

MANON STEFFAN ROS



FEATHER

Manon Steffan Ros is an author, screenwriter and playwright. She has written more than forty books in her native language, Welsh. Her YA novel, *The Blue Book of Nebo*, won the Yoto Carnegie Medal for Writing in 2023, and her children's title *Me and Aaron Ramsey*, was published in April 2024. Manon lives with her family in mid Wales.

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The Snows they Melt the Soonest

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Chapter 1

I never expected to have a story to tell.

You just don't get books about people like me. I'm not a main character type. I know some people that are – the popular kids at school, who always have loads of people to hang out with, and who the teachers like. Usually the ones who live in the villages or in the posh part of town, up on the hill. My mate Kieran is a bit like that. You could *totally* imagine someone writing a book about him.

But me, I'm just ordinary. Average. I'm not the least or most popular in my class, and I'm not gifted at English or football or anything, really. I live with my parents in town, and I'm one of the people that other people tend to forget about. Not in a mean way – I'm just invisible, I suppose. I'm lucky that Kieran wants to be my mate, because that's how I think people remember who I am – Huw, Kieran's mate.

But I *do* have a story, and here it is. I'm not going to pretend to be popular or rich just to make you like me, but I'll tell the truth, exactly as it happened.

‘Hello! It’s only me!’

I pushed open the front door and kicked off my trainers. Nan’s house smelled amazing, like cake and polish and open windows. I could hear music blaring in the back kitchen. She was listening to ABBA again.

Nan lived on the High Street, next to a computer shop and across the road from a Chinese takeaway. Her house used to be a grocer’s shop, long before I was born. There was a black and white photo on the wall of the living room of how it used to be, all bulging shelves of food and soaps and cigarettes.

‘Come through!’ Nan called, as she did every afternoon.

You’ve probably already got an image in your head of my nan. Most nans in books and films and games are pretty similar to one another. White or grey hair in that short, curly, old-fashioned cut; always quite short in stature; almost always in dresses or skirts. But my grandmother was nothing like that. She was tall and had long wavy hair that she dyed a dark brown; she wore jeans and cool trainers and rings on most of her fingers. Her house wasn’t like the houses that my friends’ grandparents lived in. Hers was chock-full of plants, with dozens of pictures and paintings on the

walls and colourful lamps dotted about the place.

I walked through into the kitchen and grinned at Nan, who was in the middle of cutting me a slice of a huge, freshly baked cake. 'I thought we should celebrate!'

'Celebrate what?' I asked, puzzled.

Nan giggled. 'I don't know. That it's a Friday?'

'Ace!' I grinned, sitting down at the table and taking the plate. The slice of cake was almost the size of my head. 'Looks yummy!'

'I put peanut butter in it instead of jam.' I loved peanut butter. She cut herself a thick wedge of the cake. 'How was school?'

'Okay. I still don't get long division.'

'Pah!' she shook her head and grimaced, her mouth full of cake. 'What a waste of time! What's the point in learning all of that stuff when they've invented calculators?'

See what I mean about Nan being a bit different?

'It's such nonsense!' she went on. 'They'll teach you all that stuff you don't need, but no one will tell you how to pay a bill or how to cook a decent bowl of pasta!'

I'd heard this many, many times before, and I never got tired of it. It was always good fun when Nan got on her high horse. She'd be saying next that schools should teach lessons on kindness.

‘What they *should* be teaching you is lessons about kindness.’ She stabbed her cake with her fork and shook her head. ‘How to disagree with other people without falling out, that kind of thing. The world would be so much better if you could have a GCSE in kindness!’

I nodded, though I could just imagine how difficult it would be to find anyone to teach *that* class. ‘Hey look, Nan! Percy’s back!’

Nan turned in delight to see the collared dove perching on the kitchen windowsill. Percy had been coming to see her for at least a year, and she loved him. Sometimes he’d bring his mate, Petra, with him and they’d sit in the garden cooing as Nan fetched them something to eat.

She immediately crumbed up the remains of her cake and went out to the garden. Percy fluttered away to a safe distance while Nan scattered the cake onto the sill. Then she stood back to see Percy return and peck happily at the cake. I watched her smile.

She *loved* birds. They seemed to love her too, and know that they were safe with her. She’d told me a million times about her father, who’d kept racing pigeons, and the way he had a special voice that he used with the birds. It was a soft and kind voice, though his usual tone was hard and clipped, even with his own children. He’d always keep a pocketful of raisin

biscuits for the birds, though he'd tell Nan and her brother that biscuits were unnecessary and wasteful. My great grandfather didn't seem like a very nice man from the stories I'd heard, but he'd certainly given my nan a wonderful love of birds.

Dad sometimes told her off for feeding them all the time – 'You'll get rats again! They love cake and bread and nuts too, Mum!' – but Nan wasn't going to let any rodents spoil her fun. Her mind always seemed to wander to faraway places when she was watching the birds, as if she wasn't quite here. I loved the way her face softened when that happened, the way her eyes didn't seem to focus on anything in particular.

I sat by the kitchen table, savouring the last of my cake. It really was delicious. ABBA was still playing in the background, and Percy was demolishing his cake outside in the sun, and I had no school for six entire weeks. Life seemed pretty much perfect.

When Nan came in, her face was bright and seemed to shine with happiness. All because of one hungry bird! She put her empty plate in the sink and turned to look at me, smiling.

Oddly, she seemed surprised to see me.

'Oh Johnny! I'm so glad you've come!' she said, and leaned in to give me a hug.

And that's when I knew that Nan was not well.

Because I'm not Johnny, I'm Huw. Johnny was Nan's brother, who died over seventy years ago in the Second World War.

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