

Songs my Father taught me

by Alice van den Bosch

I don't have a single memory of my father when he wasn't singing, I honestly don't. One of his biggest regrets, he often told me, was that he never tried to get into any sort of singing career. His voice wasn't perfect, hadn't been trained by any sort of special diet or anything, but there was nothing else which filled me with such irrepressible joy. He just sang; around the house, in the garden, in our old, battered silver van.

We did a lot of travelling in those days, especially when I was younger. Some of my earliest memories are of me curled up on the front passenger seat, the radio turned up full volume and my dad carolling along to whatever track was being played. He wasn't particularly fussy about what song but my favourite time was in the evenings when he would get out his guitar and play and sing older songs; folk songs. I didn't always catch all the words but there was something magical about this type of music, something the crackly old radio couldn't capture in the more modern songs. My father's voice suited these songs best I always thought, sometimes wild, sometimes soft, but always sending me off into some of the best dreams I can remember from my childhood.

I was sixteen when he died, suddenly, of a heart attack. One moment he was bent over his guitar, crooning out the words to our favourite: *The Skye Boat Song*. The next he gave a short gasp and fell forwards, clutching his chest. His guitar slipped to the floor where it cracked in two, like my own shocked heart. I ran to the phone but by the time the ambulance crew arrived he was long gone. The last sight I have of him is a cold grey face from which his dark lifeless eyes stare up at me, but without quite seeing me. I will never forget that image.

The funeral was a quiet one; my father had always been a shy man and hadn't liked to mix much. Besides, he'd liked to be on the move so we had never stayed anywhere for longer than a couple of years. They asked me to do the reading and I agreed but the words tasted as dead and cold as a corpse inside my mouth and I knew they didn't mean anything at all; my father had never believed any of it. There were hymns too, dusty and mournful and so unlike my father that I wanted to scream out in the middle of the service for them all to stop. At one point I could almost have sworn I heard my father grumbling from the pew behind but when I turned around there was no one there.

Afterwards there was a reception where I found myself being hugged again and again by people I had never met before in my life. The room was full of shaking heads and grave faces, even tears, though I felt sure none of them had really known my father. In the midst of it all I just stood there, I think, numb; none of this had properly sunk in, or made me accept that he was really and truly gone.

The days after that I remember were a sort of shapeless haze, drifting from one activity to another without any sort of awareness for what I was actually doing, or that life around me was continuing as normal—except when I was feeling angry at it all, half thinking that the whole world should have stopped at the moment of my father's death, just as he'd been my whole world for the past sixteen years. I'd packed away the broken guitar—too sharp a reminder of a day I now wanted to forget—and stuffed all his music books in a box up in the attic. Their songs had all ended for me.

I went back to school a month later, already dreading all the sympathy I would receive as I stepped through the familiar gates. It felt awkward at first, even wrong that I should be trying to get back to a normal life when such a vital part of it was missing.

The head teacher had already spoken to everybody, though, so that they were all especially kind to me, but mostly left me alone. Then, one morning in assembly, a girl stood up and sang. We often had people performing

something at least once a week but it was the song that got me. She sang *The Skye Boat Song*, my favourite. My father's favourite. I couldn't stop myself; it was as if this song had knocked away the dam of numbness I had built up inside myself so that finally the tears had come, so thick and fast that they wouldn't stop. People started to notice, I mean this sixteen year old guy sobbing his eyes out in the back row must have seemed pretty ridiculous, and there was an outbreak of nervous giggling from the younger years, hastily hushed by the teachers. The girl who was singing faltered, and then stopped altogether, and I remembered how my father had been singing just before his heart attack and how abruptly his song had been ended. A lone guitar tumbling to the floor and cracking in two.. I managed to calm myself down after this deluge of memories and turned to find the singer standing there, chewing her lip nervously. She was small and round with smooth dark hair and reminded me somehow of my father's voice; not especially beautiful but full of life in a way that so many people weren't.

"I'm sorry." She said, awkwardly, because my eyes were still red from crying. There was a pause, then she said: "I heard about your dad. I can't imagine." I felt a shaky smile lift the corners of my mouth as she said this and she returned it gratefully.

"No. you were great. It was my dad's favourite song, that's all." I replied. "He was playing it the day he died. He would've loved hearing you sing it. You're really good."

"Thanks." She flushed. "I've always loved singing. I want to learn the guitar as well but I haven't saved up enough to buy an instrument yet. I'm Grace, by the way."

"Amazing Grace..." I murmured, struck by a memory of one of my father's songs. Then I glanced at her again and this time it was my turn to blush. "If you want, I've got a guitar at home. It's broken but if you can get it fixed you can have it." Her eyes—a dazzling emerald green—met mine and the smile that lit up her face was like a ray of purest sunlight. It made me feel warm all over.

“That would be amazing! Thanks David.” She said then she walked off, humming *The Skye Boat Song* to herself under her breath. She turned back once to flutter her hand in my direction and I returned it with a smile. My heart felt considerably lighter, no longer imprisoned in the stifling silence that had fallen since my father had stopped singing. A new song was playing there now; a new key, a new beat, and this song would play forever.
