

The Musician

by Sarah Penwarden

It's not like Mum hadn't had boyfriends before. She had. It's just that none had moved in and none were like him.

Kayla, Sissy, and Mum were queuing for movie tickets one Saturday night when a man came up. Mum looked shy before introducing him, her eyes shining. She looked instantly younger, Kayla thought. Almost a girl. The man's name was Jed. Mum kept smiling – secret smiles, just for him.

Jed wasn't tall. He had fair hair, shaved at the back and sides and swept over his forehead, with a wispy blonde beard. He wore a red-and-black checked shirt and some kind of bracelet round his wrist – it looked like leather, Sissy said afterwards with something like disgust. A ring in his earlobe with a gap in it. Ear gauging, Mum explained later. Dark tattoos spiralled up his arms.

"Hi," Jed said.

They stood around together, a bit awkward. Luckily Jed was going to a different movie. They didn't run into him after.

He was a musician, Mum said on the drive home. They'd met at a gig in the city. Jed played guitar in the band. They'd had a good night, and now they were dating. Sissy had raised her eyebrows at that point but said nothing. She'd liked Gary, Mum's last boyfriend, but Mum had changed her mind about him.

Soon, Jed was spending evenings at their house, sitting on the couch with Mum, playing the guitar with his long fingers. His real name was Jeremy. He was from Auckland originally but had spent years in Europe. Kayla could just see him wandering down some old, narrow street, guitar on his back, playing his music in cafes. That's where he'd learnt to cook. Most nights, he filled their kitchen with the smell of frying onions and garlic. He cooked delicious dinners: veggie curries and dhal and felafel and all kinds of food they'd never eaten before.





Dad's face screwed into a frown when Sissy told him about Jed. Kayla thought it was a bad idea to talk about it, but Sissy bowled straight on in. "Mum's got a new boyfriend," she said in a rush, "and he's a hippie."

"Hipster," Kayla corrected.

Dad frowned even more and looked away. His hands were covered in oil from fixing the ute, spare parts scattered. It was his weekend and the rugby had been rained off, so it was a day indoors. Sissy and Kayla were out in the garage, passing Dad tools.

"Do you like him?" he finally asked, pointing to a spanner.

Kayla frowned at Sissy. Sissy just shrugged. Then she asked if they could go out for dinner.



A few months later, they were eating spaghetti with Mum and watching the news. Kayla could tell she was building up to something. She was nervous.

"Girls. I have some news." Mum paused and took a big breath. "I've asked Jed to move in."

"What? Jed ... living here ... with us?" Kayla said. "You only just met!"

"Actually, we've been seeing each other for a while." Mum's cheeks had turned pink. "It's been at least six months."

"He'll be our *step*-Dad?" Sissy squeaked.

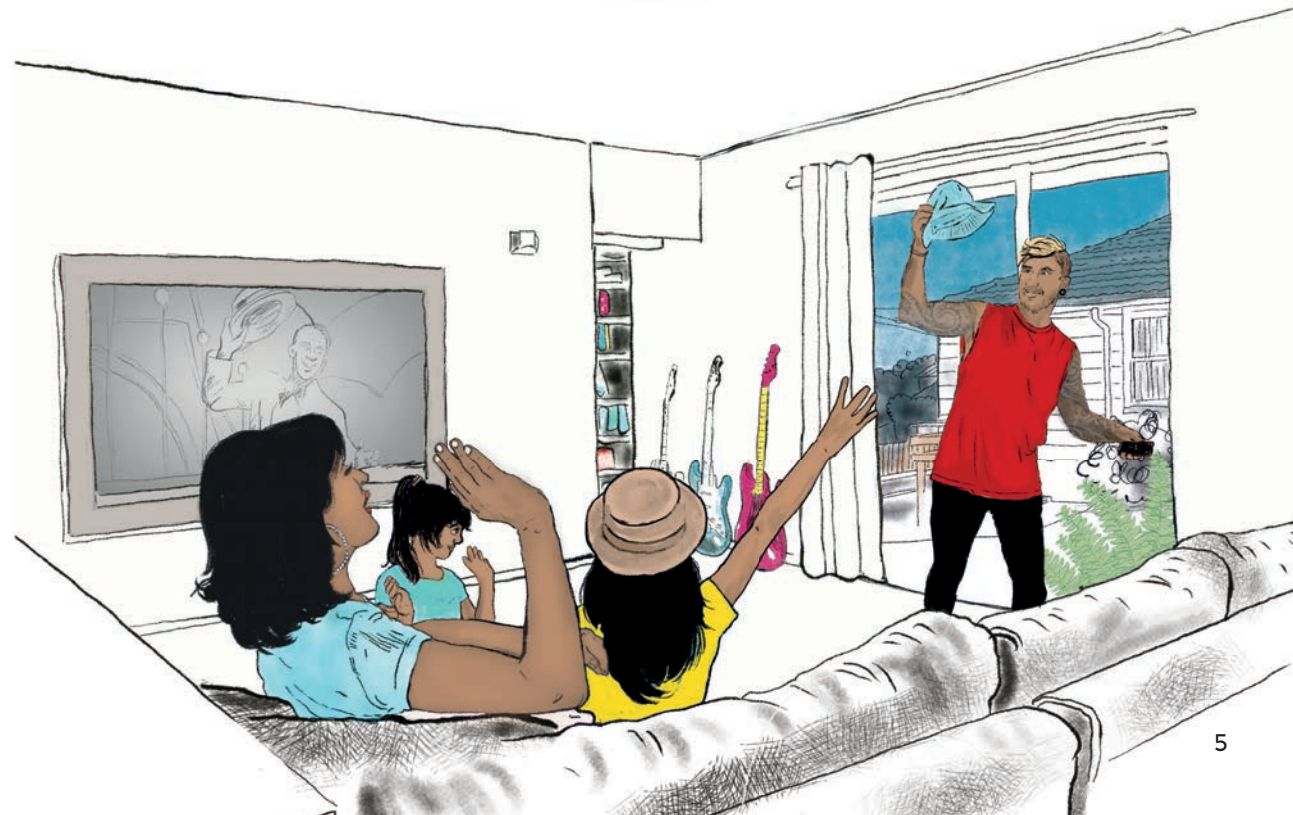
Mum winced at the word. "No, love. He's my boyfriend. No one's going to be your dad but your dad, OK?"

Sissy seemed relieved. Kayla said nothing. There was a lot to think about.

It was strange at the beginning, having a man in the house who wasn't their dad: seeing him trim his beard in the bathroom mirror, his shoes next to Mum's in the wardrobe, his three guitars resting against the wall. Sometimes, the house smelt of aftershave. It was like lemons. Mum seemed happier, Kayla thought. She was laughing again. They hadn't heard that for a while.

Sissy wasn't so sure. She and Jed didn't have much in common. Sissy liked playing netball and rugby. Drawing horses. Helping Dad with the ute. She said she didn't know what to say when Jed was around. Still, he made the house feel calmer, and he was good at maths. He helped Kayla with her homework. He especially liked algebra and wrote numbers very neatly, crossing his sevens with a dash.

They watched movies together sometimes, laughing at the same things. Jed could nail American accents, and he had a good memory. Afterwards, he'd perform entire scenes – even the long ones – doing all the voices. Kayla would laugh so hard she'd snort. There was also their connection over animals. Jed was a vegan, though he'd started out vegetarian. He decided to take it further after visiting a farm that kept chickens in cages. He'd been thirteen years old – exactly Kayla's age. Kayla talked to Mum about animals, how they should be treated. Mum said she understood, but Jed really got it.





One day, they got home from school and Jed wasn't there. This was unusual.

"Where's Jed?" Sissy asked.

"He's gone out," Mum said. "We had a fight."

"A fight?" Sissy said. "What kind of fight?"

"Just a fight."

"But what about?" Sissy asked.

"It's too complicated to explain," said Mum, her brown eyes filling.

"Is he gone for good?" said Kayla.

"He's staying with a friend for a few nights. To think things over."

"Doesn't he want to live with us any more?" Kayla asked.

"I'm not sure," Mum said. "Can we please just drop it?"

Jed did come back but only to move his stuff out. It was during the day, while they were at school. They didn't get to say goodbye. Sissy didn't seem to miss him, but Kayla did. The house was quieter and less interesting without Jed's music.

Mum didn't talk about the breakup – not to them, anyway, but Kayla heard her on the phone to Aunty Trace and caught the drift. He wasn't sure about being in a relationship; he had some stuff he needed to sort. His explanation didn't make Mum feel any better. Kayla felt sad when she heard her talking and sad to think she'd never see them sitting on the couch together or hear Jed playing funny riffs on his guitar. It was confusing when people changed their minds.

A month went by. Then, one Sunday night, they'd just got back from a weekend at Dad's, and Kayla wasn't sure if she was imagining it ... but Mum seemed a bit happier than usual. She was humming to herself, ironing, when her phone rang. She walked quickly into her bedroom to answer it. After a while, she came back, looking pleased.

"Who was that?" Kayla asked.

"Jed," Mum said quietly. There was a pause. "I bumped into him last night."

"And?" Kayla said.

"And nothing. We talked. That's all." Mum began to iron a pillowcase. It was clear she thought the conversation was over, but Kayla was sceptical. It felt like there was something Mum wasn't saying.

"Really?" Kayla said.

"I don't want to get into it, love."

Mum didn't look up. It felt like she didn't want Kayla to see her eyes. "Let's wait and see. Who knows?" Mum was being careful, but her voice went up at the end, like she was hoping for something.

Kayla sighed. "So we just wait then?"

"Yes, love."

"Did he say anything about us?"

Kayla asked.

"Yes. He said to say hello."



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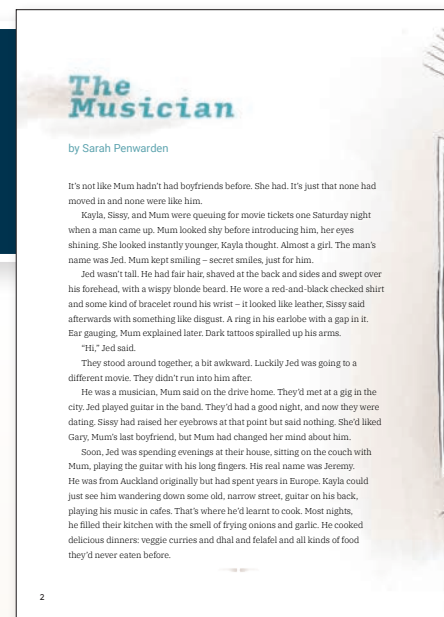
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