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Not a Short Story

A timed exercise

by Chris Kingham

My mother died when I was seven years old. I do not remember all that much prior to this period. I do not remember all that much about her. Apparently that is a fairly common phenomenon.

She was Irish, and I vaguely recall her being both fun but traditional. She would eat cream cakes and tell ghost stories, yet feel guilt and go to church multiple times per week. She was Catholic.

My father is a product of his time. He is a wonderful man in many ways, but definitely a product of his time. He worked hard. Very, very hard. But he didn't change nappies or cook or clean. He just didn't. These five hundred or so words are not the place to analyse whether or not that were right or wrong. Just one of those things.

What harrows me most about my mother's departure is the passive aggressive nature as to the final full stop. Or at least the account I was told in later years. She had been ill for some time when she woke up my father in the early hours of one night in March, 1993. She apparently simply asked him to make her a cup of tea, to which he obliged. When he returned she had gone. I cannot fully process that sequence of events, even so many years later. Did she know she was about to die? If so, was she sparing my father from seeing her last breath? Or was it simply a coincidence?

I also hate the blind panic that must have been going through his head. Not only had he lost the love of his life, but he also had a seven year old and a thirteen year old sleeping peacefully only feet away. Dead to the world.

As a side note it is also worth mentioning that every night my brother and I would come into our parent's bedroom and give our mother a kiss goodnight. The night of her death she called us back for a second kiss. I cannot recall this happening on other nights. Our mother was very affectionate (I am told) and therefore this element of the story is not especially weird or wonderful. But she called us back as we were about to leave the room. It did feel different. Crazy as that might sound.

As I have alluded to earlier, my father could not cook. Boy did he have to learn quickly. By his own admission he would intentionally burn every meal he gave us - such was his fear of poisoning us. This was a time of Mad Cow Disease, fear mongering tabloid headlines and less access to information. Our meals were normally something with chips. That something normally tasting of carbon in one way or another.

Very early on a tradition was born. At 8pm each evening a large bar of Cadbury Dairy Milk would appear - being split evenly between my brother and I. This tradition continued for the next decade or so until I moved out. I later learnt that the rationale behind this was because my father was so terrified that we were not being fed enough that he hoped this 'plugged any gaps'. What it has done is undoubtedly make me associate chocolate with comfort, affection and safety. While the jury certainly remains still out as to whether or not one can truly be addicted to chocolate, I think I would make an interesting case study.

It doesn't need to be a candle lit dinner, or a grand banquet, to bring people together. 100 grams of Dairy Milk, and a brief discussion over who would have the paper wrapper, and who would have the purple foil, can have a profound effect on things.