

Hope Box
Elly Strigner 2012

In Layla's old room, I sit on the bed, tracing my finger across a threadbare patch on the quilt. Her room is just the way she left it three years ago. The pictures on the walls are almost petrified, suspended in their position by years-old tape; thin layers of dust have settled on every surface, absorbing the weak light from outside. A 3D image of the two of us (one of those stickers from an auto-booth, somewhere in Chinatown, I think) hovers a few inches away from the wall above her bedside lamp. Our faces are pressed together, cheek to cheek. I am grinning; Layla is pokerfaced. She is about sixteen.

A small plastic box, a blue scarf, a piece of paper and a loop of red string are resting on my lap. At this moment, these are a few of my most valued possessions.

In many ways, I was very similar to Layla when I was growing up. She doesn't believe it, of course – or rather, she doesn't want to believe it, but it's true. She's seen photos of me and my friends in the 80s, the 90s (back when I could put away six rounds of toast and butter in a heartbeat and still get told I needed a good meal), and had a good laugh at me. Kindly, though. I can tell when she's being kind. It's not that obvious unless you know her.

But on the rare occasions I get to see her now, I notice flashes of my former style about her person. Oversized shirts, tiny cut-off shorts and big boots, that kind of thing. The difference is, she's not doing it to be stylish. And yet she still manages to take it further than I used to. The full on, androgynous look never really caught on with my generation. I wouldn't have shaved my hair off, for a start. And physically she's a lot stronger. But essentially, it's all there.

That stuff is just aesthetics, though. We're more alike than she knows. When I was in my twenties I never wanted a husband, children, or any of that stuff. I suppose it's lucky I didn't get married, really. These days, it would only have widened the gap between us.

I met her father at Glastonbury festival and our entire relationship was done and dusted that weekend. When Layla was six, I spotted him on Facebook. When I say 'spotted', I mean I actively looked for him. I typed his name into the search bar on a whim. I never even knew his surname, but there he was, popping up in the list of top five blokes named Frankie; a tasteful monochrome headshot, eyes twinkling like black pearls.

I couldn't bring myself to add him then. How tacky would that have been? I considered it, for sure. I'd clicked away from his image, disgusted at myself for hunting him, and a few hours later clicked back again, but he'd vanished. Lost in that network as its popularity soared. Over the next few weeks I even doubted it had been him (my PsyKey coach often assures me that this is a classic defence mechanism. She says that sometimes we deliberately 'lose the keys before we reach that locked door'. I'm not

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sure why I pay for that kind of advice). Anyway it's too late now that Facebook charges a ridiculous subscription fee and has become 'exclusive'. Only the upper classes, celebrities or prostitutes can afford to use it these days, and there are so many dummy profiles out there that his might be one of them, if somehow he had let it become dormant.

He was from Sheffield. His eyes seemed to change colour in twilight, from slate grey, to silver, to a sparkling, coal black. He wore a piece of red string around his neck and told me he was a Buddhist, and didn't believe in attachment. I wished I didn't, either.

We met on the first night, watching Lamb; I say 'watching', though it's more likely that I was treating the music as background noise. I swayed into him, he caught me, and that, as they say, was that. We merged briefly, the way people tend to at festivals. If only we had done so in real time.

In my tent, on the last night, we had zipped ourselves into my sleeping bag, arms entwined around each other like creepers.

'Frankie', I'd whispered, 'does anybody ever call you Francis; like Black Francis?'

'No', he'd said, 'Never'. He pressed his forehead against mine so that I could only focus on one eye, huge and dark. 'Just my family'.

Then he kissed me. It's on repeat in my memory, a flickering GIF I can't stop watching. I must have had far too much too drink, though, because how else could he have left without disturbing me? When I woke up in the morning, he had gone.

Now I'm nearly sixty and Layla is twenty-five, and she has no romantic interest in men, though there have been trails of adoring, broken girls in her wake, none of whom are quite strong enough for her. There have been fewer of them in the past year or so, as far as I know. She's fazing them out, all part of her asceticism, she tells me. It's a waste, to be honest. I was going to say she's beautiful, but handsome is probably a better word for Layla. Charismatic, she is; like her Dad. How can they be so alike, when she's never even known him? I barely knew him myself. Am I imagining it? But I see him, all about her body. It's in the way she holds herself. The way she stares.

A few years ago, she persuaded me to go with her to a meeting for the Ex-Esposas Union, the grass roots of the anti-marriage movement. She wanted me to understand it all, the way she did, or does. She led me inside the old youth centre, a building that reminded me of being a girl guide, still rich with the smell of bleach and digestive biscuits, and I filtered myself into the shadows at the back of the room.

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I watched as Layla slipped quietly onto the plinth in the centre. Behind her hung a large banner. On it was a woman in white, her back to the audience, hands bound by an oversized wedding ring; above this, the caption 'Holy Matrimony?'.

My daughter cast her flinty gaze across a room full of people who called themselves 'revolutionaries' (though to my mind the only thing that qualified most of them were the tattoos). She just waited, patiently, and said nothing until everyone had shut up. They did, quite suddenly, and they listened to her, too.

I'd read online about the kinds of things the Ex-Esposas fanatics did, though Layla rolled her eyes when I told her. Crashing and sabotaging people's weddings, occupying churches, and, in more extreme cases, even taking people hostage at registry offices. And that day in the youth centre I listened, trying to push away the dull fear stirring inside me, as Layla stood on stage and lambasted marriage as another misogynistic ritual, a way of repressing women and forcing religion on society.

That was my daughter, at just twenty-one, and all those people were nodding furiously and cheering her on. But I couldn't concentrate on her words, or even fully enjoy feeling proud of her. All I could focus on were her eyes, which were exactly like Frankie's.

I was ignorant about this until I had Layla, but everything they say is true. The love you feel for your own baby is overwhelming, a tsunami, almost a burden (it's alright to admit that, these days, in fact it's encouraged - another bit of propaganda that came out of the perverse Child Limit reform policy in 2019). No child is more perfect than your own.

I see her mostly on the Holo-Gramma, now that she lives in London, though I always wish it could be in the flesh. Of course these feelings are all down to hormones and chemicals, but it amazes me that I gave birth to her. It feels like a rope is being wound around my heart every time we speak.

But she's chosen never to know what this feels like. Not because she doesn't go for men, I don't care about that (she could have a baby without a man, anyway, if she really wanted). And of course, a daughter's love for her mother is indisputable, although not quite as intense (I've got experience in this area). It boils down to this; I don't think she believes in love. That's what keeps me awake at night.

And so now I sit here, with these pieces of shrapnel on my lap, bits of the past that she might simply reject, or build a pyre for. I never went to church and never believed in marriage, so why am I challenging my own child? Shouldn't I be on her side?

But no, in this case I have to defend my own principles. I want to try and make her understand.

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I'm nearly sixty, single, and I really do like it that way, so it shouldn't matter to me that marriage is illegal. Layla's generation spat on the idea of marriage and have virtually washed it away. Christians are slowly becoming more and more penalized and hundreds of churches around the country have been closed. They had all these grand ideas to turn them into schools, rehabilitation centres, art galleries – but as far as I know most of them are derelict, or being used as squats.

Oh, I'm certain there are still people brave enough to get married in this country, although more often in secret, for fear of extremist attacks. They still believe in it, as a gesture of love and companionship. Not the evil, woman-hating institution it's touted as now. They say 'every man and woman for themselves'. But whatever happened to 'no man is an island'? Of course, my Layla is at the forefront of it all, waging war against the church; and this rebellion against marriage, the union of two people under God, is where it all began for her.

'God' she said to me, that day after the meeting, 'God is a myth, Mum' (as if I didn't already know or think that) 'He's as good as an advertising ploy, created by lunatics to control sane people'.

'I *know* that, Layla', I say out loud now, as I sit on her bed, floating somewhere between the past and the present. 'But that's not the point of God'. That's not really the point of getting married, either.

It's no good – she won't hear me. She's in the city, busy leading the revolution. I peel the hologram of us off the wall and place it carefully in the plastic box. I wrap it in the headscarf I have had since I was twenty-five, one I wore every summer for ten years, that I called my 'festival scarf'. On top of that I put the red string. It's a replica, it's not Frankie's – he'd never have been separated from that.

The last thing to go in the box is the most important piece of all. It's a scrap of paper, no bigger than my palm. It is soft around the edges, pleasing to touch. I found it in my coat pocket on the last day of Glastonbury nearly twenty-six years ago. I press it to my cheek, unfold it, and see that the black ink has begun to turn green.

*Saskia,
You're a fine lady,
Love, Francis*

When Layla got a bit older, six or seven, maybe, she began asking questions, and I always told her the truth; I always referred to him as Francis.

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I'm not stupid. Layla will probably see this as a betrayal, and think that this parcel undermines everything she campaigns for. But I need to make her see that I didn't actively reject marriage. It was an opportunity that passed me by, like a language I knew about, but could never learn.

I seal the lid and take the parcel down the hallway to the mail shuttle. I watch as it vanishes down the metal portal. I shut Layla's bedroom door, but I don't lock it.

I know why people want to get married. I know what it feels like to be in love.