

Picture the Moment

It was a dull, damp afternoon and Emmie was bored. Had it been a nice day, she would have asked to be taken into the garden to sit and enjoy the sunshine. Her favourite spot was near the bird table. If she was very quiet, a couple of cheeky blue tits would hop on there to snatch a morsel before the thuggish pigeons arrived to gobble the lot. Once, a bold robin redbreast had perched on the arm of her chair and cocked its head at her, its bright button eyes inquisitive. *It's all right for you, she'd said, you can fly. I struggle to walk nowadays.*

But it wasn't warm enough. The days were drawing in already. She'd stay inside. So how to fill the gap between lunch and tea? She'd finished her book (which had ended on a rather unsatisfactory note: she did like a *proper* conclusion) and didn't want to start another one yet. She wasn't a big telly fan, unlike many of her fellow 'inmates' (as she jokingly called them, including herself in this description); she liked a good drama but there weren't many of those on and they were full of bad language and violence. The TV companies insisted on putting, what's the phrase, *trigger warnings*, that was it, at the bottom of the screen but why include things that *trigger* in the first place? She preferred the old programmes they showed on some of the Freeview channels. And what was it about so-called comedy these days? All smut and no humour. 'Dad's Army' and 'Last of the Summer Wine' – they were more like it, gentle comedy and no swearing, and still funny. She didn't switch on the telly in the day, apart from on special occasions like the Coronation; she waited until 7 pm so she didn't get square eyes, as she used to warn Clive.

She sipped the cup of tea, now on the cool side, that Maria had brought her half an hour ago. A thought struck her. She'd get out the photograph albums! It was a while since she'd looked at them.

Emmie used to have hundreds of photos: a few very old faded, almost sepia, ones going back to her childhood and beyond; black and white ones, not many, from her youth and first marriage; then more (rather lurid) colour pictures from the 60s and 70s when the children were growing up. After that, the photos were mostly those taken by family or friends, copies given to her as a souvenir of some outing or holiday. Lots of the grandchildren, of course.

When she and Tom downsized from their rambling old house to a modern bungalow, they'd had a good sort out and discarded many of the photographs. Some were of people and places they didn't even remember, no information on the reverse to give them a clue, and they'd spent happy evenings guessing wildly and falling about laughing. She'd stuck the pictures they wanted to keep in six large albums and put them in a cupboard in the spare bedroom.

Then, eighteen months ago, Emmie was forced to agree that she was finding it increasingly difficult to look after the bungalow on her own, even with a cleaner twice a week and a handyman who cut the lawn and weeded the flowerbeds and did any little jobs that needed doing. She found it harder to admit she could no longer look after herself. First, she'd had a carer call in morning and evening, then three times a day, then four, until she gave in more or less gracefully to her family's pleas and allowed herself to be installed in a care home. And it was quite nice here, lovely staff and well-cooked meals. She wasn't unhappy. She had come to accept that this was a new, probably final, phase of her life.

But moving to an even smaller space meant, of course, that the amount of furniture and other possessions she could bring was very limited. A favourite chair, the glass-fronted china cabinet inherited from her mother containing her most treasured objects, and the Art Deco-style (although not purchased at an Art Deco price) standard lamp and her room was quite full. Storage space was, naturally, minimal and much of her stuff simply had to go. At this stage of her life Emmie wasn't too bothered by this radical pruning of her belongings. If one of her family wanted anything they were welcome to it;

otherwise, the hospice charity shop would benefit.

She did want to keep some of her photos, though. After all, what were photographs if not memories? She would need to carry out another cull.

A month after she'd moved into 'Rosecroft' – and, yes, there were roses in the communal garden – the six photograph albums were still in a pile on the floor of her lounge/bedroom, between the fold-down table and the china cabinet. Emmie was at a bit of a loss what to do with them. Her family were frequent visitors and one afternoon Jade, her granddaughter – no, *great*-granddaughter, dear me, her brain cells were diminishing; *Vivien*, Jade's mother, was her granddaughter – called in with her boyfriend, Simon. Or was it Dan? No, that was the previous one. *Jake*, that was his name, she ought to remember because it was only one syllable different to Jade. Nice young man. Anyway, when they were sitting close together (there was really only room for one visitor at a time) with a cup of tea and a slice of home-made Victoria sponge (Emmie, despite her limited mobility, could still bake a cake with the best of them), Jade commented on the albums. Had she made a start on them? Emmie had to admit she hadn't.

'Tell you what, Grangran', Jade said, 'I'll help you! It'll be fun, seeing all the old pictures. Let's make a start now! You don't mind, do you?' This to Jake. Jake gazed adoringly at his beloved. Of course he didn't.

And so they did. It was agreed early on that the holiday snaps could go. Emmie either vividly recalled weeks in Alicante (1963) and Malta (1966), in which case there was no need to keep the photos, or she didn't, in which case they can't have been that memorable so there was no point in having a photographic record of them. She and Tom did have a fantastic trip to South Africa to celebrate his 65th birthday. She put on the 'keep' heap a picture of the two of them enjoying a sundowner after an exciting game drive when a huge lion walked right alongside the jeep, so near she could have reached out and stroked its tawny mane. A memento of their last happy holiday together.

Similarly, photos of various outings and occasions over the years, long since forgotten, could go. That left the dozens of images of family members. She'd have to be selective.

'Look at this one! Is this you, Grangran?'

'Yes, with my parents.' The couple had been carefully posed by the professional photographer: Mother seated on an upright chair, cradling baby Emmeline whose face could just be seen peeping out of the shawl and bonnet she was swaddled in; Father standing by their side, hand resting on the chair back, uncomfortable in his Sunday suit with stiff collar and trying not to appear ridiculously proud of his wife and daughter.

'That's definitely number 1 in the album!'

Then came a group school photo, the girls and boys maybe 11 or 12.

'That's me,' Emmie pointed to a girl in a belted tunic, her straight dark hair in indeterminate style. 'I'm standing next to my best friend, Josie. I wonder how life turned out for her.'

'And this is your wedding photograph! How young and optimistic you both look! And how smart! You in your jacket and skirt and a cute little hat and the groom in his uniform. The date on the back says 30th November 1944.'

I was young, Emmie thought, only 20, too young but I didn't think that at the time. And, yes, I was optimistic. The war was drawing to an end at last and I'd met the man of my dreams. A good job we can't foresee the future.

Aloud, she said, 'Not a very nice month to get married in, but he (she couldn't bring herself to say his name, even after all these years) was on leave from the Army and we seized the opportunity. No chance to organise a big church wedding. And, anyway, it wouldn't have seemed right without my father

to walk me down the aisle; he'd passed away in January. We didn't have a place of our own, of course, we lodged in my in-laws' spare bedroom while we saved up to buy a house.'

Emmie would have erased all memory of her first wedding long ago but, without that, there would have been no Eleanor.

As if reading her thoughts, Jade picked up a photo of a little girl on a donkey, obviously taken on Blackpool Beach as there was the Tower in the background. The girl was laughing with delight.

'Who's this?'

'It's your grandmother, dear. She loved horses and donkeys. She'd be, let me think, 6. Yes, I remember, it was 1955. It was the last holiday we had as a family before your great-grandfather...' She trailed off. Jade knew he'd walked out on her. Emmie had never made a secret of it. Why should she? She'd done nothing wrong. She wasn't the one with a roving eye, never satisfied with what she had.

Life as a single parent hadn't been easy. In those days, you didn't get much help from the state and it was hard finding a job to fit around school hours. Her mother was miles away so she relied on kind neighbours to keep an eye on young Eleanor after school. Then she met Tom. He was a cousin of a friend who just 'happened' to be there one day when she called round for a coffee. By the time Emmie realised that a spot of matchmaking was involved, it was too late to make her exit; anyway, it would have been bad manners. They hit it off immediately.

'And you and Tom got married in 1962.' Jade was reading the back of the next photograph.

It was in a register office again, by choice; having been married before and with a teenage daughter, it didn't seem appropriate to marry in white. Eleanor insisted on a proper bridesmaid's outfit, though! Her mother was delighted she got on so well her new Dad.

Emmie's attention was caught by a picture of an angelic little boy, blonde curls and blue eyes (she'd progressed to colour film by now). 'That's your great-uncle Clive'.

'You mean Clive who's always "away"?''

Emmie went on as if Jade hadn't spoken. 'He came as a surprise, you know. Tom and I had been married for six years and had given up on having a child. Then, all of a sudden, there I was, at 43 "an old mother" in those days. Clive was a bonnie baby, happy and healthy. He had doting parents and a stable home. Life seemed full of promise for him.' She sighed.

'Anyway, what's next? Oh, this one, I think. It's your grandmother's wedding.'

Jade giggled at the fashions that everyone wore in 1972. Her grandma Eleanor was pretty in a long flowing frock and carrying a posy of flowers but her new husband! Shoulder-length hair, droopy moustache, flared trousers and a loud kipper tie! And the other young men were dressed the same way.

'And what *are* the women wearing? Look at the length of their skirts!'

'It was the age of the mini skirt, dear. Everyone wore them. And hot pants.'

'Hot pants? What on earth were those?'

'Why, shorts – and some were very short! I remember a pair your grandmother wore: blue gingham they were, with matching blouse. She looked cute in them. At least, the local boys seemed to think so!'

Jade couldn't visualise Gran – who was in her 70s!! – in *hot pants*!

Emmie picked up Eleanor's wedding photograph again. 'Of course, your mother's in this picture as well,' she remarked casually.

'What do you mean, Grangran?' Jade was puzzled.

Jade wasn't slow in catching on and was trying not to laugh.

'You mean... Gran was *pregnant* when she got married?'

'Don't sound so shocked, dear. Your generation didn't invent sex, you know!'

Jade was, uncharacteristically, lost for words. She pointed to another picture to hide her blushes.

'Here's Mum at her graduation ceremony, all toggled up in her gown and cap thing.'

'Mortar board, dear, that's what it's called. And do you recognise the young man standing behind your mother?'

Jade peered at the photo.

'It's Dad!'

'Yes, they met at University, as you know. He graduated a week later.'

Emmie smiled at her great-granddaughter's evident pleasure in the old photos. But she was tired now; she'd reminisced enough for one day.

'I think I need a rest before tea. Tell you what, why don't you take all the photographs and choose a few nice ones of you and your brother, to bring our family history up to date.'

'OK, Grangran. But we don't have any recent ones of you!'

'Oh, I don't need any of me, I can look in the mirror!'

Emmie made light of it but, truth to be told, she hated seeing herself on film. She looked so *old* and wrinkled (she'd smoked in her youth, as did everyone else in those days, and she'd been a sun worshipper, slathering on the cooking oil to encourage a glamorous deep tan); her hair, once thick and glossy, was grey and thin and patches of pink scalp peeked through the wisps. The last time she'd submitted to the camera was in 2002, at Jade's christening, and that had been a group shot and she'd made sure she stood behind the rather tall godfather.

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Two weeks later came the day that Emmie had been anticipating with a mixture of pride and dread. It was her 100th birthday. This wasn't that unusual, she supposed. She'd read somewhere that almost *eight thousand* people turned 100 every year, more than twenty a day! Even so, it was still an achievement. But now she was a centenarian! It made her feel positively ancient. Oddly, her family had hardly mentioned it. Eleanor and Vivien both said they'd pop in to see her, but it was a Sunday and one or the other always visited at some point over the weekend in any case.

At 8.30, as usual, Maria knocked at her door and came in, carrying a tray of tea and two shortbread biscuits, fan-shaped, Emmie's favourites. On the tray was a large white envelope.

'Happy Birthday, Emmie! Look what's arrived for you!'

Emmie peered at the envelope (even with spectacles she was a bit short-sighted). It was stiff and there was no stamp. On the front was written in flowing script *Mrs Emmeline Roberts, Rosecroft, Briar Place, Shrewsbury SY 14 6AZ*. She turned it over and saw a discreet coat of arms over the words Buckingham Palace.

'Oh!'

'How exciting! Can you manage to open it? I brought a paper knife.'

Emmie carefully slit open the envelope and drew out the card. On the front, there was a photo of the King – she still hadn't got used to calling Prince Charles the King – and, inside, his hearty congratulations on her special day, signed by him personally. At least *someone* had remembered her birthday!

'Breakfast's ready when you are, my lovely'. All the care assistants called all the inmates "my lovely" or "dear" or even (this from a cockney born and bred) "me ducks". At first, Emmie had inwardly objected to this intimate mode of address but she'd become accustomed to it. They meant well and they were very nice girls.

At breakfast, several of her fellow residents wished her 'Happy Birthday'. Otherwise, the morning passed the same as any other morning. It was warm enough to sit in the garden so that's what she did for an hour, nodding off as, irritatingly, she often did these days. It was hard work finishing a

book, no matter how interesting. She woke with a start when the call came for lunch, and then she retired to her room for her afternoon nap. Apart from the brief thrill of receiving greetings from the King, it was a normal day.

Maria knocked gently and came in to wake Emmie up. It was 3 o'clock. Goodness, she had had a long sleep.

'You have visitors, my lovely.'

She helped Emmie dress, suggesting she wear her best frock, and brushed out her hair. 'A touch of lipstick, I think!' Emmie was taken back. She couldn't recall when she'd last applied lipstick. She glanced in the mirror. Maria had made her look quite presentable.

Walking into the communal lounge on Maria's arm, Emmie was met by cheers and clapping. *What?* She adjusted her glasses. Why, all, or nearly all, her family were here! There was Eleanor with her latest beau (how *did* she attract them at her age? She was 75, for heaven's sake!) and Vivien with her ex-husband (with whom Emmie got on famously; he made her laugh) and Jade and Jake, and even Nick! She'd been sure he wouldn't remember her birthday and, anyway, he was on a gap year, travelling round Europe. (In fact he *had* forgotten and it was only a text from Jade that reminded him: Wherever you are, brother dearest, you WILL remember Grangran's special birthday, won't you? It was cold and wet in Poland so he was quite happy to cut short his travels and hop on the next available train to England).

And who were those two middle-aged men in the corner? Of course, she recognised them now. They were her younger sister's boys, God rest her soul. When did she last see them? It must have been in 2013, at the funeral. Fancy them coming all this way! Add to that several particular friends who lived in the home and two or three carers to keep an eye on things and the lounge was quite crowded. The only person missing was Clive. But, then, Pentonville probably didn't allow day release, even to celebrate your mother reaching her centenary.

There were balloons and bunting and a giant card signed by everyone at the gathering with a **100 Today!** badge that she pinned to her chest. On a side table nestled a beautiful flower arrangement. Best of all (Emmie had a sweet tooth), next to the flowers was a fabulous cake decorated (by Vivien, she suspected) in pink and white icing with pretty scallop shells around the sides and her name and the date piped on the top.

Emmie was having a wonderful time as her guests took it in turns to sit by her and chat. Then Jade appeared clutching a flat packet.

'I hope you like how I've done it, Grangran.'

Emmie put down her glass of sparkling wine, wiped her hands (the cake was delicious but a trifle sticky) and took the gift. It was a slim photo album, with a cover of some material that was soft to the touch; on the front was inscribed:

*Emmeline Roberts, daughter, wife, mother, grandmother and great-grandmother
– her life in pictures*

Emmie turned the pages slowly. Jade had painstakingly pasted in the photos they'd chosen together plus a few more and underneath each was a neatly-typed label with names, the occasion and date.

'It's brilliant, dear. But why is the last page blank?'

'Ah, well, that's for a record of your very special day'. And Jade gestured towards Maria who had an iPad at the ready.

Oh no! But she couldn't refuse to be in a photograph, not when her family had gone to so much trouble to arrange this marvellous party. So everyone clustered round her chair and they all looked at Maria and said *cheese* and Maria clicked away. Finally, the men moved away and stood in a little group. I bet they're pondering how soon they can decently leave and go the pub for a proper drink, Emmie thought wryly.

Meanwhile, Eleanor, slightly tipsy from the wine and quite overcome with emotion, bent down beside her mother and clasped her to her bosom.

'I love you so much, Mum!' she cried. 'I know I haven't always shown it but I do appreciate you.'

'All right, dear.' Emmie patted her shoulder awkwardly. Then, before she realised what was happening, Vivien and Jade joined in. The four of them were entwined in a cat's cradle of hugging.

Maria was entranced by this display of familial affection, four generations of women! She seized the moment – and the iPad – and touched the screen once more.

Jade, inspecting the images, exclaimed, 'That's the one! That's just perfect for the final page of the album.'

And Emmie had to agree. She looked at the photograph, so natural and informal, and hardly noticed her wrinkles and bald spots and straggly grey hair. What she saw was a fortunate woman surrounded by love.