

Short Story by Melanie Dixon

The Albatross

She told me she had been abandoned at birth, by her mother. That was the story of her life and all the stuff that happened to her since then dangled off that pivotal moment. She was always the victim, things were always somebody else's fault, usually mine.

She told me my father had drowned.

She said he fell off the side of a sailing yacht, late one night, somewhere off the Marlborough Sounds. His body was never found. I remember her exact words when she first told me, it's still etched onto my three year-old memory, "Daddy's gone." The story grew over the years, but whatever she said it always left me with the same thick numbness. She said there'd been a storm and he'd been swept overboard. She said he'd more than likely had one vodka too many, as was his way. She told me he'd never been around much in any case. She didn't cry.

The one thing I remember about him is his smell, sometimes I catch a whiff of it in one of those department stores. A fleeting memory of warmth and then it's gone. I had night terrors for years, those nightmares where you're surrounded by cold water and you can't breathe and..... I wake up sweating. Cold and clammy. I went to counseling when I was a teenager but I never got over it. I still won't step on board any kind of boat. Not for all the tea in China, as they say.

Then there was the photo, the one that ended up on top of the piano. I'd made her put it there

when I was small. I told her that every family had photos around the house and I wanted one of all of us, somewhere I could see it. I spent hours staring at that photo, of him and me and her, all together. I sat there playing endless scales just to look at his face. While my fingers ran mindlessly up and down the keys, I carved the shape of his bones into my mind so I could run my fingers over the lines on his face in my sleep. Up and down the scales until Mum yelled, "Will you stop that bloody noise."

I took the photo with me when I moved out, to go to college. I don't even know if Mum noticed that I'd taken it, she never mentioned it and I wasn't going to be the one to start one of her discussions.

I put him on the book shelves in my student room, so I always had him with me. Then it became habit, everywhere I went, the photo came too. I took it on my OE to London. Always thought Dad hated it in that flat, too far from the sea for him. When Mum came to visit I hid him away in my sock drawer. She said I needed to forget about him and move on, just like she'd done. "I don't want to forget him," I said. And that was a mistake. Suddenly it all came pouring out; who did I think I was, and what was I trying to do to her, and didn't I care about our family, and I didn't know anything about him or what life was like with him, and I was stupid and inconsiderate and hurtful, and all that stuff. She looked empty when she stopped.

Eventually I went home, as we all do, when we're ready. I took the photo through customs in Auckland, tucked inside my handbag with my passport and a handful of British pounds. Then all the sensible stuff. I got a job, got married, bought a house of my own. And Dad came too, sitting inside a new frame now, on my chest of drawers in the bedroom. Two smiling parents with a baby, isn't that how life is supposed to be?

For a while I imagined him turning up. As a kid I thought he'd come back for Christmas. I remember one year staying up way beyond midnight, waiting for him to walk down the garden path. He never came. Even as an adult, I thought he might come sauntering in for my 50th birthday party. I would know it was him by the way my mother went pale and had to suddenly sit down. Like she'd seen a ghost. A 75 year old ghost with a smile that could charm his way in or out of anything he chose. He was expensively dressed, in dapper blue trousers and a more subtle, slightly pink shirt.

“Happy birthday, sunshine,” he said, sauntering up to me and kissing me on both cheeks, like the French. Left, right, left, right. He handed me a package, wrapped in nautical paper. I knew it was him. It had to be, who else? My kids, stared at him, open-mouthed, like I'd taught them not to.

Of course it never happened like that. After all he was dead, had been for 47 years by that point. It didn't stop me wondering though, thinking about him. If I believed in ghosts I'd say he was haunting me, a restless spirit, never willing to let go of what could've been. I thought I caught a glimpse of him once, at the airport. A man looking so much like my Dad's photo, I almost ran up to him and threw my arms around him. I managed to stop myself. Told myself it was just my imagination. Had a glass of wine instead to calm my nerves.

As a kid, it was just me and my Mum. “You're the only one I've got,” she kept reminding me. Even when I was grown up and had a family of my own, she kept it up. Telling me how she'd be on her own if it wasn't for me. Telling me how lonely she'd be. She bought a house down the road, so she could pop in whenever she felt like it. You can guarantee that just as I was yelling at the children to hurry up and get out the door for school, my mother would turn up asking, “Is everything okay, Dear?” And smiling in that kind of smug, superior way. “They'll never forgive you,” she said. Just like she never forgave her own mother. Just like she never forgave my Dad. That was the sort of person she was, she held onto grudges for dear life, like an albatross around her

neck.

In the end it was quick, not the prolonged nursing through some awful, progressive illness, like I'd expected. That would've been her preferred option, having someone fuss over her 24 hours a day for year after year. Instead she got stomach cancer. Two weeks and it was all over. Even I didn't know it could happen quite that quick.

It wasn't until after she'd gone that I realised how much she'd controlled my life. “You should do this, you shouldn't do that,” always ready with advice, but that was just how she was. She chalked up my triumphs as her own. “Big promotion” she'd post on Facebook every time I got the smallest of pay rises, then sit and wait for the applause and admiration from her friends, pressing the update button every 30 seconds to see how many new 'likes' she had. So, when she died, it was oddly liberating, not having somebody telling me how I should live my life at every available opportunity. I wore a dark red dress to her funeral, she always hated red.

It was quick sorting out her house, she'd spent years throwing things away, like she was trying to get rid of herself. The only things I kept were the photographs – the one I already had from the top of the piano, me and Mum and Dad when life was still perfect, one of me as a toddler with another kid about my age, and a few photos of me going through school, you know those painful official photographs you have taken every year. Everything else she'd got rid of. No letters, no photos of her and Dad when they were young. Nothing. Not even an old electricity bill from 1967, even that would've been something. I sold her house to a young family and used the money to buy a bach in the Sounds. Somewhere to watch the boats going past.

A year after the funeral, he turned up. Not my father, of course not, you already know he'd

been dead for years. But a man about my age arrived on my doorstep. The first thing he said was, "I'm so sorry. It's been so long."

There was something familiar about him. He had the same rugged-looking face, the same cheeky eyes, surrounded by lines from too much laughter.

"She told me I mustn't see you," he said.

"Who?"

"Our mother. She said you have my photograph."