

## PICKLED ONIONS

*Jessie Davidson*

For as long as I can remember, Grandad would send us a jar of pickled onions at the closing of summer. He never gave anyone the recipe. It was his and no one else's.

In the holidays when I came to stay, I would lie on the living room floor reading *Harry Potter*. Sunlight trickled down on me through the cracks of the venetian blinds. The room was golden and warm, and it smelt like Nana's perfume from the 60s. Outside, Grandad sat on his weathered park bench, peeling a pile of onions that would lean its weight against the old brick house. The sun glared down on his aged skin and he would smile. Everyone in our family got a large jar of pickled onions. Grandad never forgot anyone.

They were better than the store-bought ones you get. Biting into one sets off a symphony of spices, coating your tastebuds with its music. Dad would make rules about how many we were allowed per day. But I knew he always ate a few more than he was allowed. I can't say that I didn't do the same though. Dad was just sneakier than I was.

When Nana died, Grandad made two jars of pickled onions for everyone. It distracted him. He bottled all of his pain and grief into those jars of onions. As hard as we tried, Grandad never talked about his feelings. Silence is how he copes, and who we were to take that away from him. Nana was always the firm, chatty one. She gave out her love with buckets of nails. The year Nana died my Dad didn't eat any pickled onions.

As the years peeled away, Grandad's house smelt less and less of Nana's cigarettes. Her perfume that used to roam freely through the house had walked out the door. Grandad spent most of his time in his elaborate garden. Caring for his beans, tomatoes, strawberries, lettuce, cucumbers and onions. He hardly ever came inside. We got three jars of pickled onions that year.

When we came to Auckland to help him move, Grandad didn't speak. He watched quietly as we boxed the laughing photos away, untangled jewellery, and stacked boxes of memories in Aunt Lee's car. Before we left, Grandad stood with Nana on the driveway. He hugged her boxed ashes tightly to his chest. Tears fell freely from his exhausted eyes. Quietly, he said goodbye to the home he raised a family in. Then, without saying a word, he turned and made his way to our old Toyota Land Cruiser. He cradled Nana in his lap the entire way to

Napier. Grandad didn't have time to grow onions that year. We got a box of chocolates instead.

Grandad has a small veggie garden behind his new house. He grows lots of beans and potatoes, a few tomatoes, a lettuce or two, a bunch of strawberries and no onions. He is too old to make pickled onions now so it's no use growing them. His hands shake too much when he tries to peel them. He struggles to hear. His eyesight has disappeared. He had his driver's license taken away from him last year. He's stuck in his unfamiliar house, only getting out on Friday nights for dinner at Lee's house and Sunday mornings to go supermarket shopping. Nana's ashes sit in his room on her old vanity. He still says goodnight to her.

Last summer my brother Callum asked Grandad for the pickled onion recipe. Grandad was silent for a moment, and then sighed. "Well, I suppose someone will need to feed your Dad when I've carked it." He handed Callum a pen. I watched as my brother eagerly wrote down everything that came out of Grandad's old and weary heart.

We grow onions now. Bucket loads. In the holidays when Callum comes home from uni, I can look out of my bedroom window and I'll see him wearing a wide brimmed straw hat. The sun beats down on his freckled skin, and he's peeling a pile of onions that lean against our cream coloured, suburban home. Callum sends everyone in our family a jar of pickled onions.

Except for Grandad, who always gets two jars.