

Bourne
toWrite...
creative writing
workshops

Room 101

by Zoé Carroll

I loped up the stairs to the front of the care home, pushed open the glass doors at the entrance and strolled in, steeling myself for today's visit.

"Morning Alex, Anna's in her room, she couldn't make it down to the lounge today." the nurse looked perplexed, her mouth fixed into a weak smile.

"Do you think she'll know me today Sandra? How's she been?" Her smile remained while she gently told me that the doctor had been again, and that we didn't have long left with her.

"She's lucky to have you," Sandra sat with me on the blue covered chairs in reception, "most of our guests don't have many visitors, let alone daily ones like you, she would be very proud."

I know that she, like most people, has assumed that I am Anna's son. I don't bother to correct her. It doesn't matter now. I am the named next of kin on all of her documents and that is what we fought so hard for.

I walk up the stairs rather than take the stuffy lift, and down the hallway to the room at the end. I knock on the door gently and push it open, "Hello my love, how are you feeling today?"

She looks straight at me and my heart jumps, she is here today. Some days she is not certain of who I am and other days she thinks that she knows me but can't remember quite how. Today though, I can tell from how she looks at me, she knows every inch of me.

"Hello Alex, I'm glad of a visitor. Would you like to read to me today, I've been wondering what happened to Mr Ridley in our story."

"Of course." I sit in the armchair next to her bed and begin to read where I left off the day before. Occasionally I stop to pass her a drink of water or to plump her pillows.

This woman and I have shared thirty-five years of the most unfathomable love and it breaks my heart to see her like this. After a while I sit and hold her hand. It is gnarled with age and arthritis but I still see her beauty. She is still the most attractive woman that I have ever known. Time doesn't change everything, just the physical part of us, the love remains the same.

The call came in the night. I knew as soon as the phone rang what the caller would say. I was in my car and driving like a man possessed before they had hung up. I screeched to a halt right outside the home and ran up the stairs to the glass door. The night nurse rang me in.

"Anna Mackie?" he enquired, I nodded but carried on past the reception desk, "Room 101," he called after me.

"I know" I replied as I took the stairs two at a time and ran down the long hallway to the end room. I burst in, making the collected nurses jump and look round at me, "You're in time," one of them said, and directed me to the chair I'd sat in earlier. I took Anna's frail hand in mine and kissed it tenderly "I'm here darling, I'm here with you."

I stayed with her until the end, until her last breath had left her body and her heart had stopped beating. Some time later a nurse touched my shoulder and said that I should go home and get some rest, they needed to do some things and that I could come back later and see her again. I asked her to call the numbers on the list that I'd left with them when we had checked Anna into this home. The wider family, I explained, would rather hear the news from them than from me.

Later that afternoon I went back to Room 101. I entered to see the backs of four people in their sixties. My own age. I recognised him before he turned, the shape of my former best friend. The man who had never forgiven me for falling in love with his mother the first time he had taken me on a visit home to meet his family on a trip home from university. We had tried to stop ourselves, but the pull was too strong. Eventually we succumbed to the feeling, knowing the great cost to both of us. Anna had left Alan's father and we had never heard from him, or his younger sister, Helen again.

"Alex," He looked at me, "I can't believe that you are here. You can't even give us this moment to be with our own mother without intruding."

"You've had thirty-five years to be with your own mother Alan. It was you who chose to cut us out of your life, to never return an invitation to visit us, to keep her grandchildren from her. Anna and I have nothing to be ashamed of. We fell in love, we didn't mean to - but it was real and it lasted until the end. Til death did us part" I quoted the last part of the marriage vows because, despite my wishes to, Anna would never marry me. She insisted that she'd made that promise once before, to Alan and Helen's father, and been unable to keep it. She wanted us to stay together because we wanted to, not because of a promise we had made. It was why it had been so difficult to have me recognised as her next of kin. I backed out of the door.

"I'll leave you to it. You probably have some catching up to do."