



## **Pictures**

Xavier Leret

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## Pictures . Xavier Leret

She showed me her son Davey's life, beginning with the polaroids of her huge belly in the weeks before he was born, followed by a grainy one in which he looked like a bruised, featherless chicken, moments after his birth. He looked a little red too, like he still had her blood on him, but that might have been the light. She said that she had videos too, though we didn't look at those. They were in neat rows on a book case.

I have to use the same camera, she said, the same one that we used to make the video because no one makes these tapes anymore. I plug it into the back of the television and I play them every night. I have an old television too, because I know the socket fits. She nodded with her hand covering the the page of the album that she had just opened, she closed her eyes, took in a breath, lifted her hand and opened her eyes at the same time, letting out a sigh, like it was all a beautiful surprise. This is when he was two. He had such lovely hair, I couldn't bear to cut it. He used to suck a dummy. He had a whole collection of them. He would take one out and pop another in. Look there, you see? She ran her finger tips over the image like she was feeling the sensation of his skin and where it bubbled it was like she felt him shudder.

She wasn't an old woman though she looked like she'd walked a long old way in the rain and that, and most of it up hill too and there was something ill about her, which I couldn't quite put my finger on, but as she looked through the photos she constantly shifted the weight of her breasts, like they weren't sitting right on her heart and as she did that, there would be a slight tremor in her jaw.

Do you like your room, she asked?

I nodded, yeah, it's comfortable, ta.

And the house, do you like the house?

It's lovely, got a character. It's bright, I said, although, I was lying about it being bright, (but to be fair I had booked myself in a little late in the day).

I like to fill the place with sunlight, she said. In the morning it kills the germs and clears the dust.

She pointed to a photo of him on a climbing frame and smiled. This was his second birthday. He was always climbing, all over the furniture, so we got him this. You know, it was the best money we ever spent. Over the years we added to it and it grew until it covered the whole garden. It

was like his kingdom. The little monkey. Of course, that's not where it stopped, no, no, he climbed every tree in the street and in the park and then after the trees he conquered the houses.

He looks like an amazing kid, I said, a right little superhero.

That made her smile as she flicked through to the middle of the album, look, there he is, on top of the house. My heart nearly stopped when I saw him there. There's a film of him, over there, in which he is running across the terraces, the sun is behind him and he looks like an angel, like one of those pictures in a glass, what do they call them?

Yeah, yeah, I said, I know what you mean, it's err, oh, what do they call them – a hologram.

A hologram, she exclaimed! Yes, that's it - but it's not a hologram in a glass, it's a hologram in a sunbeam. It's one of my happiest films of him. He looks so free. Of course it cost us a fortune in the end because, as he would run, tiles would slip, drop down, and smash on the ground, explode everywhere. It's a wonder no one was killed. My husband was furious – although, when he first saw him do it he was amazed. He used to make the films. When the neighbours complained, well, I think that got to him... Where do you come from?

Swindon, I said.

She nodded. I've never been to Swindon.

You're not missing much, I said. There's a nice old bit to it but for the most part it's modern and concrete. Got flattened in the blitz and then rebuilt in the sixties, on the cheap like. Leaves you cold, if you ask me. And there's the magic roundabout which is insane, but in a funny old way it's the nearest thing that I can think of that sums up life.

How's that, she asked?

You drive up to it, I said, to find not one roundabout, but a pattern of the damn things, which have a number of ways through and all of them are legal. You can go left, or twist right, or spin in a circle, or cut and thrust, or rev it right up and just go for it, but either way, if you're not careful, you get hit. That, I reckon, is life in a nutshell.

So why here, she asked?

I fancied a bit of the sea.

There were gulls shrieking out on the ocean which made me turn to look.

You like the sea, she asked?

I nearly drowned in it once, I answered. Got a mouthful of salt water and swallowed and then before I knew it, I was choking. The salt was

too much. I've never liked salt, never, not even on my chips. You know? Bit silly really. But I do like to look at it. Yeah.

She had a hand on a breast and moved it and her teeth ground a bit. I love the sea, I find it soothes me. There is something about its rhythm that keeps me alive and I'm grateful for that. She got up and walked over to the cabinet, took out two crystal glasses, which chimed when they touched. Would you like a drink, she asked?

That would be nice.

I have brandy, would you like a brandy?

Yeah, I like a brandy every once in a while.

She produced a bottle of brandy which had a fat base and a thin neck. The glass was misted like the windows on a dead shop. She put a glass in front of me and one in front of her chair and poured a large drink into both of them, put the bottle back and sat down. We clinked our glasses but our hands deadened the sound into a clunk, a broken chime on a clock. I put the glass to my lips. The brandy was warm and burnt as I swallowed.

Do you have any children, she asked?

Just one. A boy.

A boy?

Yeah, well sort of.

What does that mean?

I haven't seen him in a long time, not since he was... he must have been two.

I'm sorry – that you missed out on him, growing up.

That's all right, I don't remember him much. It's all a long time ago.

You've never wanted to see him?

No... no that wouldn't be right.

Really, why?

Oh, you know how things turn out, I said.

Yeah, she said sadly.

She took another sip of her drink and put the glass down and stroked the photo of her son at the age of two with curly hair and big eyes.

He's got lovely eyes, I said. He's a credit to you, a really beautiful little boy.

Yes, she said, as she turned a page and there he was, still little but in a school uniform, a white shirt, with long grey trousers. It was taken outside the house and she was standing beside him, looking happy. He was holding her hand and smiling.

That is was first day of primary school, she said. He was so scared as I took him, held my hand tight all the way. The school's only around the corner. I walk past it sometimes. They wear a different uniform now but the children sound the same when they play. If I close my eyes I can be back there. You should try and see your son.

I looked down at the table. I don't think so. He wouldn't remember me anyway. I'm sure he has someone else now. Wouldn't want to rock the boat and all that... it's been a long time, a very long time... he's practically a man now... he won't want me around. I wouldn't, not after all and everything. It's all under the old bridge, as they say.

I'm sorry to hear that, she said and I nodded and took a sip of my drink. There were flowers in the wall paper on the walls. The sofa and chairs were green and looked like some kid had spent a bit of time jumping on them, a good few years it seemed to me. There were no photos of him on the walls, though, or the cabinet or the sideboard.

Here he is playing football, she said, and this is his class and this is him climbing on the rocks not so far from here and as she turned the pages one after the other, the boy shed his small teeth, grew a gummy smile, his teeth became too big, slowly his face caught up, his hair got shorter and then a bit longer, she got a little wider, but not much and at some point the polaroids were ditched for something a bit more classy.

Here he is outside church, she said, he liked this church, said the spire was a rocket to heaven. He wanted to be a rocket man and go to heaven.

I bet he climbed that spire, I said, I bet he did that, judging by the rest of what he was up to.

Her eyes dropped and her hand fell over the book, hovered over the pictures of him. The room was dark now, the sea lashing the shore outside. She kind of sighed and then stood, quietly crossed to the dimmer switch by the door, raised the candle lamps into a soft glow, shut the door which was open to the hall and returned to her seat. Her hands fell over the book. She closed her eyes and breathed there for a moment and then looked at me directly and slowly she turned to the back of the book to reveal him lying in a coffin in a church. He fell, she said, turning the pages through a packed chapel, through the tears and the cries, to her hand upon his face, to her final farewell, to the stone that marks his rest.

I didn't know what to say. I looked at the last photo for a bit and then I looked up at her but she wasn't looking at me. She got up and walked to her sea view window. The sun was setting. The sky was slashed and bloody and the night was coming out in a bruise. She was holding herself steady and what was left of the gold of the day was stuck to her, but

she didn't care for anything like gold, not the gold of sunshine, not the gold of kings, none of that, as she stood there alone, in front of that big window with the giant of the world looking in.

I looked at my glass and we didn't say anything for a long while and then, finally, she asked, have you got a photo of your son?

Mine?

Yes.

I've got one, I said.

Just the one?

Yeah. I almost lost it once, but it came back.

That's what counts, she said.

Is it?

Yes. And with that she smiled at me. Have you got it, I'd love to have a look at him.

OK, I said, why not? I never looks at it these days. I took my wallet out of my trousers, fished inside the little pocket for stamps and that and pulled the photo out. It had a rip down one side. She came back over and sat down and I handed it to her. He looks a right little bruiser, I said, with his hair shorn short. He was big too, I bet its he's right muscly now, not like me.

He looks lovely, she said.

He weren't a bad kid. Not really, not compared to others. He didn't like going to bed, I remember that. Used to scream the house down.

What's his name?

Steve, I said, but I used to call him Little Sparky.

She ran her finger down the torn edge. Was this where his mother was, she asked?

Yeah.

She nodded.

She weren't around much, I said, and when she was, well, you know... I looked into the alcoholic mist of my glass. I was with him, I said, when he took his first steps. It was just me... Just me. He was a sparky boy, up and on his feet and around the furniture before the other kids of his age. Could be a right pain in the arse too, had a habit of skitting off when you turned your back. But his first proper steps, they were amazing.

I traced my finger around the rim of my glass and it sang a one note tune that got stuck and then got going again.

Yeah, I said. He stood and lifted his right foot forward and put it down and at that moment there was like two of him, his old self and his new self and they were handing over and for a moment, they blurred

and in that blur anything could have happened, whole new universes of maybes opened up and then it all fused and his future was set. Yeah, I saw that.

Moments like that stay with you, she said.

Yeah.

I bet his mother was disappointed that she didn't see them.

Oh, she didn't care. She didn't care for nothing. Too busy carrying on.

Oh?

Yeah, you know, behind my back... with other men.

I'm sorry to hear that.

Yeah.

Is that why you left?

Yeah, summut like that.

And you lost contact with your son?

Yeah.

You should try and find him, it's never too late to pick up the pieces.

It won't work.

You don't know that.

I do.

How can you? He's your son. He's probably missed you every day since you left. Boys need their fathers. They need them.

What about your husband, I asked?

Mmm?

There were no pictures of him.

He was always holding the camera, I don't know anything about them and he was always there for that. Always there.

Oh, right.

And when Davey died... He doesn't live too far away. I see him from time to time. They were the very picture of each other. He was always there for him. You could be for your boy, if you wanted.

He don't need me.

You don't know that.

I do.

The problem was between you and his mother, not him.

It's too complicated, I said. I can't go back and change things.

You can always make good on what was bad.

Not this.

Why, what did you do that was so terrible? Your son is alive. He's alive and you can still have a future with him. He's a part of you. She put her hand on mine. Don't do this to yourself.

You don't, I said, you don't...

What did you do son, she asked? There's a cloud around you. I can see it as sure as I can see you and you are trying to use it to hide something. What are you running from? Did you hurt her? Is that it?

I don't want to-

Was it worse than that? Did you do something worse?

I felt myself recoil.

Was it something you meant to do, she asked, or was it an accident?

My gut was tight and even though her hand was soft on mine she was holding me to that table, holding me there, in front of her book of her boy that was dead. Not angry, not judgemental. There was no accusations in her tone just a deep sadness. A sadness that was beyond herself, begot of her son and her loss but which had grown fruitful into an understanding and a sense of mercy that I had not encountered before.

It was out of the blue, I said. One of those things. My other universe you might say.

There's such sorrow, around you son, she said. I thought that, when I opened my door to you. You're closed up, like you're wrapping a wound.

I don't want to excuse what I did, I told her. I take responsibility for it. I can't pretend that I didn't want to hurt her, cause I did. Of course it was wrong. I know that now, but at the time... I was lot younger, unwise to the world...

We were whispering now, she and I, in the dim glow of that room.

It wasn't just what she did, I said, it was the way she taunted me and doing it in public too. I was so pent up, and then she said it... hit me with it really hard... right between the eyes. I'd known it all along, deep down, and just got on with things... but to hear her say it... to hear her right out loud and with that taunt in her face... well that was it. I hit her bang on the nose... and to my shock, it exploded... everywhere... the lights in her eyes dimmed a bit... she toppled some... and then she crashed to the floor. And that should have been it, but it wasn't, cause she cracked her head on the fire place... an almighty crack. I tried to help... I didn't know what to do. There was blood everywhere, on my hands, on my clothes, on my face, it was in my eyes too. I thought it was tears, but it wasn't... I was dripping with it... I was dripping with her... I remember trying to shake the life back into her... I was screaming her name like a mad man, and shaking her. And then I saw her eyes and I saw that she was gone... that there was nothing going to bring her back. Nothing. The whole room became still and I kind of came round and I

looked up and I saw his little face looking down on me. It must have looked awful. I must have looked... And that must be the last picture of me he has. The last one. The last big one, anyhow.

I flicked my brandy glass with my finger pinging it like a bell. And the worse thing, I said, is this, I was angry at him too...

Why, she asked?

I looked down at the table. Because she had said that he wasn't mine. And when she said it... well, I knew it was true. I knew it.

How?

Because I never saw my face in his. Not one picture of me. Not one. And that had always hurt, cause I loved that boy. It was me that had brought him up. Me.

I took a sip of my brandy and it went down and was uncomfortable in my stomach. I did my time, I said. My full stretch. I didn't even apply for parole, there was no point in getting out early, what is there, for me, out here, in the free world? And I felt terrible, it wasn't in my nature to lash out like that... and I have this fear, now, that if I can do it once, then I can do it again. You can be a reformed this and that, but you kill a woman, like I did and that's it, job done. She's always there, hanging about on my shoulder. You know, she was on the white walls of my cell, every day, the same picture. She never said a word. Didn't move or nothing, just stared at me. And he was there too, not with her, mind. He was just around. I used to play out memories with him. I did that. I would close my eyes and hear him want to go to the moon on a swing, or throwing food about, or once, in Tesco's, when he undid all the boot polish jars and then smeared it all and everywhere, chuckling away. Funny as fuck, he was. He used to like me to throw him in the air and spin him around and all the time getting higher and higher. And if he hurt himself, it was me he ran to. Not her. Me. He'd have forgotten all that now. Who remembers the everyday stuff from when they were two? I can hardly remember what I was doing just this morning. But the big bad things that happen, they shock the memory with pictures, tattoo the brain they do and tattoos hurt, I can tell you, and then they're there for all to see and try as you might you can't lose them. I bet, even now, he still has flashes of what I did, when he dreams. What a picture to carry around with you. What a picture.

Outside there were kids laughing on the beach as they stumbled past. I looked up at her. I expected her to look sick, or scared but she didn't and for a moment I thought that maybe she was beyond all that, that really her life meant nothing to her. I could be a serial killer, I thought and she

wouldn't care, she'd probably beg me to finish her. Thing is though, what had struck me - when she'd been standing in front of that window, with the sun butchered and the sky blackened and wale, with the whole world crowded in to look - and I didn't realise at the moment I saw it - what had struck me was this; that it was not the crowd at a football match or in a film, looking in, getting off on the entertainment - no, it was not that, at all. It was like creation was watching over her. Not God, there ain't no God, it's creation that goes on and on and that's not something you can argue with.

I felt her squeeze my hand. Life happens, she said.

Yeah, I said.

No-one can escape it, she said, it's just the order of things. I wish it was different.

Yeah.

She handed me back the picture of my Sparky. You don't want to loose that, she said, there's some good memories there - not just the bad. Keep it safe.

I nodded and said, look, I'll pack in the morning. You don't want the likes of me staying here. People will talk.

She put her hand on mine and said, no, I don't care for all that. You've been honest with me. You didn't have to, but you were and that's what counts. You can't run forever and have the likes of me passing judgement on things that I know nothing about. Life is too short to be so ruined so quick. No, you can stay as long as you like, son. As long as you like.

## About The Author

Xavier is a writer, filmmaker and playwright.

Films include *Unarmed But Dangerous* starring Frank Harper, Mat Fraser, Terry Stone and Faye Tozer. It tells the story of a Kung Fu master who has no arms. *Unarmed But Dangerous* is currently on worldwide release through Anchor Bay Entertainment. His first film, *Mine*, was selected as a breakthrough movie for LUFF 2007.

Plays include *Renaissance* (a Millennium Award Winner), *The Fantastical Adventures of Leonardo Da Vinci* (a commission for the International Festival Of Perth), *Thirst*, *Alice*, *Caligula* and *Swing*.

He has just completed his first novel 'The Adventures And Hallucinations Of The Child Prostitute Daisy Byatt And Her Love For The Boy Carlo'.

He lives with his wife and three children in a quiet spot of the UK.

You can find more of his work and work in progress at [www.xavierleret.com](http://www.xavierleret.com)

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