

I inhale sharply, tighten my grip on the birchwood handle, then make my first cut. Slicing a firm line the full length of the flaccid belly, I am immediately hit by the pungent stench of innards. My jaw clenches. My breathing changes. *Lightly, lightly my child*, Nana P's voice urges. I proceed, now sucking shallow pockets of air, being careful not to activate my sinuses. A very slight whistling sound resonates through my gritted teeth.

The exhilaration of weighing in with the heaviest snapper fish in the competition still pulsing through my veins, I must concentrate hard on keeping my lunch down. Just one more whiff of fish entrails and the half-digested mince and cheese pie I selected from the Bay Bakery at 6am this morning will be expelled for all to see. But this is not going to happen. Not today. I would sooner swallow it back down than be seen to lose my composure. Especially under the scrutinising eyes of the Willams' brothers. They would get a real kick out of seeing me fail. Of course they are feeling sore, this is my very first fishing competition and I have already stripped them of one title today. They don't realise that I'm not interested in trophies or any other accolades, and I'm not here today to prove them inferior or to 'get their goat' as my Nana P used to say - that's just a bonus.

Nana P had encouraged me year after year to enter this competition, but I always managed to find an excuse. Performing in front of others is an intolerable form of torture for me. Some might say I have a pathological fear, but I would simply describe it as the one activity I despise above all others. Since Nana's untimely death I had felt an urgency brewing inside me. I had just one life and I didn't want to waste it. Suddenly my actions had purpose, and I was determined to move forward and face my fears. When I spotted the annual flyer on the marine notice board, I had signed up right then and there for the contest. I would not allow myself an escape option.

Apparently it was my birth that promoted the renaming of my grandparents, Evelyn and Robert, to 'Nana P' and 'Pop P'. Subsequently, 'Poppy' was the first word I uttered, and so the name stuck. It had been a rousing interrogation in the kindergarten playground that had prompted me to question why I didn't have a mum or dad to speak of. At home that same day I was shown photographs of a cheerful cherub with wide curious eyes and a pouty wet mouth, enveloped in the arms of a petite flush-faced woman with dark wavy hair and a broad, beaming smile. Looking past their red-rimmed bloodshot appearance, the woman's eyes were a match for Nana's – large, deep-set, and the same hue as the ocean. A tall, blonde, honey-skinned man glistening with stubble was standing behind with his bare arms cradling his wife and baby daughter. He was gazing over them with a look of complete devotion. There was a warmth in his smile that made me instantly smile too. Despite their apparent euphoria, signs of sleep deprivation simmered just below the surface.

Shortly after the astonishing revelation – that I'd once had, and then lost, a mother and a father – I began to notice that I was being watched. At school the teachers' eyes seemed to follow me everywhere. Some of my friend's parents gave me long lingering looks. Even Nana P and Poppy seemed to be always hovering or lurking nearby. What were they watching for? Was I doing something wrong? I was only 10 months old when they died. They were driving home from the cinema and I was tucked up safely in my cot. Nana P had offered to babysit, which presumably allowed them some much-needed 'couple time'. The details of the accident were not important, Poppy assured me. The decision to claim me and raise me as their own was made 'in a heartbeat' Nana P had said. And no two people on earth could have loved me more.

I had always been fascinated by the pearl pendant that Nana P wore around her neck, and the story of its origins. I can't recall a single day, in all my 16 years, when she wasn't wearing it.

She had discovered the pearl herself in an oyster shell during her first official date with Poppy, many years before I was born. It was perfectly symmetrical and virtually blemish-free. She had gasped so loudly the waiter arrived at their table in seconds. After briefly pondering the odds of discovering a pearl in an oyster shell, it was confirmed to be a very rare find (according to the experts, about 1 in 10,000). The restaurant manager arrived on the scene to request a promotional photo. Then Poppy slipped the bivalve beauty into his pocket where he promised to keep it safe. Nana was so fixated on her new love interest that she completely forgot about the pearl. Six months later Poppy took Nana to dine at the very same restaurant, which was situated along the waterfront and specialized in Italian cuisine. And it was there, following a delicious meal of freshly steamed mussels, eggplant parmigiana and tiramisu that he presented her with the pearl, now fashioned into an exquisite pendant. The gem with its creamy-white iridescent lustre had been fitted with an elegant solid gold clasp. Nana had gasped for a second time. Poppy tenderly enclosed the pendant in the palm of her hand and promised to love, cherish, and take care of her forever. Nana was thrilled to receive the romantic gift which she wore as a necklace, close to her heart, from that day on. The besotted couple were married within the year. And the restaurant manager had the delightful story published in the local paper.

With a history of motion sickness and a general disinterest in all things boat-related, Poppy didn't much care for the sea. He preferred to study its moods and currents from a safe distance. Despite this, he was more than happy to allow Nana P the time and space to indulge her passion for the ocean. Some people may have thought this an odd arrangement, but it worked for them. Drifting across Mercury Bay in her beloved 14ft Sea Nymph runabout, with a fishing rod in her hand and a thermos of tea at the ready kept her calm and centred. It was as though she drew strength from the sea. Poppy often joked with me about Nana P's deep love affair with the ocean and how he simply couldn't compete. There were benefits for

Poppy too though, as he did love to eat fish. In fact, he would happily eat fish morning, noon and night, and snack on it in-between. With Nana P bringing snapper, cod or gurnard home on a near-daily basis, and me fetching him the latest recipe books from the local library, he had garnered much culinary knowledge and had come to view himself as somewhat of an expert in the kitchen. But since Nana's passing, seafood had been off the menu in our household. It just didn't seem right to purchase it from the supermarket after indulging in freshly caught fish for the past two decades – and it just didn't seem right, regardless.

Nana P had been snatched so unexpectedly from our lives. I was in the kitchen packing books into my bag for school, trying to be as quiet as possible so as not to disturb the others who hadn't yet surfaced. It was frosty and frigid outside with the sun barely squinting over the horizon. The bowl of porridge in my stomach was doing a good job of warming my core, but my hands were still white with cold. A chilling sound pierced the air, resonating through the walls and ceiling. It came from somewhere deep and vulnerable. I shuddered, dropped my backpack with a thud and raced down the hall to the bedroom. It was a heart attack that took her in her sleep. That made no sense to us. Nana P had radiated a vibrancy and vigour that belied her years. The doctors assured us that she had passed peacefully and without awareness of what was happening to her. And with Poppy by her side she had not been alone. In the early days of her passing I clung to this information as if my own life depended on it. Whenever I pictured my Nana's last breath I would replay what the doctors had said over and over in my mind like a mantra. She died peacefully... with no awareness of what was happening to her... and no pain. Peaceful. No pain. Poppy by her side. But sometimes this wasn't enough, and I would cry, for hours. Poppy told me it was good to cry, to get it all out.

There had been times when I'd arrived home from school to find Poppy sitting alone by the window, keeping watch over the horizon. He had lost the love of his life and I did not know how to help him. All I could think to do was hug him until his watery eyes cleared, and make us both a cup of tea. Then we would sit, side by side, watching the waves roll and crash against the sand. Occasionally he would sit down on the couch in the living room and simply stare, unblinkingly, through the TV. It was as though he didn't even know I was there. It was a new kind of pain, missing someone who was sitting right next to me.

For the first anniversary of Nana P's death, I had suggested to Poppy that we organize a small ceremony to scatter her ashes from the boat across Mercury Bay. He agreed, as it had been Nana's wish to drift for eternity with the motions of the sea. However, I suspect that he would have preferred a more traditional plot to have her laid to rest. He'd always wanted to keep her safe. I came up with the idea to have a plaque made and attached to the boat in her honour – something tangible and permanent to represent her life. It read:

Evelyn Maree Pearce

“Nana P – The Pearl of the Sea”

Loving Wife, Mother and Grandmother

December 8th 1951 – October 11th 2018

When I first laid eyes on the plaque I was struck by the significance of the dash-line between the two dates. Between her first breath and her last breath, a life – an entire existence – had taken place. And in my mind the dash-line, in its smallness and simplicity, seemed to negate that fact. I must have stared at that dash for close to an hour, determined to make it matter. I had an endless slideshow of memories to recall. My favourites were of the walks we took together, usually on Sundays. We would wander the full length of Buffalo Beach chatting incessantly about my school, my friends, and my goals for the future. She often seemed

amused by the anecdotes and thoughts I shared, but I never felt that she was laughing at me. She never made me feel small. Every now and then something would really tickle her, and her laughter would ring out bright and cheerful like dandelions bursting from the ground. Then I would explode into a snorting, giggling mess, because it wasn't often that you saw a grandmother doubled over, weak at the knees, stumbling around in the sand. And we would continue to set each other off again and again until our ribs hurt and we were forced to pause, mid-walk, and take a few moments to regain ourselves. Looking back, I wish I'd asked her more questions about life before *me*. Still so much of that dash remains a mystery.

I can hear murmurings in the crowd. My stomach lurches two, three times. Even with my head down I recognise who those voices belong to.

“Careful... don't break a nail.” I groan internally. *How original.*

A forced cough and then, “She guts like a girl.”

“Yes she does. So you'd better watch out.” *Good one, Pop.*

A wave of sniggering, an uncomfortable shuffling of feet. My cheeks burn. Tiny hairs bristle the back of my neck and a flood of goose bumps stipple my skin. Then a whispering inside my head, *Don't let them get your goat.*

I lift the thick flap of flesh, exposing the cavity, and pull the entrails out with my gloved hand. Then I scoop out the liver, kidneys and remaining organs with a metal spoon. Next I rinse the carcass thoroughly with the hose provided, flooding the cavity to remove all traces of blood. After patting the snapper dry with a small towel, I then thoroughly dry my ungloved hand ensuring my fingers won't slip on the knife handle. A traitorous blonde tendril escapes my elastic hairband and drapes across my right eye, partially obscuring my vision. I have to resist the urge to tuck it behind my ear. Blonde hair is a unique occurrence in the Pearce household. I've never said as much, but sometimes I feel like the odd one out, an

imposter. I can't resist any longer. I must know if Poppy is watching. I allow myself a single glance upward, and instantly our eyes meet. I feel a surge of relief wash over me.

Due to Poppy's propensity for motion sickness, we had kept a close watch on the marine forecast in order to select a day as close as possible to Nana P's anniversary that promised to have smooth, calm weather conditions. Poppy was very quiet as we headed to the boat ramp and his face looked uncharacteristically pale. His pulse was clicking in his temple, as though a small insect was trapped in there trying to push its way out. I suddenly worried that I was pushing him too far. I knew he would do anything for me, but I didn't know if he was ready to let Nana go. When I spoke to him the night before he had sounded apprehensive about our plans to go out in the boat. I had urged him to come along, saying that I couldn't do it without him. And then the final blow – “It's what Nana would have wanted.” But it was too late to change our plans now, Nana was waiting.

Launching the boat went without a hitch. Poppy parked the car and trailer while I did some final checks and got the outboard motor warmed up. It had been a while, so it choked a bit and coughed a few fumes to begin with. By the time Poppy had returned, the exhaust had cleared, and the motor was running smoothly. He sat on one of the low seats. Being closer to the floor of the boat we predicted would cause him less disturbance. As we idled alongside the wharf, I noticed him gazing out past the lichen-dappled fishing boats returning from an arduous stint at sea, past the abandoned dinghies anchored in the harbour gently rocking themselves to sleep, and out towards the setting sun, a misty orange-pink, rapidly shrinking below the horizon. He must have been deep in thought.

Standing to face the cool headwind I steadily increased speed until the boat was on a level plane. The wind began to pick up and the surface of the water was no longer glassy, but ruffled and wrinkled. I could see white caps dotting the bay further out. I pressed the throttle

forward and headed out of the harbour, past Shakespeare Cliff and beyond Buffalo Bay until I reached the small islands off the coast of Opito. At Needle Rock I shut off the engine. The silence was alarming. We continued to drift forward a few metres, pushed by the wake washing against the hull. The blood thrummed in my temples and my chest stung more and more with each breath. I seated myself near the stern of the boat and looked to Poppy who was still pale, but no more so than on the car drive over. Deep creases circled his tanned neck like tree rings on an old native. He looked at me with heavy eyes.

“You ok Pop?”

“I'm fine Lily, just a little queasy.” He reached down into the side panel of the boat and carefully lifted the urn that housed Nana's ashes, then looked at me as if to say ‘How do we do this?’ I gave a gentle shrug then indicated towards the side of the boat, facing downwind. We shared the task, releasing her slowly and deliberately, each of us whispering our own messages as we took turns leaning over the water. I hugged Poppy tightly as we watched the ash cloud disperse.

“Here, I think it's the right time for you to have this.” He reached into his pocket and withdrew Nana's pearl pendant, then gently placed it in the palm of my hand.

“But Poppy, I- ”

“There's no one I'd rather have wear this than you.”

I had admired that pendant all my life, but now that I was holding it out on the water, drifting... I knew it didn't belong to me. The promises the precious pearl held – to love, cherish and watch over forever – were promises that Poppy had made to Nana.

“Pop, I think this belongs with Nana. Don't you?” I smiled gently into his sad worn face, “The pearl found its way to her once – a one in 10,000 chance you said – perhaps it will find her again, wherever she is.”

He let out a deep shuddery sigh. “Lily, if your Nana could see you right now she would be as ridiculously proud as I am.”

I held the pendant to my own heart for a moment, then to Poppy's. Then I leaned over the side of the boat holding the necklace above the water, hesitating for just a moment before releasing it from my fingers to be swallowed by the ocean. A thin trail of fizzing bubbles chased the chain down. And that's when he began to howl. His blood curdling bellows startled the gulls perched on Needle Rock and they took to the sky in fright. The sound wouldn't stop. It came from deep within him, primal in its pitch. I could feel it in my own gut. The same sound I had heard one year earlier, on that wretched, sorrowful morning. I watched, dumbstruck. When he could catch a breath he wailed,

Where have you gone?

Why did you leave us?

Big, ugly, gulping sobs escaped him. Suddenly I felt a rising panic. I was drifting on the water with nothing but open space around me, but I felt trapped and suffocated. A burning sensation bubbled up from my stomach, rising and spreading through my core. My head began to spin and my ears buzzed loud and shrill. I frantically gulped at the sea air. What had I done to Poppy? Something was terribly wrong. He collapsed onto the floor of the boat, releasing a long sorrowful groan. I could see emotions swirling within him like ocean currents, deep and strong and menacing. There was no stopping the grief as it came in waves, knocking the breath out of him, over and over again. The pain that had been festering inside

for so long seemed to hit like a whip, slicing deeper and deeper, making him writhe and wail, thrashing through his tired body. He had lost so much.

When the harrowing ordeal was over, he lay crumpled on his side with both knees curled up and shoulders hunched forward. I lowered myself onto the floor, and gently, cautiously, wrapped my arms around him. I felt him slowly relax. After several moments he pulled himself up into a sitting position and wiped his wet swollen face with the backs of his hands. Squinting at me through puffy eyelids he apologised for scaring me. I shook my head and kissed his cheek, softly, just like Nana P used to do when she wanted to remind me that I was loved. I felt a sharp pang of guilt. Then a gnawing feeling of humiliation began to claw its way up my body, igniting a heat so intense it truly felt that I might burst into flames. I hadn't organized the ceremony for Poppy, I had done it for myself. It had been what I needed to help me move forward. But what was right for me, it seemed, wasn't right for him. It had grown bitterly cold and Poppy looked far too frail to be exposed to the frigid sea air. This wasn't where he belonged. He was a stranger to the sea.

I scrambled to my feet, stumbling as the boat rocked suddenly, kicked the engine into life and flicked the navigation lights on. It was a rugged journey home. Gusty winds buffeted the boat and choppy waves slapped hard against the hull. I was thankful for the light beams that danced and flickered across the water as I steered into the troughs, pitching and rolling with the waves. Above the howling wind, I could have sworn I heard Nana P's voice, *You are stronger than you think*. I did not feel strong at all. I felt like a wounded animal. I had lost my best friend in life. My rock. The one who had helped mould and shape me into who I was today. The one who was always, always on my side. Sometimes it was too much to bear. Feeling some drops of moisture on my cheeks I looked to the sky, but there wasn't a rain cloud in sight. My vision was blurred but that didn't matter, I knew exactly where I was and where I was going.

By the time we arrived back at the cottage the inky sky was freckled with luminous stars. Poppy looked raw and dishevelled. I sent him to have a hot shower while I lit the fire and made tea. After reassuring me that he was okay, he retired to bed. I couldn't rest until I had the boat sorted. Waxing and polishing the fiberglass after a session at sea had been a ritual that Nana P had never broken, apparently it provided protection from corrosion. The salt water was very *unforgiving* she had said. I thought of the fishing competition, then only two days away. I would need to prepare.

Launching the Sea Nymph at the boat ramp had been an exhilarating experience. The wharf was bustling with boats and competitors. Not only was I the youngest female there but I was unaccompanied, so I had only myself to rely on. After the initial thrill wore off, it was a relief to feel Nana's presence as I was leaving the harbour. Like a warm blanket around my shoulders, she reassured me that I was on the right path – the path that would lead to our most favoured fishing spot.

I selected Nana P's fibreglass rod as my weapon of choice for the competition. It was reliable, strong and sturdy. I would normally have used one of her lighter graphite rods which are far more sensitive, allowing me to feel bites from fish easier. But I knew that if I snared a heavy fish I risked tackle breakage, and this was not a risk I was willing to take today. Some competitors may have used extra rods to increase their odds of hitting more fish, but I felt that today was a 'put all your eggs in one basket' kind of day. My goal was not to source dinner, but to land the heaviest fish that was unfortunate enough to cross my path. After dressing the hook with a large chunk of pilchard, a few squid tentacles to make the bait look alive, and a stinky brine-soaked pipi for an attractive aroma, I allowed my shoulders to drop a little. I knew that to land myself a whopper I needed to be strategic, patient, and alert. I also needed a fair measure of luck. *If it's meant to be, it will happen.*

Nana, are you there?

I waited and waited, slowly lifting and dipping the rod, over and over again. I had plenty of time, and all the willpower in the world. The first tug on my line was just a teaser. The next few were nibblers who had only stopped by to sample my bait and then leave. In between a few more nibblers I caught a small cod, and a good-sized gurnard. I was just about to secure my rod in the holder and pour my third cup of tea for the day when something hit my line with such force, it was nearly yanked clean out of my hand. Lurching forward my hip slammed into the side of the boat. I grabbed the guardrail with my free hand, clamping my fingers tightly around the rod. I felt my face split into a smile. Let the games begin.

When hauling in a big fish, Nana P had taught me to keep firm tension on the line at all times – ‘but not too firm or the line will snap!’ Keeping the tip of the rod up, I reeled in with a smooth, consistent motion, pulling the fish closer and closer to me as I went. Every now and then he would decide to make a run for it. I had the drag set on my reel which allowed him to take out the line for a bit. Then I’d reel steadily for a short period. And then I’d back off again. I knew the fish would tire before I would. I just had to make sure I took it slow and steady and kept my cool. Over time his runs got shorter, less violent, and less frequent. I was wearing him down.

All the way back to shore I tried not to listen to the frantic slap of tail against plastic, and the writhing and gasping of the giant beast inside the fish bin. All the way back, even over the sound of the boat’s motor, I could hear the slap-slap-slap slowing to a quiver.

Laying the body flat, I grasp the tail firmly with my gloved hand. Using the blunt back edge held at a 45 degree angle I rake the knife in short sharp bursts against the grain of the scales, moving from the tail towards the head, along one side of the fish and then the other. As I scrape, the scales flick off and scatter all over the filleting board like glistening sequins. It

isn't necessary to descale the entire snapper as I plan to remove the skin anyway, but I know that going the extra mile will impress Poppy. He had taught me that large fish have large scales, and large scales are about as difficult to cut through as a body of armour. Regardless, I had already reasoned that cutting through large scales would dull my blade, which would then require extra sharpening, using up more of my time and breaking my rhythm.

I make a cut right behind the gills, just under the dorsal fin, slicing down until I hit the spine. At the top of the body I turn the knife's blade so it lies flat and hard against the backbone, and work my way along to the tail. Applying slow, broad strokes I make firm cuts all the way to the central vertebrae. Then using an in-and-out sawing motion, I graze the blade against the spine in order to achieve the thickest fillets possible, and the least amount of wastage. *Waste not, want not.* I allow myself a fleeting glance at Poppy who nods approvingly.

My long strong nails make the perfect tools for securing the flap of skin at the tip of the fillet. This is the trickiest but most satisfying part to remove. Guiding the knife gently and precisely along the underside of the flesh, I wiggle the tail end every few inches or so in order to work against the blade and to ease the separation. Perfect. Lifting the translucent silvery skin up for Poppy to see, I drop it ceremoniously into the guts bucket. I hear an indecipherable murmur.

Suddenly I feel the full force of all those eyes on me. My face burns hot yet again and my knees start to tremble. I glance at Poppy and he nods encouragingly. *You're nearly done.* All that remains is to make a thin, triangular cut down the centre line of each fillet to remove the pin bones. But it's like a spell has been broken. The clock is ticking but I've lost my momentum. Lost my purpose. Lost my most precious Nana who always, always helped me when I needed it. I can feel tears waiting on standby, eager to burst forth and create a scene. I quickly turn my head away. I need to get a grip on myself. Turning back I see the knife

drop from my fingers. My vision swirls as tears fall and splash onto the blade. Suddenly Poppy's arms are there, holding me steady.

“Lily... Lily look! What on earth...”

I'm looking. And I see a crowd of blurry faces. I blink. And see the perfect snapper fillets laid out awaiting their next procedure. I gasp. Right there, in the pile of discarded remains – creamy-white, iridescent, with a gleam of solid gold. My jaw drops. Poppy's hand gingerly reaches forward and plucks the precious pendant from the slimy entrails.

“From the belly of your giant snapper! How could that happen? How...?” His voice drifts and so do his eyes. He smiles. *Really* smiles. And it's the best thing I've ever seen.