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Listen, I'm not crazy

by Candida Lloyd

“Listen, I’m not crazy. I want you to save something for me.” The grey-haired man wore a worn, black, suit and spoke with a slight accent. He’d spent his childhood in Poland or was it Hungary? Across the table from me, he pointed to a small bowl of tzatziki. It was one of the dishes I had prepared for the wake and was made from simple ingredients: yogurt, garlic, fresh mint and a little salt.

Standing next to me, my sister helped our guests to food and I felt her squeeze my finger, hard under the table. I knew what she was thinking. “Yes, you are crazy! Tight as anything – saving a little bit of tzaziki because you’re too mean to buy your own from the supermarket for 99p.” This narrative about our step-father was a familiar one.

Earlier, outside the crematorium she rolled her eyes when we saw the ordinary vehicle used to transport my mother’s coffin which was also plain. Economical. We’d left these arrangements to Eryk and he didn’t consider fancy wood, or a shiny, black hearse to be money well spent. After all, the car was only used for an hour and the box would soon be reduced to ashes.

People were packed into the terraced, London house my mother and father had bought before my sister and I were born. My mother had remained there for the rest of her life. It had hardly changed, but for the addition of Eryk’s armchair in the living room and few paintings my mother thought to be in poor taste.

She'd described him as her companion, never giving him the status of our father, her real love - a 'romantic, creative man'. His infidelity and their acrimonious divorce were too painful to mention as part of their story.

My daughter pushed in front of my step father " 'scuse me Grandad!" she said grabbing a chocolate brownie from the buffet and running off to join the fun. My sister gathered glasses to wash.

"The way you make it" he said, "the tzatziki, reminds me of my matka". His eyes moistened. "She was so full of love - like your mother was for you. She called me 'my darlink' and never made me feel different. You see, when I was born, my birth mother couldn't keep me, she was too young. Matka was in the bed next to hers in the maternity ward with her seventh baby. She took me home with her. You could do that in those days, not like now. We all lived in a too-small house, but it was never mentioned that I had different parents."

He paused for a moment.

"Except for my father. He would put me in the cupboard and close the door. Only me. None of the others. He wanted to remind me that I wasn't his choice"

In those few sentences I learned more about this man than I had in twenty years. I spooned tzatziki into a Tupperware container. "I'll put this in the fridge for you" I said.