus and his haunting refrain, at the idea that ‘no-one ever wants to court a warthog’.

I don’t remember lunch at Nana’s again after my father’s death. We must have gone, surely? The family still got together, of course, but my mother and us children were different now. We needed jolly along.

687 words

Biographical note

Kate Venables is a doctor. Other journals where her poetry and short fiction have appeared include *The Frogmore Papers*, *Lighthouse*, *Brittle Star*, and *Shooter Literary Magazine*. She is currently completing a memoir.