

## The Card

The only thing I ever got off my old man was a birthday card when I was ten. He'd gone off when I was three and left me and mam and my sister to fend for ourselves. Mam never talks about him but my sister remembers him.

'What was dad like?' I ask.

She looks at me through dark, sleepy eyes, pushes her hair back from her eyes. Her arms are scabbed like she's been shinning up a rusty drainpipe and accidentally slid back down and scraped herself. 'Whu?'

'I said, what was dad like?'

She smiles at me, and I suss that she's still trippin' and I should ask her later when she's straight.

Anyhow, the only thing I ever got from him was a birthday card when I was ten. It said Happy Birthday Mickey! And then there was a verse inside the card that went:

*Now you're ten, and how you've grown  
It really won't be long  
'Til you're a man, and fully grown  
With arms both big and strong.*

And on the front of the card was a picture, a cartoon, of a little boy wearing a hardhat and driving a tractor. But I mean, how would he *know* I'd grown? To be honest, I was surprised he knew where I was, we moved so often.

But the killer was, at the bottom of the card, below the rhyme, he'd added:

*Remember, no one's got your back  
XX. Dad.*

I'd studied this card on more than one occasion, trying to work out some depth to what he was telling me. 'Laura, what was dad like?'

Three hours later and she's washing up. The dutiful daughter. She looked up a little, thought about my question for a second or two. Then she said, 'I love him. Still.'

'Well I hate him. What was he like, though?'

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And she said, 'Stern.'

'Stern, huh?'

'I don't mean strict; more like *serious*. Like you, a bit, but smarter, taller and better looking.' Then she laughed and slapped me across the arm, 'Dry the dishes,' she said.

It's funny, I learn a lot from my sister, mainly *don't do drugs*, which I should have written in capital letters instead of italics, but never mind, the thing is, when she's not high or shaking 'cos she needs some stuff, she's really smart and, truth be told, she's the core of our family, the strength, believe it or not. Honest, she keeps us together. There's me, fifteen, bright, got a future, they tell me, though I haven't and I'll tell you about that later, and then there's my mam, as honest as, and working, and sensible (though not in her choice of boyfriends or anything) and all that stuff. And then there's Laura. Nineteen, and a junkie, but she holds the family together. Cos mam's a flake and useless, and I, basically, am at a loose end; financially, educationally, socially, morally... I won't go on.

Laura has one thing going for her; she's honest. And because she is honest she sees more than most, so she knows more than most, and she holds me and mam together.

Mam.

Hold on, I was told by my English teacher, Miss Wright, that I should show, not tell; 'too much exposition,' she'll say to me (look it up). So maybe I should stop describing my life, start showing what happens instead, but I'll get to that bit in a bit, so to speak.

Ok, so mam. My mother. She is thirty seven years old and she is a flake. A total dribble. Weak as. They should do a reality TV show on my mam – "How Not To ..."

"How Not To bring up your children."

"How Not To save for the future."

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"How Not To get a good job."

"How Not To attract a nice boyfriend."

She did once. Attract a nice boyfriend, that is. And I've read all the women's magazines she buys and I knew from the off it wasn't going to last. From the moment she said to me, 'He's kind, thoughtful, good looking. He's got a good job, Pete, and a lovely car' (a bloody good car, since you ask. You didn't? But you would have. A Kompressor. Which means Supercharger. Which also means money. Cool. German. Cool. And much more). But anyway, as she's telling me all this I'm thinking, Yeah, but mam, you're going to fall for a skinheaded nightclub doorman or a carpet salesman called Wayne and you're going to jack Pete in and tell me 'there was no spark' which translates as, you think that love equals pain, and affection means distress and you think that being nice is the equivalent of being invisible. Which it kind of is. So just be honest. Please. So, as predicted, Pete went the journey. Kompressor and all. And in moved Marc. Fifteen years younger than mam. What a tosspot.

What a racket.

It was embarrassing. It was the crime that no parent should inflict upon their children! Making those noises. I was twelve, which made Laura sixteen; she'd just failed her exams and was working in Safeway. Very content. Regular money, dreaming about her own flat. Boyfriend. And the last thing that Laura wanted was mam and Marc doing that upstairs halfway through a Sunday afternoon. Go on mam; be a mam, not a flake. Don't be desperate, please. But no. And when Marc made a play for Laura one afternoon, just a *suggestion* you understand, she screamed the place down and mam came dashing downstairs half-dressed and slapped Laura to shut her up and then slapped her again when she heard what she was accusing Marc of doing.

I'm not tough, really, I'm not. And I'm not pretending to be not tough so you'll think that really I secretly am tough either. I'm just not. So when mam took his side against Laura I couldn't drop Marc with a right hook to the jaw or a knee in the family jewels, though I really, really wanted to, so I just went and sat on the front step and listened to them row.

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It was one of those afternoons with dark and light grey clouds flying across the sky on the wind (*scudding*, as they say in really old novels). I sat on the step of our

front door watching the seagulls wheel and fly and sail on the wind. I wished I could do that.

I have this theory that, to us the world is a flat thing we stand on, but to birds it is a cliff they cling to, a huge ball and they cling to the side and then fall off and fly and glide. I'm digressing here, but I can't remember what else happened, except I know how it ended. The next morning I waited until Marc went out and then I used mam's phone to call the police and grass Marc for the twenty grams of cocaine he had stashed in a haversack under the stairs.

Bingo.

Job done.

Like I say, I'm not tough. But I don't need to be when there's five *polis* and a German Shepherd dog breaking down the door and dragging Marc screaming down the path and into a van.

Anyhow, this card I got from my dad. It said, *remember, no one's got your back*, like this was some piece of information I'd known but had forgotten, or like I already had asked someone to *get my back* and then discovered they *hadn't got it*, or something. I mean, come on dad, I don't know who you are, or where you are or what you do or anything, but come on, be a *dad* for a minute. For as long as it takes *not* to write that sentence.

I was ten years old for Chrissake.

Write *I miss you* or *We'll meet up when you're older* or *Stick in at school*. In fact, here's an idea. Don't send me a card.

Go on.

Unsend it.

But the funny thing is, daft, one-off card with a stupid picture and a deranged verse it might have been.

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But he was right.

No one's got your back.