

Aftershave and Cigarettes – A Short Story by Melissa Knight

Blue Stratos and tobacco, my father's distinct smell smothered by the warm stripes of wool stretched over his expanding stomach. The fibres gently scratch my face as I rest against him, cocooned by his arms. Slightly wheezy, he breathes in and out. My head and hand rise and fall with his breath, and I blink slowly, listening to his lungs fill with air. His wheeze will continue to get worse as the years go on, long after he has given the Benson and Hedges away.

I can hear our big brown telly in the background. Laughter erupts from my dad's mouth and the faint smell of sugary coffee follows. I lift my head up and turn towards the television, and see Benny Hill being chased by a group of scantily clad women.

The sound of steam escaping from the iron pulls my attention towards my mother, a vision of domestic beauty. Her mouth is turned up at the corners and it isn't long until she begins to giggle. Her lips form an o shape and loud laughs spill out, a sight that would be embarrassing years later, and then a memory that I would do anything to see again. As a child, sitting on my father's lap, I look at her and only feel warmth, happy because she is happy too.

Mum looks at me with a broad smile, asks me if I would like my bottle. I am four years old and I still drink milk from a bottle, something of a safety blanket for me, and the reason behind a slight overbite and two rows of metal glued to my teeth in ten years time. I nod and ask for Konky too. He is my best friend and toy monkey, and with my mother's help I squish him down beside the arm of the chair and dad's bear-like body. She gently stokes my blonde hair and hands me my bottle.

'Our angel,' she says to dad, but I see a sadness in her eyes which will deepen over the next two decades. My mother, an extraordinary creature, who I will only begin to

understand after her ashes rest beside those of her parents. And by then, the pieces of the puzzle may all fit together, but it is a useless picture they form because I cannot hold her and tell her the things I want to.

Sitting on my father's knee, I am protected. The sense of safety I feel with him I will not find anywhere else. His gentle nature transforms the armchair into a refuge and his big paw hand on the back of my head helps me forget mum's pained look. A child's attention is quickly diverted. As an adult I will look back and know that this strong, quiet man tried to help his wife through the memories of a violent life. I will remember that sometimes it was my mum who sat with him, turned inwards with her head against his chest, his strong brown arms cradling her. It was a rare sight which would be replaced with unpredictable moods, and episodes of depression my family would all witness, but none of us would admit to.

As cancer ate away at her body shortly after her fiftieth birthday, mum told me it was years of resentments and fears that had caused her illness.

'We are not going to fight anymore,' she told dad the day she was diagnosed.

For three months they were as they met, and their regret for years gone by was palpable.

After her last breath, I once again sought the comfort of my father's lap. Five months ago, at the age of twenty six, I sat in my mother's hospital room, wanting to disappear into my father's shirt as I wept for our loss. Sobs came from deep within him and the sound of it startled me, making me cling to him even tighter. I realised that having his daughter to hold was as much comfort to him as his arms were to me.

I may not have learned how to solve life's great problems, or even the simple ones, from sitting in my father's lap. I watched a tender and loving relationship slowly

unravel over the years, but looking back, I understand that my parents were both doing the best they could. As an adult I am now doing the same, but I am lucky enough that I can return to my father's lap, and for a moment forget the complications of an adult life.

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