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His Dead Mother

By Colin Garrow

It's funny how we remember things in fragments and half-images, our minds fitting together the missing pieces in re-creations of something approaching the truth, or not, as the case may be. Like a series of old photographs, I can see Tony's house and its contents quite clearly, though I know it was most likely completely different. I remember the living room, with its solid, central dining table dominating the space, as those sort of tables did in those days, when families still ate together. I was never invited in, but left on the doorstep while he took a lifetime to find a coat, a scarf, or a football. And often, in those few quiet moments waiting at the half-open door, I'd peer along the gloomy hallway and see his father at the table, or standing in the kitchen, chubby fingers toiling with some unfamiliar routine, a melancholic smile telling of his grief.

The house was on my way home, so I'd occasionally catch Tony coming in or going out, kicking a ball around in the front garden, or playing with a model aeroplane. Sometimes his mother would be at the window, or standing in the doorway, calling him in for tea. She wasn't dead at that point, obviously, but she never looked terribly healthy and her voice rasped, like she had something stuck in her throat. She must have got ill quickly, but it was months later, long after I'd noticed her absence and silently wondered where she'd gone, that Tony referred to her death as an event.

One afternoon, in the field opposite the house, he told me how she used to listen to the radio. He said this as if it were an afterthought to something he'd already mentioned, his sing-song voice cheerful and buoyant, as if he were chatting about new shoes, *The Dandy*, or a fish-n-chip supper.

I probably said something banal, like What happened to her? But he went off on a tangent about some TV programme or other, so whatever killed her would have to remain a mystery to me. In the days that followed, I watched him carefully, waiting for a chance to ask what I hoped would be a seemingly innocent question that might lead to some juicy titbit I could mull over in the safety of my own room, but he never mentioned again.

Not having any actual experience of death myself, I found it intriguing to monitor, in my rather naive and slightly disturbed eight-year-old way, how other people reacted to those who'd lost someone. Gracie, one of the few girls I was friendly with at the time, had a younger sister who'd died in a fire, and I often wondered how it affected her. I remember in class once, when the teacher (a suitably mean and rather strident woman) gave Gracie what I can only call a severe tongue-lashing for laughing inappropriately. I was deeply offended on Gracie's behalf and wanted to jump up and tell the stupid teacher what I thought of her - something along the lines of Don't you know her sister died? But of course, I didn't do anything of the sort, and instead

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speculated on whether Gracie and Tony knew about each other's loss. Perhaps if they had, I thought, some kind of kindred spirtly sort of thing might have emerged.

For a while, I forgot about the whole Dead Mother thing, in favour of more suitable pursuits, but it came back to haunt me one day after school when I invited Tony round to my house to play. I don't recall anything about what we did, but at some point we decided to go outside. While Tony waited for me in our kitchenette, I ran to the front of the house to change my shoes. Having done this, and for no particular reason I can bring to mind, I stood at the foot of the stairs, out of sight of Tony and peered round the corner to watch him.

He called to me to hurry up and at the same time, helped himself to our biscuit jar, which not only contained the better quality biscuits from our family assortment, but a considerable number of sweets and chocolates from my own collection. Stuffing his pockets with everything he could get his hands on, and all the while calling out Hurry up, What you doing? Let's go, Tony never once took his eyes off the prize. When he'd shoved as much as possible into every available compartment, he turned and looked along the passage, at which point I nimbly stepped out of my hiding place as if emerging from some hidden room.

It bothered me that my so-called friend felt it was perfectly okay to take things that didn't belong to him. I wouldn't have minded so much if he'd stolen things from someone else, and to be fair, years later, I went through a similar phase myself, until a friendly newsagent (who thought I must be going through a difficult spell and should be allowed to repent my sins without recourse to police intervention), eventually caught me. What fascinated me, however, was the fact that Tony's actions could only be the result of his Dead Mother. After all, he'd been absolutely fine while she was still alive, so the only explanation was that something must have changed with her passing.

What that change might have been will have to remain a mystery, since I quickly decided that, while I was more than happy for Tony to help himself to other people's property, I was decidedly not happy for him to help himself to mine. After the incident with the biscuit jar, I took a different route home from school and, as only rich people had telephones in those days, we quickly lost touch.

In later years when my brother and I regularly stole sweets, comics and paperbacks, including the complete set of the Pan Book of Horror Stories, I never once considered that my behaviour was in any way related to that of Tony's. It may be that Tony and I went through the same phase at different times in our lives, but I like to think that we might still have been friends if it hadn't been for his dead mother.

Colin Garrow's short stories have appeared in *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Flash Flood*, *Word Bohemia*, *Every Day Fiction*, *The Grind*, *A3 Review*, *Postcard Shorts*, *1,000 Words*, *Inkapture*, and *Scribble Magazine*. He currently lives in a humble cottage in North East Scotland where he writes unpublished novels.

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