



GRAN

BY JOHN EMMS

EXCERPT

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GRAN

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A comedy of relationships, focusing on three generations of women

CHARACTERS

Nellie Froggett - 96 (briefly 19 at end) – Yorkshire, feisty, fun-loving, but with a troubled past which she's trying to get over. Wishes Sally was more like her.

Becky Jackson - 18 Nellie's grand-daughter (can double to play young Nellie in final scene) – takes after Nellie, with whom she shares a mutual love, but less naturally rebellious

Jack Froggett - various ages – 20, 32, mid 50s - Nellie's deceased husband – Yorkshire, fun-loving before the war but afterwards deeply traumatised

Sally Jackson - 55 Nellie's daughter - conventional, conscious of others' opinions, previously compliant, but now trying to make Nellie act more sensibly. Still getting over the loss of her husband.

Rev. Mervyn Godfrey - 74 - southerner, great friend of and support for Nellie, despite constant exchange of insults

Messenger (Balbir) - indeterminate age – somewhat harassed bureaucrat from the afterlife

SYNOPSIS

Nellie dies while ignoring Sally's common sense, and taking a risk, but is sent back by her 'guardian angel', the Messenger, Balbir. He refuses to allow her into the afterlife until she has revealed to Sally a long-held secret. After a little confusion coping with Nellie's return, Becky keeps asking questions, while Nellie's close friend, Mervyn, the vicar who apparently knows all, encourages Nellie to reveal her secret to Sally.

Nellie is reluctant to say too much too fast, but flashbacks reveal some answers.

Meanwhile Sally, who can't see Nellie and can't cope at all with her return, tries to get Mervyn to exorcise her and when he refuses improvises, which is no fun for anyone, except Nellie.

The gradual explanation of the details behind Nellie's difficult marriage and Jack's death, and then the revelation of the secret (Ted, not Jack, is Sally's father - which, it seems, Sally has long suspected) bring the three generations much closer. Nellie is then left with a difficult decision when Balbir (after a little trouble with the materialisation technology) gives her a choice of how to spend the afterlife - she can return to her happiest days, but with no memories of her later life and family; or keep her memories – the bad with the good. We are taken back through a review of Nellie's life and she finds that her new relationship with Sally and Becky provides an acceptable basis for being returned to Jack to be together again in their earlier, carefree years.

ACT 1

Scene 1

*Late Saturday morning in January 2015. The living room of **Nellie Froggett's** terraced house in Halifax. There is a small porch and front door. Another door leads to an inner hallway and stairs, and the kitchen. Two chairs, one a rocking chair with some knitting lying on the seat, are in front of the fireplace, where an electric fire is lit. Other furnishing includes another armchair or sofa, a Yorkshire dresser, a TV and a small table with a bottle-shaped parcel on it. **Nellie** is by the dresser, putting a photo album away. The doorbell rings, the front-door opens and **Becky** puts her head inside.*

Becky: Hello, Gran. Can I come in?

Nellie hurriedly pushes the album into the dresser, but doesn't close the door properly.

Nellie: *(going to sit in the rocking chair and picking up the knitting)* Ey up, love. Have you switched your phone thing off?

Becky: Would I dare leave it on?

Nellie: Leave your wellies in the porch.

Becky: *(taking off her wellies and coat before coming in)* It's bitter out there. Still snowing, too. How are you today?

Nellie: Never mind me. How are you on your birthday? Come and have a hug.

Becky: I'm good, thanks.

*She comes in, closing the door behind her before going to give **Nellie** a hug.*

***Nellie** struggles to get out of the chair, but **Becky** pushes her back.*

You stay there; don't bother to get up.

Nellie: Don't you tell me what to do, little madam.

*She pushes **Becky** aside, then stands up*

When you're old everyone thinks they can order you about. Have a proper hug.

*She puts her arms round **Becky** and kisses her.*

Happy birthday, trouble. Now - sit there while I give you your present.

*She goes to the table and brings the parcel to **Becky**.*

Becky: Gran! What have you got me?

Nellie: Don't ask silly questions. Just open the bloody thing.

Becky: But..

She opens the parcel, revealing a bottle of whisky.

Oh, Gran! Thank you, but...what will Mum say?

Nellie: I couldn't give a flying fart what your mam says. Anyway, I gave her one of those on her eighteenth birthday, too.

Becky: Did you? What did Grandad say?.

Nellie: He didn't say owt. Being dead at the time.

Becky: Oh. I didn't know he'd died so early.

Nellie: Fourteenth of April 1976. Just in time to miss the red-hot summer.

Becky: How sad.

Nellie: Aye. Especially for him.

Becky: He must have been quite young.

Nellie: He were fifty-seven.

Becky: How awful. What happened?

*Nellie is about to answer, but hesitates. The sound is heard of someone walking down steps, then falling with a loud cry. **Becky** is unaware.*

Nellie: I'll tell you another time. Blessed release, though, to be honest.

Becky: Oh, really? Was he suffering?

Nellie: I meant for me. Now go and get the glasses and we can celebrate your birthday properly.

Becky: But it's only half ten.

Nellie: So? That's another thing about getting old. Everybody starts arguing with you, as if you're not capable of making decisions any more. Your mam keeps telling me it's time I settled down and started to behave.

Becky: But you do behave, Gran. Very badly most of the time.

Nellie: Aye. So she says. But that's just how I've lived my whole life. Or tried to when I could. Fun, risk, excitement. Definition of a good life.

Becky: I remember you doing that parachute jump when I was little. Mum thought you were mad.

Nellie: She would. Stepping off a high kerb's enough excitement for her. Now get some glasses.

***Becky** goes to the dresser, finds two glasses, then notices the album in the open cupboard.*

Becky: *(opening the album)* I've never seen these before

Nellie: What? Oh...no. You haven't. It's just...Put it back, will you? There's a love.

Becky: But they're really old. And...Oh. That's you, isn't it? You're so young.

Nellie: Aye, well, I haven't always been ancient. Now put it away.

Becky: But who are these boys? Is one of them Grandad?

Nellie: Yes, as it happens. Now stop nosing. That's just for me.

Becky: Oh - here's one a bit more recent. And another. That must be Grandad is it? Except he doesn't look much like that photo we have at home.

Nellie: No it isn't. Please, love, just put it away will you? Come and open your whisky.

Becky: (*puzzled*) OK. Sorry.

She brings the glasses and pours the whisky.

Did you get whisky when you came of age?

Nellie: There were no chance of that, love. For a start it were in the great depression and we had no brass. And for seconds my mam were a Methody and wouldn't have the stuff in the house. Which is why I started drinking it whenever I got the chance. More than that, lass!

Becky: There'll be no room for water.

Nellie: Who wants water?

Becky tops the glasses up.

Good health.

Becky: Cheers. And thanks, Gran. Wow, that's strong!

Nellie: Don't try to kid me you've never drunk it before. There's too much of me in you for you to be that bloody innocent.

Becky: Well, all right, but, y'know, not neat. What are you knitting?

Nellie: *(holding up a part-knitted colourful jumper)* It were going to be a surprise for your birthday, but I can't seem to knit as fast as I used to.

Becky: Oh Gran, it's awesome. You are sweet.

Nellie: I'm knitting it a bit tight so it'll cling round your titties.

Beckie: For heaven's sake, Gran.

Nellie: Well, you might as well show 'em off. They're a lot nicer than mine ever were.

Beckie: *(jumping up and giving her a kiss)* Hang on. Let me take a picture.

She takes out a mobile phone and starts to take a selfie with Nellie and the jumper.

Nellie: Put that bloody thing away.

Becky: *(taking the photo)* No, it's OK, Gran. Just smile. It's being a camera now. You're OK with cameras, aren't you?

Nellie: I don't know - camera, phone, computer, seems owt can be owt these days. Try living with just a home-made cat's whisker radio, lass, and see how you manage.

Becky: *(laughing)* Oh, Gran, the world always moves on. You can't live in the past. Look.

She shows her the picture.

Nellie: I can live where I bloody well like. God, I look like a wizened old hag!

Becky: You do not. You look brill. Hang on. I'll send it to Tom on Snapchat. He's never seen you.

She uses the phone to put a caption on the picture and send it.

Nellie: Hey! Never mind that. He can come here if he wants to see me. I don't want my photo all over that web thing.

Becky: It's only going to Tom. And it'll disappear when he's seen it.

Nellie: Nowt disappears on that.

Becky puts the phone away. Pause.

Becky: Why did you say it was a release for you when Grandad died?

Nellie: Aye, well, that were the war.

Becky: What - in 1976?

Nellie: Oh, aye. And when he came back from the war in 1946, and every year in between. Not when we were wed, though. He were still grand then.

Becky: So how did the war change him?

Nellie: (*after hesitating*) Well, for a start it made him a sergeant.

Becky: Why was that a problem?

Nellie: Because it gave him a taste for ordering people around. He were only a private when we wed, you see.

Becky: Was that when he was home on leave?

Nellie: Aye. 1942 that were. He'd been called up in 1940 while we were engaged, and we hadn't had chance before he went off.

Becky: You've never liked being told what to do, have you Gran?

Nellie: Course not, lass. Who does?

Becky: Not me, that's for sure. Ask Mum. And did Grandad do a lot of it?

Nellie: Not exactly. He spent his life telling me what *not* to do.

Becky: Um, is that why that album has no later photos of him?

Nellie: Never mind that album.

Becky: What sort of things did he tell you not to do?

Nellie: All sorts. Don't drink so much. Don't keep working at the mill. Don't be so friendly with that chap. Don't encourage Sally to be rebellious. Don't keep trying to get on top of me when we're making love.

Becky: Gran! Should you be telling me that?

Nellie: Of course I should. You're a grown-up now. You need to learn a few things about life. And men.

Becky: I know quite a lot about men, thank you.

Nellie: No, you don't. Though you know more than I did at your age, I'll be bound.

Becky: Did you stop working at the mill?

Nellie: Did I 'eckers-like. Not for a good while, anyway. I loved that job. I were that good at it they didn't make me leave when I got married. They made me an overseer.

Becky: And did you really encourage Mum to be rebellious, too?

Nellie: I just wanted her to have a bit of a spark. To be like me.

Becky: So did she?

Nellie: Well, you can see what she's like now, can't you?

Becky: I'm not sure I'd want her to be wild, though, Gran. It's not how mothers should be.

Nellie: Aye, well, you're never going to have to worry about that.

Becky: But she did rebel, though.

Nellie: Not that I noticed.

Becky: But you wanted her to be like you. And she wasn't. If that's not rebelling, what is?

Nellie: I've never thought of that. Bless me!.

Becky: Wasn't Grandad in favour of - what was it? - fun, risk and excitement, then?

Nellie: Look, Becky, love. I don't want you to get the wrong idea about your Grandad. He were, well, he were grand. Before the war. He were full of life. Aye, and full of fun, risk and excitement.

Becky: Is that why you keep that album? To remind you of the early days?

Nellie doesn't reply.

I wish I'd known him. Like I knew Dad's dad.

Pause.

But who's the other man? The later photos?

Nellie: Well... Oh, Becky, I didn't intend you to see that album. Not yet. But, well, perhaps there are things you should know. Sometime... or your Mam should know but...It's difficult.

Becky: What should she know?

Nellie: Well...look, not now. You need to understand...one day, perhaps.*(Pause)* But first I'll tell you about the good times...

*Scene merges to a provincial dancehall of the 1930s, with perhaps back projection showing dancers. A big band is heard playing a lively swing tune, loud enough for voices to need raising. **Jack**, aged about 20 and dressed in cheap but stylish casual clothes of the period, appears and pulls a rejuvenated **Nellie** from her chair*

Jack: Come on, lass. Stop lazing about.

Nellie: I'm not lazing about, you gert lummo. I'm just giving my arse a rest for a minute.

Jack: So get it moving.

Nellie: Right, lad. Just watch it.

*They start dancing enthusiastically - perhaps the lindy-hop. **Becky** is still watching.*

Jack: Shake it, baby!

Nellie: Wheee!

Jack: We can go for a spin in the Swallow after this. I'll show you how we've souped her up.

Nellie: Right. You're on.

Jack: Then we'll park somewhere and...

Nellie: I can't be late. My Mam'll go mad.

Jack: Don't fret, lass. I'll get thee back. Now, you watch this.

*He jumps on a table, dancing exuberantly. **Nellie** laughs and applauds. **Becky** joins in the applause.*

Nellie: That were at the Alex in town. Used to take me there whenever there were a good band on.

Becky: What, here in Halifax?

Nellie: Of course. Got us thrown out a couple of times. *(She laughs)* And once on my birthday he splashed out and we went to the New Victoria in Bradford. Billy Hey and his Band. They were champion. It's the Odeon now and all shut up.

Becky: Why were you thrown out?

Nellie: Well...

*She gestures towards **Jack** on the table.*

Becky: And he had a car?

Nellie: (*watching **Jack** and laughing*) Oh, aye. He were mad on cars then. He worked in a garage with a couple of pals, Ted and Harry. They bought an old car cheap between them - an Austin Seven Swallow it was - lovely bright yellow - then replaced the engine with summat much more powerful they got from somewhere.

Jack jumps down from the table and grabs **Nellie's** hand.

Jack: Come on. They're coming to stop me. Let's go for that spin.

As they run off the scene changes and they are found sitting close together in a small car, driving through the dark, headlights on. Sound and lighting effects, or possibly back-projection, delineate the action.

I'll let him pass, then get him back. He won't be expecting a Swallow to match him in that big Riley.

Nellie giggles excitedly.

Right. Now we'll show him.

He accelerates and overtakes.

'Ey up, lad. Dawdling a bit?

Nellie: (*gesturing through the car window*) Wheeee! Slow coach. Now - can tha catch that one up ahead?

Jack: What? The Humber? You betcha.

The engine roars louder.

Nellie: Come on. We're catching him...Now!...Oh. look out!

*An oncoming car passes close by at speed, horn blaring. **Jack** twists the steering wheel and laughs.*

Jack: Missed us.

They glance behind at the car they've overtaken.

Nellie: That were easy. Let's find another.

Scene fades and returns to Nellie's living room.

Becky: Sounds a bit crazy.

Nellie: Oh, that were just part of it. But he had ambition, too. They all did, him and Ted and Harry. Wanted to open their own garage one day.

Becky: But after the war he wasn't the same?

Nellie: No, he bloody wasn't.

Becky: But why? Had he had a bad time?

Nellie: *(Beat)* Well, all right, I'll tell you a bit. Aye, he had. That were what made him irritable all the time. That and the anxiety attacks. But why did it have to turn him so bloody miserable for the rest of his life?

*Scene changes to the same living room, but in about 1950. **Jack** is sitting on the rocking chair. **Nellie** is standing. **Becky** is watching. A radio is quietly playing dance music.*

Nellie: Can't we go out, somewhere, love? There's a dance at the Alex. Or what about the pictures? *Annie Get Your Gun's* on at the Royal.

Jack: I'm all right listening to the wireless.

Nellie: But what about me? You never take me anywhere.

Jack: You know I don't like going out. Stop bloody asking me all the time. I don't feel safe when I'm out. It's like...Anyway, I don't know why you're always wanting to go off gallivanting around, after them long shifts at that bloody mill.

Nellie: They're not as long as they were during the war. Any road I just like to go out. So did you in the old days. Remember what the doctor says. It might help you.

Jack: Aye, well. I don't trust that bloody doctor. I'm not going there any more. And it's time you stopped that job.

Nellie: Oh, don't start that. Besides, we need the money now you're out of work again.

Jack: It's not my fault. I'll find summat soon. Nowt I've tried has suited me since the garage closed.

Nellie: But you haven't really tried owt, have you? Anyway, you were going to open your own garage. You and Ted and...

She hesitates.

Jack: Aye. And Harry. But that's not going to happen now, is it?

Nellie: Ted still wants to do it

Jack: For Christ's sake, leave me alone. I'm fed up with hearing about bloody Ted. Have you been seeing him again? I've telled thee, I won't bloody have it.

Nellie: Why shouldn't I bloody well see him? You may not want to be his pal any more but God knows I need someone I can have a laugh with.

Jack: Don't talk to me like that, woman. I'm the man you're supposed to spend your time with. I'm your bloody husband for God's sake. Any road, what have you got to laugh about?

Nellie: Aye, good question. But I still need a laugh. That's why I want a friend like Ted. Oh, Jack, love, don't you think having a bit of fun would do you good, too? Might help stop your nightmares.

Jack: You know nowt about it. You weren't there. You didn't have to go through what I did. And you didn't see...didn't have to...make the decision I did.

*He breaks down for a moment. **Nellie** goes to him and puts her arms round him.*

Nellie: Come on, Jack, love.

***Jack** recovers, then after a moment pushes her off.*

Would it help if we were able to move into a place of our own? Rather than being crammed in here with my mam.

Jack: No, it bloody wouldn't. I like it here. And let's face it, your mam isn't going to last forever, is she?

Nellie: Oh, Jack.

Jack fades away. The scene returns to the present.

The doorbell rings briefly, then the front door opens and Sally enters the porch.

That you, Sal? Leave your coat and wellies in there. Don't want snow traipsing in.

Sally: *(removing her coat and wellies)* Mother! I'm fifty-five. Stop telling me things I learnt fifty years ago. And please don't call me Sal.

Nellie: I named you. I can call you what I like. But don't you call me mother. Fifty years ago I was your mam.

Sally: Yes, well, I grew up. And since you are my mother I can call you what I like.

Nellie: No, you can't. That doesn't make sense like mine does. Have some of Becky's whisky.

Sally: You didn't get her whisky, did you? I told you not to.

Nellie: You always were a misery. You didn't think I'd take any notice did you?

Sally: Anyway, how did you get it?

Nellie: At the off-licence. How do you think?

Sally: So where are the chocolates I got for you to give her?

Nellie: They were very nice. Thank you very much.

Sally: Never mind 'thank you'. You're paying me for those.

Becky: For heaven's sake, you two! Will you give over!

Nellie: The time I give over belly-aching at your mam'll be the time I drop dead.

Sally: Roll on the day.

Becky: Mum!

Beat. Then they all laugh a little.

Nellie: I don't know what makes me think you always did as you were told.

Sally: I did when I was young. Well, usually. I just thought it was the right thing to do.

Becky: Mum always likes to do the right thing. You know that, Gran.

Nellie: Aye. She always did exactly what I told her to do, except refuse to do as she was told.

Becky: Did you tell her to do that?

Sally: Of course she didn't.

Nellie: Maybe not. But I did try to get you to think for yourself and be adventurous.

Sally: You wouldn't let me be myself. Now, I'm off shopping. Have you done me a list.

Nellie: No. I can get it myself, up the road.

Sally: You are not going out in this snow. You're ninety-six, for heaven's sake.

Nellie: What's my age got to do with it? I'm fit enough. I often go up there. That's how I got the bloody whisky.

Sally: Not in the snow.

Becky: It is quite deep, Gran. And it's icy. And there are steps remember.

Nellie: Now, don't you start, lass. I've got my stick.

Sally: I'm not arguing with you. I'm telling you. If you don't give me a list I'll get what I think and you'll have to put up with what you're given. And if you argue, I'll take your stick away.

Becky: And you keep saying she didn't rebel enough.

Nellie: She didn't. You didn't mean it about my stick, did you?

Sally: Yes, I did.

Nellie: Well, in that case I'll have a white sliced, half a pound of butter and a couple of eggs.

Sally: You can't buy eggs in twos.

Nellie: I know. But since you're doing the shopping it isn't my problem, is it?

Sally: And butter isn't good for you.

Nellie: Aye. It could take ten years off my life. I'll risk it.

Sally: Suit yourself. (*She goes to put on her coat and wellies.*) You can pay me when I fetch it. And for those chocolates.

The doorbell rings. Sally opens the door.

Oh, hello vicar. Come in. I'm just off shopping.

Rev. Mervyn Godfrey enters. *There is some confusion as he tries to take off his coat and boots while Sally is finishing putting hers on.*

Mervyn: Good morning all. Happy birthday, Becky. I won't ask if I can come in, Nellie, old girl, as I know you'll say no, but I'm jolly well coming anyway.

Nellie: Of course I would. Why would I want a sanctimonious old fart like you cluttering up my parlour.

Sally: I'd better go. Bye, vicar. Goodbye, Mother. And Becky - don't drink any more whisky. Remember your party tonight.

She exits through the front door. Nellie picks up the bottle.

Nellie: Sup up, lass and I'll top you up. And should I offer one to Mervyn?

Mervyn: Of course you should after calling me a sanctimonious old fart. And I shall refuse for the same reason.

Becky: But you can't refuse me, vicar. It's my whisky. Gran just gave it to me.

Mervyn: In that case, I accept. Thank you.

Nellie: Get him a glass, love. And stop calling him 'vicar'. It makes the old fool even more pompous. You're grown up now. Call him Mervyn. Or Merv.

Becky: *Merv?*

She goes to fetch a glass while Nellie tops up the glasses, including one for Mervyn.

Mervyn: No, no, please not Merv. Mervyn will do fine.

Nellie: Now for God's sake sit down. You're making the place look a mess.

Becky: Gran! You really ought to be more respectful.

Mervyn: (*sitting down*) She wouldn't be your Gran if she was respectful. Nellie, I've come to ask if you'd like me to bring you communion at home tomorrow, after the service. In view of the appalling weather.

Nellie: So in return for Becky's fine single malt you're offering me cheap watered down grape juice.

Mervyn: We do not mix water with the communion wine at St. Cuthbert's.

Nellie: Well it tastes like it. You and your southern softie ways. Anyway, as you well know I come to church for the hymn-singing.

Mervyn: So you keep saying. But...

Nellie: So I'll be coming across to the service tomorrow as usual. Unless my bloody daughter confiscates my bloody stick.

Becky: Oh, Gran, you can't go out in this. Even just across the road to the church.

Nellie: Don't you tell me what I can and can't do, hoity-toity.

Becky: Well, I don't have time to argue with you, Gran. Even if I dared. I'm meeting Tom in town.

Nellie: Does your mam know?

Becky: Of course she doesn't. He's not good enough for me, remember?

Nellie: Too adventurous, I thought you said.

Becky: That too. She made that clear at the start.

*We go back a year. **Sally** materialises and speaks to **Becky**, who stands up.*

Sally: He just isn't right for you, darling. I mean, how many GCSEs did he get?

Becky: He doesn't need any more. He's training to be an electrician.

Sally: That's what I mean. You should look for someone who's going into a profession. Like your father.

Becky: Mum I just want someone I like. Someone who's fun. Someone who likes me. I miss Dad every day, of course I do, but that doesn't mean I want to have a boyfriend as a stand in.

Sally: Fun isn't the point.