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SHORT STORIES

The Sweet Taste of Death

Gran Webster died quietly in her sleep, leaving nothing behind.

The morning had begun normally with Meg groaning herself into another dreary day. She had pulled on her worn dressing gown, cleared enough space for two cereal bowls on the crowded kitchen table and smoked a cigarette as the kettle boiled for her morning shot of caffeine.

She had long since given up being houseproud, if she ever had been. The sauce bottle had a crusty beard, the pint of milk had a thick top layer that had once been cream, and last night's half-empty cup of coffee doubled as this morning's ashtray.

Meg carelessly let the kettle boil over onto the gas, which spluttered and hissed in protest. With a curse she poured the bubbling water into the instant powder, splashing some onto the lino. The cat screeched as drops landed in its nest – a cut-down superstore box and an old pullover. Meg gave it a kick in irritation, but she had a high regard for their feline lodger. It earned its keep. Theirs was the only house in the close without rats.

Throwing open the bedroom door, Meg shouted, "Come on, you two! Shift yourself! School starts in half an hour!"

She stood a moment looking at the mountainous bedclothes which concealed her two sons, David aged eight and Colin aged six. Neither moved. Once Meg would have stood fondly regarding her slumbering children. Her satisfaction in motherhood had been total, her patience unlimited. Once upon a time... before Bill had walked out on her.

She angrily twitched the curtains open, letting in the weary grey light. Still no movement.

It took the removal of the bedclothes and a skelp on his backside before David sluggishly rolled onto his unsteady feet. Colin followed without Meg's assistance and stood, rocking gently, his eyes straining to open.

"My God!" Meg muttered, "just look at the state of you pair! Get your clothes on quick and in you come. It's early to bed tonight. I can't be annoyed with this nonsense."

Meg lit up again and cupped the steaming coffee in her bony hands. She stared out of the back window. Through the steady drizzle a lone tree was visible on a slight hill in the distance. Meg no longer noticed the backcourt with its middens discreetly turned away from the inmates, its six-foot square of trampled muddy grass, its single washing line that she never used. She was grateful that her flat was two-up and she could see beyond the mess to this sad tree. It lay at an angle, bent to the wind and rain, and carried less foliage each year as children dug out and exposed its aged roots.

A squabble in the bathroom brought Meg back to the present. Her brow furrowed in irritation but she didn't care enough to interfere.

Eventually breakfast, soggy cornflakes and weak tea, was over and the brothers were ready for school.

"Go and give Gran a kiss before you go," Meg commanded. "Tell her I'll bring in her tea in a minute."

Gran Webster occupied the front room. She never left her bed, although Meg suspected her

mother of idleness not illness. Gran was obese, smelly and had a tufted beard that frightened Colin and amused David. Colin would complain that he didn't like kissing hairy faces and why didn't she shave like Dad used to sometimes. David laughed and said she should have it transplanted to her balding head.

Bill had hated the old woman, detested having to sleep in the living room with Meg while the bloated body filled his bed. He had used her as an excuse to leave. "Either she goes or I do," he had said.

Meg had just smiled and said, "Please yourself." He would have left anyway.

"Gran's dead! Gran's dead!" David yelled.

Meg sighed in exasperation. That's all I need! She levered herself slowly from the chair and shuffled into the front bedroom. The boys stood, eyes wide, staring at the old woman.

Her eyes were open, vacantly pointing at the flaking plaster on the ceiling, owl-like and blind. The heavy jowls, in deathly relaxation, gave her the appearance of a reclining Buddha. A trickle of blood had oozed out of her thin lips and congealed on her layered chins and on the pillow.

"Go to school," Meg said quietly. "I'll sort Gran."

The funeral was held the following Saturday and Bill came.

He watched the coffin rolling behind the curtains of the crematorium and felt nothing. There were no tears from the small group gathered to witness Gran Webster's final journey.

Bill went back to the flat with Meg and the boys. He had not seen his boys for months and spoilt them with crisps, chocolate and Coke. It saved talking to them.

David and Colin were puzzled by death but pleased to see their Dad again. They seldom ate sweets and it was a sure way of leaving behind a pleasant memory.

Bill put his sons to bed that night for the first time. They were curious as to what would happen now. Gran had died and Dad had come back, all inside four days. It was difficult to understand. Bill gruffly bid them good night.

"Good night," said David.

"Cheerio," said Colin.

As Bill was closing the door, Colin asked him a question in his squeaky, high-pitched voice.

"Will you be here when I wake up?"

"No."

"Just wondered. Thanks for the sweets. They were great."

David and Colin lay awake for some time, listening to the murmur of voices through the wall. Voices rose and fell, punctuated by long sullen silences. The front door slammed shut, the television was switched on and they fell asleep.

Bill did not return.

The week after the funeral Colin came home from school, his face red and sweating, his anorak off his shoulders, and his shirt-tail flapping like some abandoned seagull.

"Look at the state of you!" moaned Meg, switching off the radio and stubbing out her cigarette in the saucer.

“It’s David...”

“You’re a filthy little tyke! Coming home like a tramp! Go and get a wash.”

“David’s been knocked down! By a car! He’s in hospital!”

Meg looked at her son, lying pale, blending into the starched white sheets. His head was wrapped in a bloody, stained dressing. His lips moved as he mumbled in delirium.

He opened his eyes, but he looked unseeing at the pink ceiling. Colin stood behind Meg, trying to understand. Meg shivered as she stared at her dying son.

“Will he die?” Colin whispered. Meg heard but did not answer. She did not notice her younger son’s look, a combination of hope and fear.

“Is David going to die?” Colin asked again, this time in an urgent hiss, as if he did not want his brother to hear.

Meg looked at Colin with frightened eyes.

The boy hesitated a moment under his mother’s scrutiny

He stretched up to whisper in her ear, words for her only. “If he does, Dad will come with sweets.”