

Walter

by Lynn Beighley

I keep sneaking looks at this guy on the subway. He's old, maybe 80. Really thin, the kind of thin that makes you think of a skeleton. But he's wiry. His beard, it's a gray, shaggy mess. He's mostly bald, but the hair that grows around the sides and back of his head is too long. Thing is, you can tell it was a cut a couple of months ago.

I think I've seen this man before, in my grandmother's photos. I can't be sure, not with that beard. But there's something in the way he holds himself, something in the way his legs are crossed, that looks exactly like a man I've seen in grams' yellowed album. And he's wearing a shirt that says "NAVY" which makes me wonder even more.

I remember a stormy spring night when I was a kid and grams was babysitting me at her apartment. This was not long before she died in the car accident. The power went out, so she lit some candles. I was bored and being kind of a brat. She was doing her best to entertain me. She pulled out a photo album and started showing me photos of herself as a little girl. She looked just like me. Long hair. You could tell it was blond even in a black and white photo.

I looked up at her and wondered if I'd look like her when I was in my fifties. Grams in her fifties was thin, she wore gorgeous clothes. She took great care of herself. She was divorced at the time and was dating at least three men.

She turned the page of the album. There she was in her teens. And standing next to a hot looking guy in a leather jacket and she was wearing an honest-to-god poodle skirt. "Oh, that was Johnny," she said. I started pumping her for information, because I was twelve and the idea of my grams dating a boy fascinated me. There wasn't much to tell, or rather there wasn't much she was willing to tell me.

"He was the first boy who ever kissed me. But then he got back together with his girlfriend."

It's only as I remember these words now that I realize how strange that sounds. He wasn't her boyfriend?

She flipped the page and there she was in a Navy uniform, my dad a toddler standing next to her. And then, I didn't think much of it at the time, she tried to quickly flip some pages over. I stopped her.

"You skipped some pages, grams."

She sighed and flipped them back. This is where I saw him. I remember it. He was in nearly all the photos on this page. He was in uniform. There was a picture of him in between two women, one of them my grams, his arms around both of them. There was another shot in a garden where he was kissing my grams, really kissing her, like a Hollywood kiss. Leaning her back a little, one of his legs in between her legs, his whole body wrapped around her, keeping her pressed closely to him, keeping her from falling backwards. And there was a photo of this man on a park bench, sitting exactly like he's sitting now.

"Grams, who's that?"

"Oh, nobody. Walter."

She turned the page. But I didn't let up.

"Why was he kissing you? Was Walter your boyfriend?"

"No, he was just being silly. He was Marjorie's husband," she said.

Next I saw her in her wedding dress with gramps. She talked about the wedding, but she didn't say anything about gramps. Neither of us did. Talking about gramps was pretty much off limits, and I knew it. I didn't find out until much later that my grandpa left her right after my father was born.

There was one more picture of Walter. He was kneeling in front of a little boy, my father as a child, showing my dad how to hold the reel of string attached to a kite.

"What happened to Walter?" I ask

"I don't know" she said, "he shipped out. I never heard from him or Marjorie."

As I sit here on this train, looking at this man, I think how

much he looks like the man in the photos, Walter. And I think how much he looks like my dad. And I wonder, and make connections, and think how ridiculous I'm being.

I clear my throat. We're pulling into a station and the man is standing, gripping the pole to steady himself. I stand up too, even though this isn't my stop.

"Walter?" I say. I can't believe I say it. I can't believe it.

And he looks at me and smiles. And I look at him. The train stops. He turns away, and steps off the train. I don't follow.

