

Small Hands

Written by Tom Flanagan

Illustration by Natàlia Pàmies Lluís

I slipped my hand into the jar—a glass-blown oblong shaped like a pig—to reach for the stacks of biscuits my grandmother had put there. Penguin bars, Wagon Wheels, tiny packets of crisps that fit perfectly into equally tiny lunchboxes, and the most prized find as far as my sister and I were concerned: Flakes. For a nine-year old, few things in my life were as satisfying as visiting my grandparents and their snack jar.

We had lived outside of the UK for most of our lives, so coming to see my grandparents wasn't just a reunion of family, but a portal into a food culture we'd never really known. When we arrived, we'd rush to hug our grandparents, before rushing even faster towards the pig jar.

Contrary to what anyone might interpret as a pointed realisation of greed, the snack-filled pig jar actually alluded to something much simpler: my grandmother just loved pigs.

The opening of the jar was tiny; fit only for the small hands that were so often the ones wanting to squeeze through. Pulling one of the chocolate bars out felt like a surprise every time, even though my sister and I were intentional in everything we did that was snack-related. I remember the biscuity and slightly creamy Penguin bar being my go-to, while the Wagon Wheel with its marshmallow texture, was what I'd pick when I was feeling adventurous.

We coveted the Flake most though; not because it was the superior chocolate, but because it was the one we often only had with our grandparents when they took us to the beach. We'd walk down to the stony shoreline, my grandmother's walking stick on one side of her, while one of us tugged at her hands on the other.

By the water, the ice cream van was waiting and within it, the pinnacle of English seaside sweets: the 99 Flake. A soft-serve ice cream in a cone, with a crumbly, melty Flake stuck through it. For most children and people in the UK this wasn't much of a novelty, but for us it was a highlight.

I'd never had a Flake until my grandmother bought me one. It was just an ordinary chocolate, but then it's always the little things that make up a memory.



As the years went on, those trips became more infrequent. We visited yearly but not as much as we used to. We were getting older and busier, and they were just getting older. Flakes by the beach became Flakes in the jar when walking down the promenade became too much for them. These soon became Flakes we couldn't reach as our hands got too big for the jar, which eventually became ones we never saw when they had to move out of the house as my grandmother fell ill.

I was 19 when she died. I'd said goodbye in the days before, and I found out as I boarded a one-way flight to Canada. I still remember seeing her in the home where she was cared for. There was a glassy expression in her eyes, the kind that appears when something in you starts to fade. She was such a proud woman my mum would tell me and she wouldn't want me to remember her there. It's not a memory that leaves me, but it's also not the one of her that lingers the most. That I saved for the snacks and the chocolates; the ones I hope are sitting in the home of whoever ended up with the jar she loved so much.

When you've never really known someone the way you wanted to, you spend your time finding the words to bring them into definition and back to life. I can't always do that on paper; not in the way reaching into the pig-shaped jar and finding a Penguin bar can, or reminiscing about sitting on a bench by the sea, my little legs hanging over the edge waiting for my ice cream to arrive.

We celebrate food as meals and dishes, but the in-betweens are the things that keep us going. Snacks—the ones I've known here—have always been celebrations of the few times I got to spend with my grandparents. We were abroad and they didn't have much, but come every visit, the pig jar would be full of bite-sized treats and we'd leave with little goody bags; filled up with treats and handwritten notes to remember our time by.

To this day, when the inevitable conversation about what the best chocolate is comes up, I still say a Flake. Nobody agrees and rarely understands, but that only serves to reinforce my feelings.

Somewhere in that crumbling sweetness, I'm still trying to hold onto a memory. Not of eating, but of times by the beach with her; my small hand in hers, the other clutching a swirl of vanilla and a Flake.

You don't realise the things that stay with you until they're gone. Flakes, for all their qualities, don't bring people back. But like the other snacks I used to share with my grandmother, they are a quiet reminder that even as I eat them now, we never really say goodbye.

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