

Cold, Cold Woman

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My grandmother lived to the age of 101 and she was a smoker, that shows you the power of grudges, my mother always says, she was a cold, cold woman, my mother says, and I try to think of her again now while I lie with my head turned away from the train window, where it's so cold the water leaking into the top of the frame is making an icy rim against the glass, I'm alone in the compartment except for my school trunk and my satchel with all my books and pens and pencils, which makes it colder, of course, being alone, my mother used to travel with me when I was in primary school and it was better when I could sleep in her lap, but now the sky outside the train window seems too full of stars, like I'm really on some boat at the end of the world, like Shackleton, the man Miss Harvey taught us about whose ship sunk 70 degrees south of the equator in blue-black water, the whole world gets its weather from ice that forms in the sea, it's freezing in here, it feels cold enough for Antarctica, all the millions of icy stars, and finally there's my grandmother in my head, sitting in her chair, always wrapped in a blanket no

matter the weather, the point of her cigarette flaring in the room she always kept dark, she had two blankets, one blue, one red, and sometimes she'd use them both, sucking at the cigarette like it was the only source of warmth in the world, she was the quietest person I've ever known,

What are you thinking about, I'd ask her, while she just sat in her chair all day in the dark room,

Who says I'm thinking, she'd ask me back, and I suppose that's kind of how I feel right now, it doesn't feel like I'm thinking it's so cold, it's like my thoughts have slowed all the way down, they've frozen up and the pictures inside my head have gone dark, someone pulled the plug on the carousel, I guess, I'm saying words to myself like Bathwater, like Hot Sweet Tea, but it's all wet kindling, nothing is catching, and I know if I move, if I could just sit up and move to get my trunk and open the latches there is another blanket inside there and my school coat with the thick wool, but my feet are dead as ice blocks in my shoes and my fingers burn in the knuckles as I hold myself and shiver, a cold, cold woman,

So how did she get that way, I asked my mother, maybe a year after my grandmother had died, back at home for the school holidays, the last few days, when I'd start to feel twisted in my stomach, sad already about leaving, my grandmother's room empty for the first time, the curtains open, and my mother told me about when my grandmother was a girl, the same town I was born in and my mother was born in but in the past, my mother called it a different time but it sounded like a different world, a far-off place like the South Pole where the rules were strange and cruel, my mother looking so much like my grandmother as she spoke, her whole face pinched around the ember of her cigarette, and she

told me that when she was a girl, my grandmother was very naughty,

Like me, I asked, which was really a joke but my mother didn't smile,

Naughtier, she said, and it looked like she didn't want to say any more but it also looked like she did want to tell me, finally, so naughty, actually, that when she was about your age they had to take her to a special hospital,

What kind of—

They don't have them anymore, she said, it was a different time, she said again, and then my mother who never touched me except to brush my hair held my hand as she spoke, she was dressed up like she was going to church, she said, petticoat and a hat, but then as soon as she got to the sanatorium two sisters made her take off all her clothes,

Even her underwear,

Yes, and they took her to a small room where there were no chairs, just two more sisters in their white-white uniforms, and a blanket lying on the floor, folded into a big triangle, and the sisters told her to lie down but she didn't want to, she said she could feel something was wrong, the blanket was all dark and wet,

Why,

They had soaked it in ice,

Wh—

They used to think it was good for you, and then my mother explained how the two sisters took my grandmother's arms and the other sisters came forward and they took her legs and they put her into the blanket, where the cold was an electric current, a blowtorch all over her skin, and the sisters folded her in the blanket, swaddled her like a baby, she said she couldn't breathe because it was like swallowing

blades, she felt the blanket sticking to her skin and the whole world was pain, the blood was aching in her veins even as her heart started to beat slower, and slower, my mother said, and then she let go of my hand and she went into the kitchen and lit another cigarette, and I knew we were finished talking about it, and the first thing I did was go back to my grandmother's room, where the curtains were open and she was gone, but I imagined her, somehow seeing her more clearly than ever before, swimming out on her own in the darkest and coldest of seas, her small head bobbing between the giant, jagged sheets, her raw heart, her lungs, I imagined her reaching out and even touching the other shore, and how when she came back, she never warmed up, not really, and how different the world must have seemed to her, and herself, how different, how ugly, when they finally let her out of the blanket, and now the ice from the top of the window has grown down the side of the glass in a skim, a smeary shutter on all the bright stars, and the train compartment feels very dark, and deep, and I finally stop shivering, I'm just numb, silent and numb, a ship sinking down, down under the dark ice.