

Fiction by Robert Coover

Grandmother's nose

She had only just begun to think about the world around her. Until this summer, she and the world had been much the same thing, a sweet seamless blur of life in life. But now it had broken away from her and become, not herself, but the place her self resided in, a sometimes strange and ominous other that must for one's own sake be studied, be read like a book, like the books she'd begun to read at the same time the world receded. Or maybe it was her reading that had made the world step back. Things that had once been alive and talked to her because part of her – doll, house, cloud, well – were silent now, and apart, and things that lived still on their own – flower, butterfly, mother, grandmoth-

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er – she now knew also died, another kind of distance.

This dying saddened her, though she understood it but dimly (it had little to do with her, only with the inconstant world she lived in), and it caused her to feel sorry for these ill-fated things. She used to think it was funny when her mother chopped the head off a chicken and it ran crazily around the garden; now she didn't. She no longer squashed ants and beetles underfoot or pulled the wings off flies and butterflies, and she watched old things precious to her, like her mother, with some anxiety, frightened by the possibility of their sudden absence. Since dying was a bad thing, she associated it with being bad, and so was good, at least as good as she could be: she wanted to keep her mother with her. If her mother asked her to do something, she did it. Which was why she was here.

She also associated dying with silence, for that was what it seemed to come to. So she chattered and sang the day through to chase the silence away. A futile endeavor, she knew (she somehow had this knowledge, perhaps it was something her grandmother taught her or showed her in a book), but she kept it up, doing her small part to hold back the end of things, cheerfully conversing with any creature who would stop to talk with

her. This brought smiles to most faces (she was their little heroine), though her mother sometimes scolded her: Don't speak with strangers, she would say. Well, the whole world was somewhat strange to her, even her mother sometimes; it was talk to it or let the fearful stillness reign.

Though the world was less easy to live in than before, it was more intriguing. She looked at things more closely than she had when looking at the world was like looking in at herself, her eyes, then liquid mirrors in a liquid world, now more like windows, she poised behind them, staring out, big with purpose. To be at one with things was once enough, sameness then a comfort like a fragrant kitchen or a warm bath. Now it was difference that gave her pleasure: feathers (she had no feathers), petals, wrinkles, shells, brook water's murmuring trickle over stones, not one alike, her mother's teeth (she hadn't even seen them there in her mouth before), the way a door is made, and steps, and shoes. She thought about words like dog, log, and fog, and how unlike these things were that sounded so like cousins, and she peered intensely at everything, seeking out the mystery in the busyness of ants, the odd veiny shape of leaves, the way fire burned, the skins of things.

And now it was her grandmother's nose. It was a hideous thing to see, but for that reason alone aroused her curiosity. It was much longer and darker than she remembered, creased and hairy and swollen with her illness. She knew she ought not stare at it – poor Grandma! – but fascination gripped her. Such a nose! It was as if some creature had got inside her grandmother's face and was trying to get out. She wished to touch the nose to see if it were hot or cold (Grandma lay so still! it was frightening); she touched her own instead. Yes, dying, she thought

(though her own nose reassured her), must be a horrid thing.

The rest of Grandma had been affected, too. Though she was mostly covered up under nightcap, gown, and heaped-up bedclothes as though perhaps to hide the shame of her disease, it was clear from what could be glimpsed that the dark hairy swelling had spread to other parts, and she longed – not without a little shudder of dread – to see them, to know better what dying was like. But what could not be hidden was the nose: a dark bristly outcropping poking out of the downy bedding like the toe of a dirty black boot from a cloud bank, or from snow. Plain, as her grandmother liked to say, as the nose on your face. Only a soft snort betrayed the life still in it. Grandma also liked to say that the nose was invented for old people to hang their spectacles on (Grandma's spectacles were on the table beside her bed, perched on a closed book), but the truth was, eyes were probably invented to show the nose where to go. The nose sat in the very middle of one's face for all to see, no matter how old one was, and it led the way, first to go wherever the rest went, pointing the direction. When she'd complained that she'd forgotten the way to Grandma's house, her mother had said: Oh, just follow your nose. And she had done that and here she was. Nose to nose with Grandma.

Her grandmother opened one rheumy eye under the frill of her nightcap and stared gloomily at her as though not quite recognizing her. She backed away. She really didn't know what to do. It was very quiet. Perhaps she should sing a song. I've brought you some biscuits and butter, Grandma, she said at last, her voice a timid whisper. Her grandmother closed her eye again and from under her nose let loose a deep growly burp. A nose was also for smelling

things. And Grandma did not smell very nice. On the way I also picked some herbs for tea. Shall I put some on? Tea might do you good.

No, just set those things on the table, little girl, her grandmother said without opening her lidded eye, and come get into bed with me. Her voice was hoarse and raw. Maybe it was a bad cold she was dying of.

I'd rather not, Grandma. She didn't want to hurt her grandmother's feelings, but she did not want to get close to her either, not the way she looked and smelled. She seemed to be scratching herself under the bedding. It's... not time for bed.

Her grandmother opened her near eye again and studied her a moment before emitting a mournful grunt and closing it again. All right then, she mumbled. Forget it. Do as you damned well please. Oh dear, she'd hurt her feelings anyway. Her grandmother burped sourly again and a big red tongue flopped out below her swollen nose and dangled like a dry rag on a line, or her own cap hanging there.

I'm sorry, Grandma. It's just that it scares me the way you look now.

However I look, she groaned, it can't be half so bad as how I feel. Her grandmother gaped her mouth hugely and ran her long dry tongue around the edges. It must have been – *fooshh!* – something I ate.

She felt an urge to remark on her grandmother's big toothy mouth, which was quite shocking to see when it opened all the way (so unlike her mother's mouth), but thought better of it. It would just make her grandmother even sadder. She'd said too much already, and once she started to ask questions, the list could get pretty long, not even counting the parts she couldn't see. Her big ears, for example, not quite hidden by the nightcap. She remembered a

story her grandmother told her about a little boy who was born with donkey ears. And all the rest was donkey, too. It was a sad story that ended happily when the donkey boy got into bed with a princess. She began to regret not having crawled into bed with her poor grandmother when she begged it of her. If she asked again, she would do it. Hold her breath and do it. Isn't there some way I can help, Grandma?

The only thing you're good for, child, would just make things worse. Her grandmother lapped at her nose with her long tongue, making an ominous scratchy sound. Woof. I'm really not feeling well.

I'm sorry...

And so you should be. It's your fault, you know.

Oh! Was it something I brought you that made you sick?

No, she snapped crossly, but you led me to it.

Did I? I didn't mean to.

Bah. Innocence. I eat up innocence. Grandma gnashed her teeth and another rumble rolled up from deep inside and escaped her. When I'm able to eat anything at all... foo... She opened her eye and squinted it at her. What big eyes you have, young lady. What are you staring at?

Your... your nose, Grandma.

What's the matter with it? Her grandmother reached one hand out from under the bedding to touch it. Her hand was black and hairy like her nose and her fingernails had curled to ugly claws.

Oh, it's a very *nice* nose, but... it's so... Are you dying, Grandma? she blurted out at last.

There was a grumpy pause, filled only with a snort or two. Then her grandmother sighed morosely and grunted. Looks like it. Worse luck. Not what I had in mind at all. She turned her head

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to scowl at her with both dark eyes, the frill of the nightcap down over her thick brows giving her a clownish cross-eyed look. She had to smile, she couldn't stop herself. Hey, smartypants, what's funny? You're going to die, too, you know, you're not getting out of this.

I suppose so. But not now.

Her grandmother glared at her for a moment, quite ferociously, then turned her head away and closed her eyes once more. No, she said. Not now. And she lapped scratchily at her nose again. In a story she'd read in a book, there was a woman whose nose got turned into a long blood sausage because of a bad wish, and the way her grandmother tongued her black nose made her think of it. Did her grandmother wish for something she shouldn't have?

I sort of know what dying is, Grandma. I had a bird with a broken wing and it died and turned cold and didn't do anything after that. And living, well, that's like every day. Mostly I like it. But what's the point if you just have to die and not be and forget everything?

How should I know what the damned point is, her grandmother growled. She lay there in the heaped bedding, nose high, her red tongue dangling once more below it. She didn't move. It was very quiet. Was she already dead? Or just thinking? Appetite, her grandmother said finally, breaking the silence. And the end of appetite. That's it.

That was more like the Grandma she knew. She had lots of stories about being hungry or about eating too much or the wrong things. Like the one about the little girl whose father ate her brother. He liked the dish so much he sucked every bone (now every time she ate a chicken wing, she thought of that father). The little girl gathered all the bones he threw under the table and put them together and her brother became a boy again.

Grandma often told stories about naughty boys and cruel fathers, but the little boy in this story was nice and the father was quite nice, too, even if he did sometimes eat children.

Her grandmother popped her eye open suddenly and barked in her deep raspy voice: Don't look too closely! It scared her and made her jump back. She'd been leaning in, trying to see the color of the skin under the black hairs. It was a color something like that of old driftwood. Look too closely at anything, her grandmother said, letting the dark lid fall over her eye once more and tilting her nose toward the ceiling, and what you'll see is nothing. And then you'll see it everywhere, you won't be able to see anything else. She gaped her jaws and burped grandly. Big mistake, she growled.

The thing about her grandmother's nose, so different from her own, or from anyone's she knew, she thought as she put the kettle on for tea, was that it seemed to say so much more to her than her grandmother did. Her nose was big and rough, but at the same time it looked so naked and sad and kind of embarrassing. She couldn't figure out exactly *what* she thought about it. Grandma's talk was blunt and plain and meant just what it said, no more. The nose was more mysterious and seemed to be saying several things to her at once. It was like reading a story about putting a brother back together with his licked bones and discovering later it was really about squashing bad ladies, one meaning hidden under another one, like bugs under a stone.

With a pestle she ground some of the herbs she'd brought in a mortar, then climbed up on a chair to get a cup down from the cupboard. Her grandmother's nose was both funny and frightening at the same time, and hinted at worlds beyond her imagination. Worlds, maybe,

she didn't really want to live in. If you die, Grandma, she said, crawling down from the chair, I'll save all your bones.

To chew on, I hope, her grandmother snapped, sinking deeper into the bedding. Which reminds me, she added, somewhat more lugubriously. One thing your grandmother said, as I now recall, was: Don't bite off more than you can chew.

Yes. But *you're* my grandmother.

That's right. Well – *wuurpp!* – don't forget it. Now go away. Leave me alone. Before I bite your head off just to shut you up.

This dying was surely a hard thing that her grandmother was going through, one had to expect a little bad temper. Even her grandmother's nose seemed grayer than it had been before, her tongue more raglike in its lifeless dangle, her stomach rumblings more dangerously eruptive. It was like she had some wild angry beast inside her. It made her shudder. Dying was definitely not something to look forward to. The kettle was boiling so she scraped the mortar grindings into the cup and filled it full of hot water, set the cup on the table beside the bed. Here, Grandma. This will make you feel better. Her grandmother only snarled peevishly.

Later, when she got home, her mother asked her how Grandma was feeling. Not very well, she said. A wolf had eaten her and got into bed in Grandma's nightclothes and he asked me to get in bed with him. Did you do that? No, I sort of wanted to. But then some men came in and chopped the wolf's head off and cut his tummy open to get Grandma out again. I didn't stay but I think Grandma was pretty upset. Her mother smiled, showing her teeth, and told her it was time for bed.

Was that what really happened? Maybe, maybe not, she wasn't sure. But it

was a way of remembering it, even if it was perhaps not the best way to remember poor Grandma (that nose!), though Grandma was dying or was already dead, so it didn't really matter.

She crawled into her bed, a place not so friendly as once it was, but first she touched her bedstead, the book beside it (Grandma had given it to her), her pillow, doll, felt the floorboards under her feet, convincing herself of the reality of all that, because some things today had caused her doubt. No sooner had her feet left the floor, however, than there was nothing left of that sensation except her memory of it, and that, she knew, would soon be gone, and the memory of her grandmother, too, and some day the memory of her, and she knew then that her grandmother's warning about the way she looked at things had come too late.

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