

The Bureau

When my nanna wanted to know what was going on in the neighborhood she would turn to *the Bureau*. No, the bureau wasn't some unofficial "office of council estate gossip." It was a piece of furniture, an Art Deco cabinet. It consisted of a pull down desk, over three drawers, flanked on either side by two cupboards - with the all important glass doors. The cabinet was strategically placed on an angle, in the corner of the lounge, by the front window, where the glass doors would mirror the street outside.

The stealth operative she was, little nanna could sit on her settee, turn to the bureau, and see everything going on in Luttrell Crescent reflected in its glass doors. The routine comings and goings of the milkman, the post man, the gas man, the rent man, and even the rag and bone man, back in the day. Then there were window cleaners, furniture deliveries, someone canvassing for political votes, and the unsettling sight of a police car on the corner. Occasionally there was more excitement, like the ambulance at Mrs. Ramsbottom's; that would generate a mental note to check the death notices in the Yorkshire Evening Post. Then of course, there was Betsy the goat. She frequently escaped her suburban pen, in favor of a life roaming in near by Clayton woods. Lives on the council estate all played out in front of nanna's watchful eyes.

I should perhaps mention my nanna was called Kitty Lyons. And while that might sound like the moniker of a starlet from a 1960s spy movie, with thigh length boots and cats eye makeup - nanna was in fact only 4 ft. something, with an impeccable perm, and fondness for cardigans.

For nanna the bureau was her secret, sophisticated surveillance system. For everyone else the bureau was where nanna stored her ice cream dishes and fancy glasses, whiskey and other spirits. The drawers held boxes of Christmas cards , airmail stamps, and an old yellow tape measure from grandad's cloth cutting days as a tailor. There was also a map of the U.S., so she knew where her grandson now lived. (Still, she thought I was living in *Colombia, South America* and not *Columbia South Carolina* and frequently wanted to know if I had problems with the drug cartels.)

When she was on top of her game, nanna could sit on the settee, watch her favorite soap, knit a new cardigan, hold a conversation, and most importantly, simultaneously surveil the whole of Luttrell Crescent, all the while unnoticed.

If she saw someone she didn't know, her interest was peeked. She would dismount from the settee and move furtively to the window for a closer look; hiding behind her flowery summer curtains, or if daylight savings had ended we were back to the heavy orange winter ones. A large rotary dial phone was conveniently placed to her side if a communiqué, most likely to Mrs. Emmet, was required.

If the bureau was nanna's first line of defense, the gate was her second. She purposely never oiled her squeaky gate. Its rusty squeak warned of approaching Jehovah Witnesses or Mormon missionaries. But on a blessed day, it heralded the approach of her beloved Father Pearson, whose vestments she washed with devotion and ironed with military precision. (And didn't she just know how to get candle wax off the altar carpet using brown paper and a hot iron - she was the Angus Macgyver of Holy Name Church.)

As a child, when I visited my nanna during school holidays, she would take me to the Odean cinema to see the latest Disney release. However, there was always a slight detour on the way. *I just need to pop into this church, love*, she would say. We'd enter the dark, dank hollows of a candle smelling church and there would be a coffin centre placed down the aisle. It would be someone nanna knew from her working days at Burtons clothing factory. After paying respects we were off to the pictures.

Inevitably, one day the coffin in the church is nanna's. Her generous heart all used up. Uncle Harry had found her dead, propped up in bed, clutching her rosary beads, a crucifix on the wall above her. Now if that doesn't qualify for express boarding and a first class flight into heaven, nothing does. I loved my nanna.

We gathered at the Holy Name Church for her funeral and sang her favorite hymn, *How Great Thou Art*. And as we sing the line, *I hear the rolling thunder*, I feel the vibrations of a removal van pulling up to number 10 Luttrell Crescent. It's the Salvation Army arriving. Yes, it took an army of sorts. They had been entrusted with emptying the contents of nanna's house, the loyal bureau included, and all its covert secrets, taken to be sold at their charity shop. The closing gate exhales one last squeak and then falls silent as the van pulls away.

I wonder where that bureau sits now. In whose corner, on what street, in which town? With its 40 years of intelligence gathering fused in the glass doors.