

Lavender Dress by Samantha Black

The dust motes move through the air as I shift the lid off the shoebox, placing it gently beside me. Alice and Henry crowd in around it, their little hands grabbing at the photos, leaving behind the kind of smudges that only small children can manage.

Alice giggles, holding up a Polaroid. “Look, an astronaut!”

I smile. “That was your dad when he was about your age. There was a dress up day at his school. Your grandparents were in the hospital – it was only a couple of days after your Uncle Tom was born – so your parents asked me to drop him off. I still think it was the best out of all the costumes.”

We continue to sift through the piles – family holidays, and Christmases, and first days of school. I’m almost about to start packing the photos away when Alice’s voices stops me. “Who’s that? Is that you, Great Aunty Dot?”

The photo she’s holding takes my breath away. “Yes, it is,” I murmur. “Who’s that in the picture with you?” little Henry inquires.

Carefully, I take the photo from Alice, my age-spotted hands tracing over Anne’s unblemished ones. All these years later, I still remember the feel of those hands in mine, the warm grasp, the scar on her left pinkie from the time she fell as a child. But how to answer Henry’s question?

They don’t know that I’m queer as the lavender dress Anne is wearing. The photo is in black and white, but she will forever be burned into my memory in vivid technicolour. That was always her favourite dress, and mine by extension. All these years later, I still remember the long afternoon we spent in the Botanical Gardens together, the way the dress fluttered across her thighs in the breeze. The way the soft cotton bunched under my hands when we risked our public reputations behind the privacy of that one big tree. They don’t know that I’m queer as the nautical star tattoo on her wrist, the one I’d spend hours tracing, tangled beneath the covers. The night I first noticed it, she was playing the piano at a mutual friend’s gathering, her tanned hands gliding rapturously across the keys. As she’d moved to lower the piano cover at the end, her watch had slipped, exposing the point of the star. I was the only person who’d noticed, and she was the only person who’d noticed me notice.

They don’t know that I’m queer as the slurs hurled at us as we passed down Oxford Street, a place we thought would be our sanctuary. Even now, my side still feels cold from the distance she made as she stepped away from me that day. That was the first night I ever saw Anne cry, a sadness almost unimaginable compared to the radiance beaming out at me from this photo. And yet in all these memories, I don’t remember the day this photo was taken. I hadn’t even realised there were any photos of the two of us in this

box. I thought the truth of our past was buried deep enough to not intersect with the lies of the present. But, somehow, this photo remains as both a time capsule and a time machine, holding in its monochrome a dazzling kaleidoscope.

Henry wriggles next me, reminding me of the here and now. I suppose she's still out there somewhere. I lost track of her after an acquaintance mentioned she'd moved to New Zealand with her husband. 'Husband'. What a grenade of a word. And for me, this photo is all she's reduced to. This photograph and the weight of memories I can never shrug off.

"Do you know who it is, Daddy?" Alice asks. I turn, startled. I hadn't even realised Paul had entered the room. He peers over her shoulder, his hands full with the recycling he's taking out to the bin.

"Oh, that's Anne," he replies after a pause, his expression clearing once the recognition hits. "She was Aunty Dot's friend."

Ah yes. Anne. My friend.

"The two were so close they were practically sisters!" he adds.

I smile tightly, and I place the photo back in the box. Our smiling faces are smothered by the lid.