

Sarah Dean 11N

Alone

It is 1945, the war ended years ago. That war had taken seventy lives from our small village in Devon. Every one knew every body else, you couldn't move without someone talking to you about their son and how their day had been. It was friendly, pleasant, how a small community should be. I grew up in this community with Daddy, Mummy and Nana. We owned a modest house in the out skirts of this village, facing the cool tranquil sea where Sammy the dog loved to play. That water sounded like heaven in the summer. The sea gulls would glide ahead whilst the hills would almost shine in their glory. You've never seen a more miraculous sight than the sun setting over the sea. The aqua marine sea mingles with the fuchsia sky painting a portrait of heaven. Nana used to say that you could get no closer to heaven, whilst still on earth and every one agreed. Nana was a respected woman, wise beyond her years. She was neither my mother's mother nor my father's mother, she lived with us because s he loved us and we loved her.

Nana met Mummy when she was eight. Mummy was always a wonderer according to Nana, and Nana had found her walking around aimlessly on the highest hill. She had been watching the sun set. Watching the sea join the sky, it's nighttime ritual. Nana always loved the sunset, she seemed part of it. She would sit for hours just gazing at its wonder, just like Mummy. They became firm friends from then, 'sunset friends' as they called themselves and the age difference never seemed to matter. When Mummy met Daddy and had me, Nana fell ill. Mummy took her in, to look after her just as Nana had done for Mummy. I had never seen Nana well, or running over the hills as Mummy always described. There is a single photograph of her on t he mantle piece with the wind running through her thin grey hair as she is running along the hill hand in hand with Mummy. Their 'Sunset Friends' badges just visible on their dirty well-worn frocks. I wished for years that I could have been there, been the girls that Mummy was, and now things have changed I realise that I can never be that girl. The girl in the picture is care free, she doesn't have a worry in the world. So different from the child she bore and this difference is what sets us apart from the world.

It was 1933; I had left school with some good scores and the promise from my teacher that I could go far in the world. Women had the vote and I felt remarkable. I had left education behind to pursue my career. I had dreamed from a young age of becoming an actress. A dream that has been kept alive by Nana. I had decided that very day to go down to the local theatre and ask for any vacancies. I did not even mind that I might have to start at the bottom, be a tea lady- I would be in the business and one day I could be a star.

That was the year I met them, the gang, Susan, Betty and Lilly. They were the girls I had always wanted to be, the girls that could have been in that photograph. I first met them on the way to church where they were sitting on the bench next to Old Oak Cottage. The three girls were laughing, they looked beautiful. Some one once said that laughter sounded like music and their laughs sung. They wore clothes of the newest fashion, a small waisted dress that flared and hung wonderfully half way down their shins. I looked at

them with pure envy, wishing I could be a beautiful seventeen year old like them. Yes, I was seventeen but not like them. I looked so plain among their paint pallet dresses. I moved along, with my hymnbook attempting to cover my rather thick waist by crossing my arms. I heard a shrill laugh behind me and automatically expected that they were laughing at me. Maybe I was being paranoid, but also rather street wise. I had been the victim of many jokes in this village. Frump Fran was one name they seemed to find funny or even Fat Franny when they were feeling really vindictive. I used my best acting technique, spun around on my heels and faced them with a determined expression. The laughter stopped and the blonde girl gave me a quizzical look. I enquired to why they thought I was so hilarious and whether I had actually done something amusing. The blonde girl's lipstick smile broadened and she laughed again. The two joined her like cackling hyenas. I turned the other way; ready to retreat when she called me. 'Wait, wait. I'm not laughing at you.' 'We are' replied the ginger girl. I gave an enquiring look and they laughed again. 'I really don't see what is so funny,' I retorted, now beginning to feel quite agitated. The blonde girl shook back her hair and crossed her long shapely legs. 'We just didn't know how to tell you that your skirt is caught...well your skirt is...' the girls started laughing again. I looked down at my skirt only to find that in my frantic rush to conceal my stomach I had dragged my skirt up and it had managed to get lodged in my attractive brown lingerie. They began to look quite uncomfortable, shifting on the bench that they were perched on. I looked down and laughed. I had become immune to being humiliated and decided to take Nana's advice to make the best of any situation. To my surprise the girls laughed to and asked me to come and sit with them.

We sat on that bench till sunset approached. I began to get to know them. Susan was tall and blonde with a wicked sense of humour. I could imagine that she has had her share of sweet hearts and she began to reel off their names, along with a string of sarcastic comments to follow. Betty and Lilly were twins, one ginger one dark. They were the complete opposite of each other but shared the same wonderful laugh. We laughed for hours about obscure things, commenting on the goings on of the village and the people who inhabited it. As sunset drew near I led them up to the top of the tallest hill. We sat and waited for the colours to blend creating a red paint. The girls looked in wonder; they have never appreciated the sunset. I suppose because they have haven't grown up with the area as I have. Lilly had a camera with her and she insisted on taking our photograph. I then parted with them, vowing to meet them on the same bench in the morning and I went home with the knowledge that I have acquired some friends.

The weeks passed and I forgot my dreams of the future, I concentrated on the present, the present, which contained friends. We laughed together gaily, I taught them about Devon and they taught me about fashion. I became aware of my body shape and for the first time realised that I was a woman. I realised that I could never be as pretty as Susan or as petite as Betty and Lilly but I could be me. I was the funny one, the one to get the conversations going. They learnt about my past, I learnt about theirs, they fell in love with Devon as I fell in love with them. I believed that life could get no better. We paddled

along the sea in the morning, shopped in the day and watched the sun set at night. It never became tedious, it was just girls, women having fun together. The day that changed my life forever was all down to Susan. She had heard about a valentine's dance, which was to be held in the village hall.

We spent the day looking for dresses and playing with Susan's make up. I found a dress that was sunset red and matched my auburn hair. It fitted my figure perfectly and Susan by the magic of make up and beauty techniques turned me into a young woman. We approached the hall nervously and tottered gingerly in with our high-heeled shoes. Susan turned many of the men's heads by passing by them with her expensive perfume. We danced as a four and began to forget about the glaring men in the corner. As the music on the gramophone turned to a slow song, the girls were taken to dance. I was left to dance by myself in the corner, looking utterly ridiculous. A young man with a beige shirt finally approached me. He had sandy blonde hair and looked just like the picture of my grandfather that Daddy gave me. We danced whilst I struggled on my heels. He seemed to find it hilarious that I could not possibly dance on these shoes. A new record was put on the gramophone, a real brass band dance number and Alfie, his name as I discovered, was found to be a horrendous dancer just like me. At the end of the dance we agreed to meet on the Thursday.

Alfie and I met on the Monday along with Susan and Bert. We took a picnic to the shingled beach. We were still there by five o'clock and Alfie and I walked along the sea's edge together. He took my hand as we strolled past the rocks. His hand was warm and safe. It sent a sharp but pleasant shock up through my arm and deep into my body. He stopped me by the changing shacks and kissed me. Not on the cheek but full on the lips. We broke away and returned to holding hands along the beach, each with an insane grin posted across our faces.

We agreed to meet each Thursday, which progressed to every day of the week. I brought him home to meet my family and he got the seal of approval from my Nana. The days of being sun set friends had ended and I actually didn't mind. Those were the days that I was a girl and now I felt like a woman. Alfie made me reconsider my dreams; he rekindled my dream to be an actress and encouraged me. He made me read him passages from scripts he brought me with the money he earned from his job as an aircraft mechanic.

A year passed and on a Thursday Alfie declared he loved me. I returned my affections to him and we shared our love on Thursday night. I was found to be pregnant and Alfie and I agreed to marry in the coming months. I grew further away from my girl friends until we only talked if passing on a street; even then it was a casual hello. News was rapidly sweeping Devon about a potential world war. Adolph Hitler had invaded Poland and England was being considered to join the war to fight Germany. All young men had been informed to prepare for war, as all men would need to fight. Alfie was soon to join. He had always had a fascination with planes and desperately wanted to fly one for his country.

By two months time war was declared on Germany and Alfie had to leave me. He gave me a list of the men in his regiment and their ages. I couldn't help noticing the ages of the men, Bert Harris - 19, John Thompson - 18. The youngest boy was just 17 and prepared to fight for his country. I bid Alfie a tearful farewell. He left me with a promise he would marry me when he returned and a lingering kiss that made me want more.

The lack of men in the village caused the women to draw together. We became involved in the men's jobs, servicing engines and preparing weapons. I worked in the knowledge that Alfie would come home and I was pregnant with his child. Susan, Betty, Lilly and I grew closer again; Nana always said that friends would never leave you when you are in desperation. Their sweethearts were also away, fighting and Lilly was heavily pregnant with her first child. Rationing was hard, I was used to luxuries in life and having less food was an extreme change. Another person who found rationing too difficult was Nana. Nana was very set in her ways; traditional some might say and did not want alternatives to the food she was used to. Mummy couldn't possibly afford to buy Nana's requirements. This change in diet made Nana deteriorate. I decided to nurse her until she got better but Nana had given up trying.

I lead her to the highest hill where we watched the sun set for the very last time, together. The sky that night was more red than I have ever seen before. Nana's cheek turned paler as the sky grew crimson. As her life was taken into the sky, Nana turned and kissed me on the cheek. Her cheek was cold and wet. She laid back down on the grass.

The village was devastated by the news of Nana. Her grave was planted on the top of the hill. The stone that was cared by Betty simply read Nana. It seemed to be self-explanatory. I then realised how important family is. I knew I would try and be a Nana for my child as Nana was for me. I had stayed at Susan's house since Nana's death, going home didn't seem right without Nana there to constantly criticise the house. In the next week Susan felt inclined to go to war to help with nursing. She left the village on a Friday, promising to write and send us photographs of her.

Lilly, Betty and I decided to volunteer at the village hall. We allocated families with the donated homes and gave first aid, water and bread. We joined the Land Army and enjoyed helping the local community. My baby was growing steadily and healthily. Lilly gave birth on the 4<sup>th</sup> of March to a little boy who she named Robert. She went to work in the next town so she could afford to live with the baby. Betty went with her to support her. The loss of my friends brought me back to reality but I realised that I still had my Mummy and Daddy and of course the sunset.

I gave birth to May on the 29<sup>th</sup> of September. She was beautiful, sandy blonde hair and piercing blue eyes, the spitting image of her father. It had been six months since I had heard from Alfie or the army. Some men returned home from the war, heroes in their own right. Mummy took to caring for the injured whilst Daddy worked as a mechanic.

It had been two years since I heard from Alfie. Apparently he was absent from battle, they couldn't find him. I knew that hope was lost. I knew that he must be out there, perhaps looking at the sunset in Germany. The sunset in Germany would be different. The sky would be blood red, stained with the blood of the soldiers. I began to understand the suffering. I felt alone.

May was a handful, she reminded me of myself when I was little. She got hold of a magazine with pictures of actresses. She declared that she wanted to act on the stage. She had the dreams that I had when I was younger. I of course told her about her father, told her of everything that we did together, the fun we had. I told her about Susan and Betty and Lilly and of course Nana. I showed her the photo of us when we were playing on the hill, by the sunset. I showed her the sunset each night, like a ritual. We would go up there and she would wave to the passing planes, hoping they were daddy and he would wave back.

With six years passing I have now realised that there is no hope. The war may have ended but the suffering hasn't. There are many women in the village without partners, without their sweet hearts, me being one of them. I keep thinking of my Alfie, lying amongst thousands of men in their shallow graves, facing towards the heavens. The sunset tonight is pale, pathetic almost as if all hope has gone. Nana always used to say that hope has never gone but I can see my daughter is without a father. She still to this day waves at passing planes - she has hope and dreams that I lost long ago. I look back at the picture of me and Betty and Susan thinking of my youth. I was happy then, I was with friends. Through them I had my lover and my child. As she grows up, she grows away from me, becoming a teenager, rebelling against society and me. She has made her own friends who she sits on the bench with, laughing at passers by. As I look up to the sunset I realise that I am alone.