

Black Ice

by MaryPat Campbell

“You’ve got your dad’s eyes,” Dora told her son Dennis Junior as he sat at the kitchen table scooping his porridge from the bowl. Dennis looked up and scowled at his mother. What good was it having his father’s eyes when he’s not even here, he thought. Dennis’s mum’s eyes often filled with tears when she said this kind of thing to him. Why do grownups always get sad when they remember?

Dennis put a few more raisins on top of his porridge and another dribble of honey. A bit of sweetness always helped. Dennis Junior and his mum were sitting at the kitchen table by the window looking out onto the balcony laced with the shadows of all the pots of herbs and flowers his mother liked to grow there. When Dennis blurred his eyes it looked a bit like they lived in the country with a big wide sky above and the clouds scudding past. But when he focused his eyes again and saw the other blocks of flats identical to theirs looming all around, and heard the rumble of the city just round the corner, he knew the countryside was very far away.

Dennis tried to forget the stories he’d been hearing since forever. How his dad had left for work one cold November morning heading off as usual on his bike. How his mum had made dad’s sandwiches as usual, except there was no ham that day so he had to make do with the cheese on its own. How his dad had complained good naturedly about missing the ham, and how his mum had said she would pop down to the supermarket later that day to get more ham for tomorrow’s lunch. His dad had ruffled Dennis’s hair and kissed his head before he left, and his mum had warned Dennis Senior about the black ice and to take extra care on his bike. She even suggested he might take the bus instead that day, but he scoffed and said he would be fine and told Dora not to fuss.

Dennis felt burdened by his mum's memories of his father, how he died when Dennis was just a toddler. He was teething at the time and out of sorts his mother told him, banging his spoon on his plate while whingeing loudly, not noticing his dad's leaving for work. His mum told him all this for the umpteenth time, he knew the story word for word by now. Dennis knew what would come next, the bit about how his mum got the phone call from his dad's friend Mike who worked alongside him at the Moorgate Post Office in the City.

Having no memory of his dad, except for a few photographs, one of his parents' wedding, both of them smiling happily into the camera, and another one of his dad proudly holding Dennis Junior in his arms, looking awkward and tender at the same time, in the hospital just after he was born.

Dennis wished he had an alive dad, he even wished sometimes that he could shout at his dad and tell him what he'd done to him, by going off and dying like that. Why couldn't he have gone to work on the bus that day, and none of this would have happened? He would never be free of Dennis Senior, and he sighed with the unfairness of it all.