

The Kaumatua

By Jonathan Horner

It was not my father but my mother that I looked up to and now that she is dead I guess one could say I looked within myself for solace and strength although quite often that was fairly weak at the best of times. I still looked up to my mother now and then but quite often she was only a weak distant memory and my father was weak as well because of it.

For instance in the past three years he had certainly not had the temptation to go out and try and find another partner nor had he the strength to continue communication with my mother's parents or his own brothers and sisters. Understandably they found this strange but after a year or two they accepted it and did not bother trying to leave messages on his doorstep for them just to be washed away with the rain.

Oh dear sweet lord if you could see the blank dead smile on my father's warm moist lips, if you could see how his emotions filter through his hands whenever he raises them up to cry you too would know what it is to lose a loved one.

Dad's clothes don't fit him now either. A faded cap, a shirt acting as a tourniquet on a once young belly, it's sad to see it as he becomes more and more detached from reality. I pray, as he does, that everything could be resurrected and that just a little bit of caring and love can be recaptured between us. We have never talked through our emotions. I guess it would be a wise thing to do but realistically I could never connect in the same way with my father once that his love and my mother had died. In that respect he is dead too.

No. I shouldn't look at my father in this way. It is mean and cruel and he is a good provider. Look at me. I am strong and young and have food on the table and have an education and a life in front of me. Nothing is wrong. And yet everything is wrong, because I'd gladly give it all up. I'd be a deformed little creature with a cleft palate and a warped back to just have contact with my mother again, and I assume, although I have never discussed this with dad, he would as well.

Every year my parents would take me on a trip somewhere. We didn't have a lot of money, we never did, but when dad wasn't busy with preparations for next year's planting of food and storage, we would take off in my Mum's little Morri that smelt like a damp Friday afternoon to a beach covered with Pohutukawas and camp next to the smell of a fire.

On Thursday just past Mum's car had been sitting in the garage for 3 years. I imagined it still kicked with life and zest, like my mum, but the last time I saw it was in a dim shaft of light looking through the parted weather-boards of the locked garage, and be honest it looked a little worse for wear.

Days used to alternate between me and my dad making the meals without much fuss or excitement. We would sit at the dining room table each night in silence eating, with my dad looking at his food and not at me. This went on for years without a word uttered besides pleasantries and apologies until one day,

'Son you want to go fishing?'

It was a big effort for Dad to say this and even though I didn't want to, I'd outgrown it for starters, I agreed.

The next morning I helped him get the lines ready and untangled each from the bundle that had sat under the house for the best part of an eternity. In turn we both attempted to separate the rust from the barbs whilst sitting on the front porch and for awhile things were as they always should have been. As you eat your Tip Top. As you wear your flip flops.

And so with that we walked down to the little wharf down by the half crescent bay where the fishes played and we walked barefoot over the baking stones and we fished. By god did we fish. Just like we used to with mum every Sunday, where we stand at the end of the pier in the blustery salt and bob our lines for non-existent fish.

After that Sunday, more and more Sundays we came back to the little half crescent bay with our two lines, with the third left under the house. And we would fish in the wind, the moonlit milky nights, the rain, the everything, as we enjoyed each other's company and reminisced about our lives and hers.

‘You know,’ my father started off one day at the wharf, ‘you see that chemically plant over there?’ My father sometimes had a looseness in his grammar, and I nodded back in understanding. ‘That was once all ours,’ he gurgled up from his belly and continued, ‘The land that is. We all used to fish over that estuary in about row boats and hunts for eels and occasionally, just occasionally in the deeper parts just before we’d row back, a kawhai.’ It was tantamount to my once great father, this once great kaumatua, saying, you know my son, it’s a great sadness how things change and then you are left with only memories.

And as we walked back that night over the mussel shells and the hard cold cutting rocks I looked at my father and saw that he would always be grounded in his memories. That he could never, ever since that cancerous growth was detected a little too late, look forward to events in the future. His clothes, his attitude, his emotions were all hooked up and barbed in his memories.

That’s why I no longer walk with my father down to the little half crescent bay anymore and kill the fishes that play. I’d rather make my meals and look at blank walls and die and be in the present then always refer back to her.

One day my father ran in excited with a kawhai. ‘A kawhai, a kawhai,’ he shouted but he only got a tepid, half browed little look of amusement from me. ‘But son you don’t look excited,’ he charged with emotion. Damn right dad. Damn right.

So I sit here, in my room doing my homework and I hear outside a motor chugging over, as only she could, as dad brings the little Morri to life. He no longer fishes at the little half crescent now either and as I hear the motor’s sounds disperse and fade into the quiet night’s air I sit and wonder if the kaumatua has started to live in the present again. Or still the past. It’s a start dad. It’s a start.