

**Bourne**  
**toWrite...**  
creative writing  
workshops

## The Landlady

by Chris Robinson

Joanie and Bill Clarkson ran The Lord Palmerston Pub in our road for years. It was a small establishment that slotted nicely onto the end of a row of terraced houses which ran along the main railway track into London. The Clarksons were well known and popular but Joanie was definitely the boss.

I remember the first time I saw her at the newsagents buying cigarettes. I was mesmerised by her. She was small and curvy. Plump but not fat and she was wearing a tight pink top which showed off her cleavage and a black figure hugging pencil skirt. It was a simple but effective look finished off by her perfectly manicured nails and large glossy pink lips. Her hair was a mass of strawberry blonde curls which hung round her pretty face like an ornate picture frame. I stood staring at this vision that was Joanie, mouth ajar and frozen to the spot until I heard her speak.

She had a deep, gravelly voice which was coarse and loud and her sentences were interspersed with swear words. Without warning I felt my cheeks redden. I was a nine year old boy who felt shy and awkward in her presence even though she hadn't even noticed I was there. I turned on my heel and left the shop without my mother's cigarettes, a mistake I later received a clip round the ear for.

When I reached the ripe old age of ten my mother decided that I was old enough to get Dad's jug of beer from the pub for his tea each night. I was mortified at the thought of having to go into the pub alone and see that woman again. Mum, noticing my reluctance, came with me the first time. When we walked in Joanie was sitting at the end of the bar on a stool.

She had a cigarette in one hand and a gin and tonic in the other and was laughing raucously with a local man I knew by sight. She looked up as we entered and shouted 'alright Mo' to my mum. Mum waved back and handed the jug over to Bill who was behind the bar. He filled it up silently, wrote something in his book and handed it back. As Mum and I turned to leave Joanie shouted 'See you tomorrow Mo', at which point Mum explained that it would be me collecting the beer from now on. Joanie nodded and that was that. We were out the door and walking home without another word being said. The whole trip had taken ten minutes and Joanie hadn't even asked my name.

And so the routine began. Each day I entered the pub, waved at Joanie, collected the beer, waved goodbye and left. The only day that was different was Saturdays when Dad wanted me to collect his beer twice. Once for his lunch and again for his tea. It was on the lunchtime visit that I would also pay the tab. Joanie was different then. I used to get there half an hour before opening and she would be in her work clothes. It was as if she was another person completely. She wore an unflattering wrap around apron and slippers. There was no trace of makeup and her hair would be in a scarf with three rollers poking out the front. The only indication that it was Joanie was her voice. She knew my name by then and I liked the way she said it. 'Morning Bobby, I swear you've grown again'. That was all she ever said and only on a Saturday when I paid the tab. The rest of the time I happily settled for a wave. I loved seeing Joanie. She made my day brighter.

For five years I collected Dad's beer. When I was old enough to stay out a little later in the evenings I used to sit on the wall opposite the pub hoping for a glimpse of Joanie. I was rarely rewarded. She hardly ever left her place at the end of the bar. I never saw her serve anyone or collect glasses but I did occasionally see her chasing some drunken old fool out of the pub with a broom. She ruled the roost and she commanded respect by just being there. She enjoyed the male attention she received but no one ever dared cross the line because she was in love with Bill you see. Quiet, dependable, solid Bill.

When I was 15 Joanie got sick and Bill cared for until the end. I found out they had been childhood sweethearts, together for more than 40 years. She was his first and only love and he was hers. She had been my first love too albeit in my teenage fantasy world. I will forever remember Joanie with fondness. They don't make them like her any more.