



## What Our Mothers Never Told Us



### The funeral

We sat there, all of us, round the table where my mother used to dish us out our breakfast, lunches, dinners. Where she had served pancakes, where we'd played cards, done our homework, argued, discussed, planned trips, parties and weddings. Me, and my two brothers: Tony, his troubled brow knitted tight as a vicar's collar, and Mike, distracted, as usual, checking something on his blackberry, quiet. And Dad, his face grey like the low winter clouds outside.

We sat quiet for some time. Things needed to be said, we all knew, but we didn't know where to start.

'It was a good send off, considering,' offered Tony.

'She would have liked the music.' Dad's voice drifted, along with his thoughts.

Would she? Would she have liked the music? Probably. We'd chosen some of her favourites from years back. Yes, I can remember her swaying to that James Brown number, humming along, while she cooked. But that was many years ago. The last few years I lost sight of who she was. Little conversation, and a lot of suffering, it seemed, as the illness slowly became bigger than she was.

The four of us had all been by her side when she passed away. The nurses were kind, sensitive, left us to it. It had been peaceful, or at least that's how it seemed.

Now, sitting around the table, the hollowness inside me grew. She had died, my mum had died. We'd laid her to rest. The friends and relatives had gone, just a few left clearing away the hall so that we could come home and have some time, time to ourselves. Time to mourn? Time to move on? Time to reflect, be grateful, be angry? People say so many things at a funeral, trying to be helpful, but nothing really helps. There's a big space and I feel as if I can only take half-breaths.

I guess I'm the matriarch of the family now. But I feel like a small child, a new orphan.

Dad is drifting off again. He's mumbling, I can't make out what he's saying. Mike's tapping something into his blackberry, Tony's ruffling the ears of Polly, our dog. Behind me, the tap drips out its usual rhythm, asking for a new washer in a plea that's been running for at least two years. A blackbird with scattered song bursts out of the hedge outside the kitchen.

'You Ok Dad?' I ask.

'Uh? Oh, yes, yes,' he hums in the spaces between the words. 'There's something though, something I want to say.'

Tony lifts his eyes up. I can see this is a struggle for Dad. I wait. Tony nudges Mike, who looks up from his phone.

'Your mother,' starts Dad. 'Your mum, well, there's something she never told you.'

Our six eyes fix on Dad, unblinking.

'She had another child, a daughter.'

Whoosh. The hollowness in my stomach gets deeper, my breath shallower, and I can find no words.

'What?' Tony's voice is edged with disbelief.

'No way,' says Mike. He even manages a wry smile with the shake of his head. 'No. No way, that can't be.'

'It's true,' says Dad. He's straining. The tendons in his neck are sharp, the veins on his temples pulse. 'It's true.'

'Why,' I begin ... and then words tumble out. 'Why didn't she tell us? Who is she? Where is she? When was she born? Is she older – or younger?' And then, looking at Dad, 'Is she yours?'

He doesn't need to answer. His face tells me, No.

How like Mum. How like her, to do something like that, stoically stash it away in a place called the past, block even Dad out of it, and carry on as if it doesn't matter. I recalled times I'd seen her staring into the middle distance, mind miles away. I wondered about Dad, holding this secret, keeping her safe, or so he thought, by keeping her secret.

And I wondered about me. I have a sister, after all. Somewhere. Maybe I'm not altogether, all alone, the matriarch.

'Cup of tea anyone?' I ask, pushing my chair back from the table.