

I didn't lose my ring, it was stolen. I didn't lose my son - he died.

The ring is easier to talk about, but my son will weave his way into this story, as will others who are close to me.

A rock on my finger, not a gem but a rock, literally - Argillite, Pakohe. Black, like the vintage, velvet dress I randomly bought in Paddington, Sydney, in 1977 - before I knew it was to be my wedding dress. Not a shotgun wedding, a recording contract for my partner that meant a flight and separation.

1981, our first born, bright eyed and alert, provoking comment ... "she's been here before". I couldn't believe I'd have enough love for a second child but I needn't have worried. When our son was born four years later, I discovered that love doesn't work like that. Our daughter sang Skinny Malinky long legs ... and carried him to me when he cried. Our little family hummed.

The ring, a fortieth birthday surprise cooked up by man and boy, father and son. A young boy, tapping on our bedroom door, woken by an early morning goods train shaking the pumice beneath the house. I still feel his anticipation as he climbs between us and asks me when it will be my birthday. Bell birds klong from feathered rimu, tui echo down the Spiral and the train clatters in and out of tunnels, engine groaning until it reaches the top. The boy points to the cupboard in the

corner of the room, but waits until we gather round the breakfast table, his eyes shiny with delight as I undo the ribbon, open the box.

Black stone, smooth, rounded like the top of an egg. Shiny, encased in silver, reflecting light. When it dulls, the craft jeweller told me, rub it on the side of your nose where it curls - a useful trick as it turns out, because it is also a pressure point for clearing sinuses. When I smell the stone it has a faint metallic scent, like blood, which is not surprising because Maori fashioned Pakohe into adzes, to cut and carve. Kia Kaha, it says, be strong, and it offers to draw things from deep within, unburden - if I let it.

It's strangely light in weight and at first I wear it all the time, except when I swim in the sea. I take it off then, because I worry the black eye gleaming in its silver socket might be mistaken for bait and attract bigger fish. Nowadays, after I haven't worn it for a while, choosing something sparkly or red instead, my husband, who is not a jealous guy, asks me to put it on again. He knows it gives me strength. The cutting edge holds its shape as it carves.

Robbed.

It was stolen in the after time - when we lived day by day. When even one step at a time was too much for us, when our lovely boy died because his heart wasn't strong enough to keep beating. We tried to be normal for the sake of our daughter. Our firstborn, missing her brother like a hole in her heart, begging us not to change.

We visited her in France where she'd gone to live for a year, but we weren't thinking straight. The beachside car park innocuous - picnickers, dog walkers, grandparents playing boules. It was a stage set we discovered later, a set staged to lure us into a sense of security so that while we swam we didn't think to check. Spanish gypsies, the gendarme said, stole from our rental car whilst we swam. My ring, our suitcases, camera, laptop, passports - everything that mattered. Except it didn't, because we'd already lost that.

The man at the car rental was kind, said it happened often, gave us numbers to ring, drove us to the police station. He was called Angel. The police were disinterested, wrote down "bijou etc" on our claim form, but the insurance company paid out. The ring was re-made, the new black stone smoothed and set in silver. We thought the Pakohe looked shinier and stronger than the first one. It needs to be we agreed as we re-aligned our life.

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When I was young and had exams to pass, my mother gave me a lucky mascot, a misshapen twig, the root of a tree perhaps looking like an impish dancer. It was the colour of tobacco, polished by me, holding it snug like a toddler's hand. For years it disappeared amongst the detritus of life until one day, clearing out a box of photographs and school certificates, I found it again. I grasped it, the Pakohe on my finger, the stone nudging the wooden limbs, the feeling just the same. I willed it to bring me luck, to grant a grandchild's hand in mine.

If you could write your life story you would not want it to contain the death of your seventeen year old son, or the absence of another child living on the far side of the world. You might write that you met the love of your life and shared more than five decades together. That part I wouldn't change.

Some things can be replaced - a ring. Others never - a son. If you believe in luck, which I sometimes do, and wish upon a twisted piece of wood whilst drawing strength from Pakohe ... then the future looks bright.

Song of loss

Your father said

he was a tree

he said a tree

without it's leading branch

he used to be an anchor

Pakohe

a rock

Your mother said

she had a stone

she said a stone

wedged beneath her breast

she used to be abundance

a warm vest

Your sister said

she'd never be

she said she'd never be

an auntie to your children

she didn't want to be

the only one that knows

abundance and the rock.
