

Like Father Like Daughter

There were three generations of females left to clear up after the funeral. Lois, her daughter-in-law Kate, and granddaughter Sadie, scraped crusts into the bin and stacked plates by the sink.

One silver grey head, one fading auburn, one bright red with its unruly ringlets; they were all silent now except for an occasional sniff. Simon had been the centre of their worlds, and without him to revolve around they had nothing to say.

None of them had eaten any sandwiches; they seemed too solid to face, the cakes too frivolous. Only Mrs Porter from next door had tucked in with gusto, but she had only come for the scandal. Her young son polished off a whole plate of jam tarts; and he hadn't even known the deceased.

When Kate had first met Simon, and been taken home to meet his mother, there had been some awkward pauses in the conversation too. She didn't realise then, but Lois had only just finished dealing with the last girlfriend left hysterical by Simon's passing fancies and changing whims.

"I don't think your mother likes me," Kate said to him, as he kissed her goodbye at the garden gate, where only last night a previous girlfriend had stood hurling abuse at the curtained windows of the house.

Lois had learned not to get attached to any of the long string of sweethearts her son had loved and left.

In time, though, it looked like Kate was going to stick around. They were still together cosily sharing their stockings under the Christmas tree, and there wasn't the usual New Year crisis of lipstick on a collar or another woman's panties in his pocket. It had quite taken the drama out of Lois's laundry sessions now Simon seemed to have nothing to hide.

"She's finally warming to me," said Kate, as, winter turned into spring and she was invited to Easter lunch with the family.

When Lois saw the giant gold-wrapped egg Simon presented to Kate that afternoon, she even began to hope that there might be a grandchild she could call her own.

Soon enough the dream came true, and Sadie was born. Kate was a good mother and Simon doted on his daughter. He brought her to see Lois

religiously every Sunday, and read the paper while Grandma played with the baby.

There were holidays too; the four of them in a caravan in the pouring rain, the windows steamed up so they couldn't see the magnificent views, lost in a silly card game. Walking on a windy prom, the candyfloss getting stuck in Sadie's fuzzy hair; and Kate dipping her into the sea to wash it out.

Lois pulled the plug out of the sink and the washing-up water drained away, taking with it the chewed up and spat out remains of the funeral feast. It had all been so embarrassing; Simon had died in a spectacularly obvious way. His life, Lois supposed, had been full of little secrets; so it was only right that his death should let the big one out.

All the distant relatives and friends, and even the neighbours, had known what his own mother, and more importantly his wife, should have seen coming a mile off.

He still visited Lois on Sundays, but now he slipped off to the pub for a pint before lunch. Slowly as a dripping tap those half hours turned into hours, then half the afternoon. Lois was too enchanted by her little granddaughter, the pink princess she'd always longed for, to take much notice of how long her son had been gone. She realised, one day, that Simon just dropped Sadie off and picked her up again at tea-time. He hadn't been drinking, didn't smell of smoke; clearly hadn't spent the afternoon at the pub. Lois supposed football was out of the question, as her washing-machine had barely seen any action since Simon had left home; but she didn't ask him where he'd really been, and neither, it seemed, had Kate.

"Did you know about this?" Lois had asked her, after the accident.

Kate, grief-stricken, poured out a torrent of anger and denial.

"No, of course I didn't know about it. I'm not the kind of woman who sits by and watches her husband have an affair. Simon knew I wouldn't tolerate that. I thought you did too!"

Lois remembered how she felt when Kate had first come along; that all of Simon's girlfriends were temporary and bound to end in tragedy.

It had been a train accident. Four carriages had come off the rails, fifty people injured, two dead. Simon was one, discovered locked in the toilet cubicle with an unidentified woman, who later turned out to be a colleague from work he'd been having an affair with for six months. Although the state of their dress when the bodies were found was not revealed to the media, everyone guessed what they were up to in the British Rail loo.

Kate could have died too, with the shame.

What kept her alive was Sadie, and Sadie kept Lois alive too. There was one piece of funeral cake left on the last plate to scrape, and Sadie saved it from the bin. It was battenburg, and the colourful squares were patterned like her skirt.

Although Sadie was only eleven she had a boyfriend. He lived over the road from Grandma. She hadn't seen him at the funeral today because he played football for the under twelves, but she was hoping to bump into him later.

When the doorbell went, Kate dried her eyes and said; "I bet that's young Harry for you, love." And it seemed that Harry coming round would somehow, in a small way, be a bit of Simon showing he was still with them.

But it turned out to be the boy from next door instead, Liam Porter who ate all the jam tarts, because Sadie had encouraged him to come back later.

"I thought we were going to do kissing," the lad said, looking glumly from Sadie to her Mum and Grandma.

"Sadie!" said Kate, "I thought your boyfriend was Harry."

"She told me they were just good friends!" sighed Liam.

Then Kate and Lois looked at each and laughed, because it seemed suddenly that Simon was very much with them; in the slim, red-ringed form of his genetically unfaithful daughter.

By Alison Habens