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opening extract from

like mother, like daughter?

14 stories about girls and their mums

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Tantie

ADÈLE GERAS

"Why," asked Lorna "is our family, like, so odd?" "There's nothing odd about it," Tantie answered. "Not that I can see. Whatever do you mean?"

Lorna and Tantie were on their way to visit Gran, who was Tantie's mother, in the Roseview Home. This took about twenty minutes by bus, which gave them a good chance to chat. Tantie was easy to talk to.

"Well, your name for a start. No one calls their aunt 'Tantie'."

"They might if they had an auntie called Tanya. Tanya and Auntie... Tantie. Rhyming with scanty and panty, don't forget!" Tantie giggled. She often giggled, which was one of the things about her which was odd. No one else's aunt, as far as Lorna could see, ever did that. They laughed but they didn't giggle.

"I think it's because you're not very old," Lorna said. "You're only twenty-nine."

"Nearly thirty. No spring chicken," said Tantie.

"But you dress...well..."

"Not like the other mums. But that's one of the advantages to being an aunt, don't you see? Aunts are famously eccentric."

Tantie ran her hands through her bright red hair and pushed her enormous glasses further up her nose. The frames were red, to match her hair. She was wearing black-and-white patterned tights under a denim skirt and had a pink feather boa wound round her neck.

"You look like a teenager," Lorna said. "And anyway it's not just that... there are no men in our family. None at all. That's... well, that's unusual."

Tantie sighed. "It's just worked out like that. It's not deliberate. We like men. Your mum was married ... to your dad."

"But he's gone, hasn't he? According to Mum, he disappeared not long after I arrived. He must have hated me. Maybe it's my fault there are no men about."

"Don't be silly, Lorna. Nothing to do with you. Anyway, we're here now."

She bounded down the steps from the top deck of the bus and Lorna had the distinct impression that her aunt was glad the conversation had come to an end for the moment. Lorna wasn't. She wasn't so keen on visiting Roseview these days.

Gran had been in the home for seven years, and

was very lucky to have got a place, according to Mum. It was only because Mum was the matron's secretary that Gran was allowed to be there. Normally, Mum said, a room at Roseview cost the same as one in a five-star hotel.

"Why does Gran have to live there?" Lorna used to ask when she was much younger. She couldn't understand what was wrong with their house, which was actually Gran's house. That was quite big enough for the four of them. It turned out that Gran was becoming forgetful and it was, Tantie said, kinder to her to put her somewhere where she could be with other people, who could remind her of things.

"And, don't forget," Tantie added, "she's got her own daughter there every day, hasn't she?"

Perhaps it was more sensible to keep Gran safe, but somehow Lorna still felt her proper place was in the kitchen at home, cooking tea for everyone, or leaning against the sink with her apron on and a big smile on her face.

Lorna used to look forward to visiting Roseview. When she was five, she loved going to see her gran. All the other old ladies in the communal lounge had fussed over her, and given her sweeties, and listened to her sing nursery rhymes that she'd learned at school. Gran was proud of her, too, and that felt good. In a loud voice, she used to tell everyone: "This

is Lorna, my daughter Becky's daughter. Isn't she a pet? Becky's Matron's secretary..." As if they needed reminding. It struck Lorna that old people were funny like that: they didn't seem to mind a bit being told things over and over again. They liked it, and kept nodding their heads, and putting out their hands to touch her and admire whatever she was wearing.

She and Tantie went up the front steps and in through the big doors, then along a passage with a very shiny polished floor to Mum's room.

"Hello, Becky! We're here!" said Tantie, sticking her head round the door.

"Hello, Mum," said Lorna. "Is Gran in the sunporch?"

"Yes, dear," said Mum. "She's expecting you." She smiled briefly and then bent her head to look at her work again.

Lorna felt guilty. She felt guilty whenever she thought properly about her mum. It wasn't that she didn't love her. Of course she did. Mum was kind, and efficient, and wore proper clothes: suits and high-heeled shoes. She saw to it that everything at home worked properly, though Tantie did the cooking (in her way, which she called "inspired" and Mum called "erratic"). Somehow, she never seemed to have any time to do the things Lorna wanted to do. Once, not long ago, Lorna had plucked up the

courage to ask her about it.

"We never do stuff together, Mum," she said.

"Of course we do," Mum answered. "What sort of stuff do you mean?"

"Well... go shopping. Go to the movies. Go for walks... you know."

Mum had blushed and Lorna immediately felt bad. "I'm sorry, dear. I do have my job and then at the weekend there's the cleaning and laundry and so forth... it's not easy. And anyway, Tantie likes that sort of thing much more than I do. You've got her too, you know."

Lorna nodded. "Yes," she said. "Tantie's good fun."

"There you are then, you're lucky. Best of both worlds."

Lorna could never, ever say what she really felt, though, which was that she loved Tantie much more than she loved her own mother. Even thinking such a thing made her feel terrible. You weren't supposed to love anyone more than your mum. No one. Mums were special and wonderful and you made Mother's-Day cards for them at school and bought them flowers and everyone said they were the most important influence on how you were, what your character was and what you became when you grew up. If someone became a criminal, everyone said *What were his parents thinking?* but they meant the

mum, usually. When people got divorced, the kids went with the mums, more often than not. Lorna had asked all her friends who they loved best in the whole world and every single one of them said their mum and dad. As she didn't have a dad, she didn't have the option of loving him best, so it distressed her that the person she loved best was her auntie.

"Come on, Lorna, you're daydreaming again," said Tantie. They were in the lounge now. You had to go through that to get to the sunporch. Some old ladies were sitting in armchairs pushed right back against the walls. Lorna and Tantie knew a lot of them, because they were Gran's friends, so they had to stop and say hello. Lorna looked down at the beige and pink and green flowery carpet, because she didn't like to see the faces covered with wrinkles and brown spots, or the hands, which looked a bit like old tree roots.

Gran was all by herself in the sunporch. She looked just the same from the back, but Lorna knew that, from the front, her bright blue eyes were faded, and she didn't smile nearly as much as she used to. Lorna dutifully kissed her, and then sat on a chair while Tantie gave her the grapes they'd brought and put the magazines she liked reading on a small table next to Gran's chair.

"Lorna... is it Lorna?" Gran said, peering at her grandchild. "Come and tell me what you've been

getting up to, darling."

It was hard to know how to tell Gran things, because you were never sure that she understood what you said. Nevertheless, Lorna went through a list of the things they'd done at school. She had just started to speak about the display they were going to do at her ballet class, when Gran interrupted and spoke to Tantie.

"She's getting more and more like you, you know."

"Lorna? Nonsense. She looks like her dad, Mother. We've always said so."

"No, she doesn't. Spit and image of you, Tanya. I'm good at resemblances, me."

Tantie raised her eyebrows at Lorna and made a funny face, as if to say *Gran's lost her marbles.*

"Are they taking you all to the pantomime this year, Mother?" Tantie turned the talk away from who looked like whom and Lorna was grateful. She hated people discussing her. She half-listened as the talk drifted about in the warm afternoon and thought about what Gran had said. Did she really look like Tantie? It was possible, Lorna supposed, that she did. Tantie looked nothing like Mum, even though they were sisters. Maybe the resemblance had taken a kind of side-step. Tantie looked more like Gran than Mum did, so maybe Lorna looked like Gran. She sighed. It was getting a bit boring, just sitting here, and she

began to wish they could go home.



Lorna and Julie were playing "Pop Idol" in Lorna's bedroom.

"We need jewellery," said Julie. "And some eyeshadow. Hasn't your mum got some things we could borrow?"

"She's at work. And anyway, she doesn't have anything we'd like. My aunt, she's the one with the bling."

"Ask her, then. She's downstairs, isn't she?"

Lorna ran down and Tantie, because she was busy making pizza dough from scratch ("No packet mixes for me!") waved her away with a vague, "OK, but put everything back, please."

"Your aunt," Julie said when Lorna came back with Tantie's things "is better than Topshop."

The girls draped themselves with beads and scarves and put coloured eyeshadow on their eyelids and danced about to music from the CD player. When Julie went home, Lorna took all the borrowed finery and went downstairs to put it away.

The house was very quiet. That meant that Tantie was out. Mum was in the front room, on the sofa, reading the newspaper and probably snoozing over it. She often did that, which she said was a sign of age, even though she wasn't that old. She was twenty-

four when Lorna was born, which made her thirty-six now. Mum said Tantie was not much better than a teenager. She usually said it in a sniffy way when Tantie had done something mad, like dyeing the curtains bright yellow.

Tantie's bedroom was Lorna's favourite room in the whole house. Her bed was heaped with satin and velvet covered cushions, she had lots of interesting-looking books in a tall bookcase and framed pictures of friends and family all over one wall. Lorna liked the ones of herself as a baby. Every time she looked at one carefully, she thought, *I was dead cute.* The best picture of all showed baby Lorna sitting on Tantie's lap on the sofa in the front room (a different sofa but the same room). Next to Tantie sat a very good-looking young man.

"Who's that?" Lorna had asked, years ago. She remembered the whole conversation.

"His name was Danny," Tantie had told her. "My boyfriend at the time. When you were a baby."

"He looks really nice. What happened to him? Why didn't you marry him?"

"I would have, only he scarpered. Joined the Navy and disappeared. Never saw him again, after that."

It was obvious that Tantie couldn't really have loved Danny, or she would have made more effort to keep him. When Lorna had asked why there were

no photos of her dad, Tantie said that he was "camera-shy" and added: "Besides, he wasn't here long enough to have his picture taken."

Lorna pulled open the bottom drawer of the chest of drawers and started to put the scarves back. Her hand caught the drawer-liner as she did so, and she caught sight of a brown something... She leaned over. It looked a bit like a letter: one of those envelopes that school reports came in.

Lorna pulled it out and turned it over in her hands. There was a piece of paper inside. She held the envelope up to the light and couldn't see anything. Suddenly, she knew she was going to do something she wasn't supposed to do. She was going to open the envelope and see what was inside. Or was she? For a moment she hesitated. You were definitely not supposed to read other people's letters. Mum and Gran and even Tantie had made sure she knew that. But what if you could do it safely? What if no one ever found out you'd done it? Then it would be OK, because it would be as though you'd never done it... and anyway, maybe it wasn't a letter. Maybe it was a cutting or something. From a newspaper.

When she saw what was in the envelope, she almost put it straight back. It was a certificate, very official-looking and printed in red. Then her own name caught her eye.

Lorna Mary Bradshaw
Born 19th May, 1993

Yes, that was her birthday. This was her birth certificate. It must be.

Mother:
Tanya Susan Wallace
Born 20th July, 1976

Father:
Peter Summers
Born 6th September, 1975

Lorna blinked. She read it all over again. Mother... Tanya Susan. That was Tantie. Her second name was Susan. That was her birthday. July 20th. Gran was always going on about how hot it had been when she was having Tantie. What did this mean? Could it... was it?

"There you are, Lorna. Coming to have pizza? I've been slaving away... what's that?"

Lorna held up the certificate for Tantie to see. "I don't understand this," she said. "Does it mean... But how could it?"

Tantie sighed and sat down on the bed. "Come here, Lorna. I have to tell you something... I did

hope that I could get away with it, but actually, I'm glad you found that. You look as though you've been turned into a statue. Come and sit down. Next to me. After all, I'm your mother, as you've discovered by accident. I'm so sorry, darling. I never, never meant you to find out like this..."

Lorna sat down next to Tantie. She shook her head. "I don't understand anything. Why is Mum... I mean, why did you...?"

"I was very young. I was sixteen. I wasn't old enough to be a mum."

"What about Mum? What did she... I mean..."

"She was married. It made sense. I couldn't have given you up for adoption. Have you any idea how much I love you? Your mum... she saved me. She's been so good to us, Lorna. She wouldn't hear of giving you up. That's why your dad left... I mean Becky's husband of course. He thought she was mad. To help me out, I mean. And somehow, there never has been anyone else, since. Not really. But we've been happy here, haven't we, Lorna? You've never felt the lack of a mother, have you? That's because you've had two... two mothers."

Lorna nodded. "Were you ever going to tell me? Did you ever discuss it? You and Mum? And anyway, why couldn't you have been the mother? Lots of people have babies without being married, don't they?"

"Yes, they do, but I was still doing my A-levels. Mum and Gran both said I had to go on to university. I wanted to go, too. I was glad I went."

"Didn't you miss me?"

"Yes, I did, but it was only three years. And I came back every holiday, to see you. I had to allow your mum to bond with you, too. It was only fair to give her the chance... to be a proper mother. It was the least I could do for her, after all she'd done for me."

"But what about my dad?" Lorna asked.

"He never knew about you. He'd gone long before you were born. And I never told Danny the truth. Perhaps I should have done."

Lorna briefly considered what it would be like to have such a handsome father. She couldn't imagine it.

Tantie stood up. "There you are, love. Life is more like a soap opera than you think. Everyone's life, not just ours. We'd better go down and tell your mum what's happened. Over pizza."

"You're my mum."

"I suppose I am. But I'm your Tantie too. Sometimes I think it's better to be a Tantie."

Lorna said nothing as she followed her aunt... her mother... downstairs. At least she no longer needed to feel guilty about loving Tantie more than she loved Mum. *I was right all along. I did love my mum best.* She remembered what Gran had said about how

she looked like Tantie, and glanced in the mirror as she left the room. *I'm going to be just like her when I grow up,* she thought, and ran down the stairs to the kitchen.