

## *JUST SITTING*

Even from behind I knew they were father and son as soon as I saw them. Same posture exactly. Then same way of looking around them, same way of shielding their eyes, same way of putting their hands in their right back pocket. When they turned together to walk along the cliff top, I could see how much they looked alike too.

I walked up to the cliff edge and stood where they had stood. I looked out to sea and then down at the rocks. Low tide had left them wet. I looked across to where the two men were approaching a bench. Just as I was turning back to the sea, the older man put his arm around his son's shoulder. My head swung back to look, to stare in fact. And it hurt. Right down in the pit of my stomach something jabbed and a long slow ache filled my chest.

In all my years, I can honestly say it had never really mattered before. Mum had looked after me, loved me, done it well. Kept house, kept us financially by working hard. But there was one other thing she kept too—silent. She would never ever talk about my father. Simply, I had no Dad. The only thing I knew was he had gone overseas. Shortly after that I was born.

So now I looked out at the empty sea and imagined how fishermen's wives would stand waiting, aching, after a storm; waiting for the first sign of a sail on the horizon; waiting for someone to come back. I imagined straining my eyes against the glitter, imagining tiny shapes materialising out of the curtain where the sea met the sky. Then a real boat did appear; a big one, right out on the horizon.

What if? I looked back at the bench. Empty now. All I wanted was to sit with Dad. What if Dad was to come back, unannounced on a big ship, just like the one in front of me?

I walked over to the bench and nearly sat on it. It felt like trespassing. Sitting somewhere where only fathers and sons had a joint ticket. Then I did sit. A tumbling, awkward dumping of self onto the wood slats, feet getting in each other's way. It was like, it was like... a spirit had been left behind, father/son spirit if ever there could be such a thing. And I blubbed. There was nothing I could do to control it. My chest heaved, tears flowed, snot ran. How long I haven't a clue. When I finally looked up, the cliff top was still empty. So was the sea.

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Days later, I was in the pub with three mates, Tim, John and Fergs. The conversation got silly as the pints slipped down and somebody, John I think it was, asked, "Who believes in ghosts? Who would you like to see come back?"

Fergs said, "Oh shut up!" Only he said it with long jeering vowels. John and Tim snickered for a minute, then, into the silence, I said, "Dad."

"Didn't know your father was dead, Alan. Sorry mate," said John. "Wouldn't have asked if I thought it mattered. Bit of a joke. Here, I'll get you another pint. Same

again?" I knew he was embarrassed. And so was I. "He's not. At least I've never heard he is."

Something happened then. Tim, Fergs and John all seemed to sober up. Instantly. It was quite funny really, because they all put their hands between their knees, looked down at them and then with identical expressions of concern, raised their heads to look at me.

"How long since you knew your Dad?"

"Forty two years. He left before I was born."

"Does he look like you?"

"Never seen a picture of him."

"Why didn't your mum show you?"

"What happened? Why the secret?"

"Why hasn't ...?"

"Don't know. Don't know and don't know."

"So, what if he were to turn up, out of the blue, like, what would you most want to happen?"

"I'd want to sit on a bench with him."

"That all?"

"It would be enough."

"Sometimes, Alan, I think you're screwy."

"Only 'think', John?" said Fergie, winking at me.

I was relieved it ended in laughter and it gave me the chance to go home.

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The next bit of the story sounds cheesy. I'd not be surprised if you said, "Oh, come on!" and gave up reading this. It was some weeks later.

An envelope was shoved through my door. It had obviously been around a bit. It was folded into four and grubby. It looked official though and was addressed to my mother. She had died nearly two years before and the authorities should have known that. How it reached me, I'll never know, but it briefly informed Mrs Alice Taylor that Mr Eric Taylor had been released from prison in Russia and was returning to England. There was no explanation. Murderer? Spy? Crimes against humanity? What would keep him in prison that long? If a spy, a hero? Enclosed with the letter was a short note. It read:

Dear Alice,

I don't know if you want to hear this or if there is anything in England for me.

If there is, I'll look out for you at Heathrow, Terminal 1. Arriving 22.41

Thursday 9 November. That's all I'm allowed to say.

With much love, Eric.

With all the delays in forwarding the letter to me, Dad was due to arrive tomorrow. No, not today, involving some panic-driven race across town only to miss him by seconds like in Hollywood. But the longest most agonising, sleepless 38 hours I've ever known. At one end of the pain scale was the overwhelming ache to finally see my Dad; at the other, a horrendous whispering that my Dad was evil.

I got to Heathrow two hours before his flight was due to land, simply because I could not bear my own company in the house. I tried to spin out a meal in the terminal to while away time, then had a couple of drinks and then I walked around the terminal. When I got back, he was there. Flight arrived early. He was alone on a bench and I knew him straight away. He sat like me. When he looked up, he looked like me. So I just went over and sat next to him. I sat with my Dad.