1) What colour will my Nana be? Wispy little bird of a thing. Slight and steely. Twinkly. Blue eyed. Sky. Breath of fresh air. Aquamarine. Maybe?

2) Nana

Visiting with Nana,

Sweet lady of few words,

Sparrow-like little bird,

Tiny with steely strength,

Bearer of seven,

Sits with me in silence,

Punctuated with “Do it like this”,

Then a snap, pop of pod,

Thumb nudging peas from seam,

One…two….three…

Collected in chipped china bowl

“Taste one”. Sweet, green, earthy.

Twinkly eye, knowing smile,

“You’re grandad grew those.”

“From t’allotment”

3) The Pantry

A vestige of wartime hard times

Of make do and mend

A cold cave, larder, pantry,

Collections of jars and cans,

Homemade pickles from the allotment,

Beetroots and pickled onions,

Bootleg potato wine and homemade brew

A thin film of flour and sugar dust

A distinct smell of cold tile, baking flour and earth,

As a small child I could not see above the shelves,

Then, neither could she at 4foot 11 and a spit

Older, I am in awe,

Forethought and readiness for a rainy day or tough week

When wages don’t cover groceries and my Grandad’s bet.

A vestige of be prepared

Waste not want not

Make do and mend

A lost art not passed on,

Appreciated too late

For a generation spoiled by excess

4) Vera

My aunt had sent a message on my birthday saying how bittersweet it was as it was also the anniversary of my nana passing away too. My 21st. I asked my father to tell me about his mother. I told him I had been thinking about her on my birthday and the weeks following. Too shy to tell him about the sense of visiting. “She was always happy. Always smiling. Always singing” he said. “Never stopped singing”. And just like that, where before I remembered silence, now I recalled her voice. Her trills and non-descript tra-la-la-las. Wartime music “We’ll meet again” danced over me.

1) What colour will my great-grandmother be? Christiana. Burns. Auburn. Fiery creature. Scary. Still. Unmoved. Scarred. Rust. Maybe.

2) One Eyed Scarred Creature with Hair the Colour of Flame

Great-Grandma Burns sat on her throne,

One eye with glass implant,

Missing eye was taken when she was a little girl,

Ran into a rose bush.

One leg half torn,

Legend has it, she was on her way to my aunt’s wedding on the bus,

Slipped and dragged under it.

Tore flesh to the bone.

3) Visits were infrequent and filled with scared anticipation,

Anticipation of this one eyed scarred creature with hair the colour of flame,

Sat on her throne, she did not move.

Held a stash of sweets in an ivory handled knitting bag by her knee,

The offered sweets coaxed me to come closer,

Or else I would not have come near,

Would have peered from behind my mother’s leg,

4) Legend has it, the creature did not see or speak to the daughter she bore,

One daughter of ten, some full and some half,

Girl with the Betty Davis eyes,

Thrown out in shame,

When pregnant out of wedlock,

I don’t know the rest

1) What colour shall my grandma be? Lavender. Contrary. Muted mauve. Unhappy. Sad. Repressed. Lost. Bitter. Vengeful Violet. Maybe?

2) I Knit and I Wonder

Left handed like my brother,

She showed me how to knit,

Hands moving over yarn and needle,

Lightning fast from repetition,

Did she select yarn,

Or pick up whatever thread she could lay her hands on,

Desperate to keep going,

I wonder…..?

Knitted, crocheted, multi-many coloured cushions,

Doilies, pillows and throws,

Even cushions for his car,

Occupational therapy I wonder…..?

For days sat at home,

Staring at the TV,

Side by side,

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“She never let me in the kitchen” my mother says. “Didn’t want us in her way”. Never told her “I love you” until a time when she is confused and my mother does not know if she is talking to her or someone else in her distant memory. “She’s cold” says my father, “not happy unless someone else is unhappy”. Harsh words. Hurtful as she is still my blood. Legend has it that she has been visiting a psychiatrist for as long as I am old. I found this out when she cracked. Left the house in her nightie in the middle of the night. They found her wandering, confused in nearby fields. Another night. Crisis. Lost it. Picked up a knife and stabbed my granddad in the back of the neck as he fixed the washing machine. A sharp inch from his spine. I don’t know why. Story goes that my uncle took my granddad to the home of a doctor that lived nearby. Perhaps, afraid of scandal and police. Scary stuff this. Don’t get it. Don’t understand why. What am I missing? Grandad D, always loving and gentle to me. “Controlling and suffocating” others report. She was admitted to a psychiatric ward. I was going through my mental health nurse training at the time. Awkward as a friend and fellow trainee worked on the unit she was admitted to. Not keen on her knowing family business. Knowing what happened. Probably knowing more than me. Negotiated and acknowledged confidentiality and the unusual situation and the demand for ethical practice. When I visited she was there but wasn’t. My mother told me she was having visions of her dead father. A man I know nothing about and have never met. Visions that came to her. Don’t know if they scared her or comforted her. On visiting I took her for bloodwork one day. Startled saw the doctor had written “psychotic depression” on the blood requisition. Angered, why did the blood technician need to know that? Were they issuing a warning? “What was the relevance?” I asked them. I asked for privacy. Demanded an explanation from the trainee doctor. Psychotic Depression is big. Scary. How did this happen? Was she always like that? What did this mean for me, for my genes? What had this meant for my mother? Grandma returned home after tweaks of medication and promises of respite and breaks from my Grandad. I don’t understand why.

4) Legend has it she didn’t love him. Told my mother she wished she had the guts to do what she had done and leave him years ago. Shame, sadness and anger at this. Sad broken family of fissures. Two of four children have broken ties. Did not speak with them for 20 plus years. Don’t know why. Sadness, anger, fissures. Invited to the hospital when Grandad was sick and withered. Declined and did not show. Denied and deceived of one last goodbye by the publishing of the wrong funeral date. My Uncle’s idea. Intentional bitterness. Sad. Anger. Fissures. Alien to me. I don’t know why

“My mum says “I never want that to happen to us!”.

5) She’s disturbing the other residents at night. She’s shouting. Screaming. Help! Help! She won’t get out of bed. My mother reports the conversation with the mental health social worker. “We talked about her life. How she’s had it rough. How she’s slit her wrists, taken an overdose and stabbed your granddad”.

She asked about your Uncle George, namesake. Said he’s been kicking off at them again, like he was at the other place”. She said “He’s intimidating isn’t he?” Flat statement, not really a question. Inquiring observation. To be honest the social worker said I’ve had to tell him, that we’re not here to be abused and if he wants to keep coming to visit……. Trailing off. Sharon is scared of him. She continues. Yes she is. You’ve got to understand that she’s been with him since he was fifteen. She’s never known anything else. He’s controlling. Penny drops. Was he violent and abusive too? Vicious cycle. Abuse. Temper. Control. What happened? My heart sinks, drops, and breaks when I write, read, think, re-read this.

What colour will my mother be? Brightest Red. Scarlet A. Brightest Red for the shade of No.7 lipstick she has worn since the ‘80’s. Maybe?

2) My mother. A bit of a bugger, by all accounts.

3) “I Made This For You”

Handmade gifts.

Thoughtful.

Vulnerable.

Unappreciated.

He carved a bowl out of wood.

A solid piece imagined into a hollow circle.

Smooth and even,

Grain on show,

How long it took,

An offering from his man cave in the garage,

Presented with pride to her,

“What’s that!?” she said.

She said.

“He put her on a pedestal” she said

“Wanted her to be a lady” she said

“Wanted her to be something she’s not” she said

“Wanted her to be like his sisters” she said

“Wanted her to cook and clean and sew” she said

“But that’s not me” she said

Fissures and cracks

What would you do?

My mother asks

When I told them before,

They didn’t care.

One said No thanks

The other “maybe” but didn’t go.

Should I tell them?

Last time I was scared

But now I’m not

“What would you do?’

I’d tell them

You can’t change them

But you have to do what you have to do

To live with yourself

No regrets

If they don’t come

That’s up to them

Yeah. That’s what I think

Thanks love

Help! Help me! Help!

She screams

1) What colour shall my great-grandmother Lily be? Ladylike. Contorted into etiquette. Pristine white gloves. Colonial. Lily White. Maybe?

Lily

2)Lemon drops,

Fizzy sherberts,

Humbugs and chocolate limes.

Chrystals on the window ledge

Making rainbow spectrum shadows on the ceiling

Amber beads and a second husband resembling the BFG.

3) Legends of born in India,

Father in the British Army.

I would like to trace her steps

Close to the Taj Mahal

A great gift of love

I want to know, what did she see?

What was it like?

How does one adjust, re-acclimate?

Records say 1 of 10

Returning a lone survivor but not for sure

4) A lady,

Handbag never left her side

Oil of Ulay everyday until her 81st year

Coiffured until she began to slip away

Boiled sweets sticky and forgotten at the bottom of her handbag

Retrieved by a son who idolized her

“Knitting…mmmm..it’s a *Dark Art. Did you know?”*

Psychotherapist

“You gotta be suspicious of a craft that makes something out of nothing. *Out of knots”*

Occupational Therapist

Hummingbird

Flighty little fighter,

Works so hard just to survive,

But no-one would know it just by looking at you,

Spunky,

Defending her territory,

Single-minded about her goal,

Survival. Sustenance. Home.

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She’s disturbing the other residents at night. Screaming. Help! Help me! Help!

4) How Dare He!

I can’t sleep.

I’m hot with rage.

Raaaaaggggee.

Like cinders in my belly that won’t extinguish.

Where a single gust of memory can re-ignite them, making them white hot.

Rage.

Like a deep howl from a primordial mother.

From deep down in the sacrum rising up to the solar plexus.

Raaaaaaagggge. Throat. Voice.

How dare he!

How dare he entice and pluck her from the cold boring comfort of her husband and children.

Rage that I knew she was looking to be plucked. Rhymes with ………

How dare he!

How dare he raise his fist, slam, squeeze her throat.

How dare he!

How dare he take my breath,

Unable to gasp for pain,

Guttural, real, hard, sore pain.

How dare he!

How dare he sneer at me with knowing arrogance.

*I know you know and there’s nothing you can do about it.*

*She’s mine. No-one elses.*

He made sure of that.

Waited until the deal is clinched and the rent contract signed,

Before launching the first punch.

Sealing the first bloody lip.

How dare he!

How dare he make her beg for mercy,

Then later beg for forgiveness.

How dare he!

How dare he shame her with bruises that she can’t explain to her children,

So she hides from them. “I can’t see you this week”.

How dare he terrorize, exploit, dominate, isolate, shame her.

Leave her on tenterhooks awaiting his return.

How dare he manipulate so she loves him even still.

How dare he!

How dare he slander, shame, coerce, threaten and scar.

*She’s a drunk. She’s mad. She’s a liar.*

How dare he draw her back after leaving once, twice, too many times.

How dare he!

How dare he shrug and move on to his next

Victim, prey, woman, wife, mother, child, daughter.

How dare he!

One braid in silence

5) Janet

After 14 years of beatings, she woke up. She contacted a solicitor, told them her plan. She told her father what had been happening. The next day they found a small flat across from the park, away from Him. Her father put down a deposit and the first month’s rent. The Landlord said “No Pets”. So she tearfully advertised for a new home for her beloved Pitbull-Staffy Cross. She contacted the estate agent. “I’m leaving you” she told him. “You’ll never dare” he sneered. But she did. The house went up for sale. Finally, she walked across town with rubbish bags of her few possessions. She walked to freedom, past the statue where my great uncle died for freedom, past the hospital where I was born and the park where I used to play with my cousins. Finally, she walked away. My Brave Mum.

Holding Hummingbirds in my hands

I asked my husband if I could share with him the last piece of writing about my mother. Feeling brave. Asking for love, reassurance, understanding and forgiveness. Yes, he said but first let me tell you about a dream I had last night. I dreamt you were catching hummingbirds in your hands. They came to you and I watched you hold each one gently in cupped hands. Then, one by one you released them gently.