

Bourne toWrite...

creative writing
workshops

The Boxer

by Richard Wilding

Her fingernails are painted midnight blue and she, or someone; I presume her, has painted a small star onto each nail. That must have taken her ages. She would only go to that trouble for someone special and I feel a slight swell of anger on her behalf that that special someone has become a no-show. She is wearing a pleasant perfume to go with the nail varnish but underneath it, her breath has the slight hint of polos about it, as though her breath smelled and before entering the pub she'd quickly tried to disguise it. I try to concentrate on the perfume as I hand the book over. She gives the back cover a read and opens it at random.

"No one makes love like they make a wall or a house," she reads. She looks up at me, those large date-like eyes widening in mock shock. "They catch it like a cold. It makes them miserable and then it passes, and pretending otherwise is the road to hell.' Well," she says, handing me back the book, "that's not a very positive outlook on life, if I may make so bold." She takes a sip of her gin. There's nothing to suggest in that sip that she tastes anything untoward which is reassuring, although I suspect that I may have to buy her another and soon, because before we know it the Bored Latvian Barmaid Collective who are running The Smugglers with such lack-lustre intent will ring the bell for last orders and I can't see them volunteering to work a single minute longer than their contracted hours.

"Most of us only have one story to tell. This is mine," she says. She takes another sip while I try not to watch and gives me a smile. It's a warm smile. Open, generous. There is a certain amount of intelligence in her eyes but not too much. I'm not suggesting she's thick. That's a different look in the eyes all together. No, I'd say that she was a diligent pupil at school and had large, curly handwriting and she's probably a good friend. I would think she just about managed her A levels but didn't get good enough grades to go to a proper University. She might have gone to somewhere like Keele, for example. Or gone straight into admin.

But you can't judge people just by their academic attainments because some people have many other qualities that are equally as impressive. "I think I've just been stood up," she says. "That's the only story I have. It's the same bloody story each time: different cast of characters, different location but same leading lady and same plot. Girl sees boy on-line. Girl swipes right. Boy agrees to date. Boy no shows. Bollocks to boys." She smiles again, and there is no sadness in the smile, just a sort of resignation without defeat, like she's a journeyman boxer who's paid to travel to the arse end of struggling towns up and down the country to stand in the ring and get thumped. It's just the job, nothing personal. Life can do that some people. They aren't born victims but at some point something happens to them and they make a choice and the road they choose has a fingerpost marked victim but they don't spot it.

So. That's my view, anyway. It could have been me. When my dad left, I could have chosen that trauma to form who I became as an adult, and become a doormat on which the powerful and driven wipe their dirtied designer shoes. But I didn't. I chose instead to work hard and I didn't have curly handwriting. I got good A levels and went to Reading where I did a lot of reading (boom! boom!) and got on the first management training course I applied to at the bank and the rest is history. A shorter career history than I'd have like it to have been if I'm honest with myself – and I'm nothing if not honest with myself – and I could still go back into management if I wanted to but you should never go back. And I'm enjoying what I'm doing now, not having to answer to anyone at work, not having to put the lid down on the loo at home, (even though I do put it down but the point is, I don't have to if I don't want to).

Rose looks at me expecting me to say something but I can't think what to say because I suddenly find myself wondering, is this it? Is this finally it? *The moment when my planning, my trying to think through all the possible scenarios morphs out of speculation, some of it idle, some of it fanciful and into flesh? Did I ever, really, think this moment would come? I think this is that moment. It is, I am surprised to discover, a mildly arousing thought. Luckily, I don't find her sexually attractive which is a relief. However, I can't speak for her and this means that I can't rule out the possibility that she made a bee-line for me because she finds me in some way irresistible. It happens. People do fall instantly in love.*

They lay eyes on someone they have never seen, never even imagined. It's like in the Everything But The Girl Song: "I was alone thinking I was fine; I wasn't looking for anyone to be mine; I thought that love was just a fabrication; A train that wouldn't stop at my station; Home, alone, that was my consignment; Solitary, confinement; So when we met, I was getting around you; I didn't know I was looking for love until I found you." I think many people are looking for love. There is no telling when or to whom this can happen. It did not happen to me, but that's not to say it couldn't happen. It still could.

I am looking for love, but not in the usual way, not in the way most people would recognise.