

Bourne
toWrite...
creative writing
workshops

Hidden Mothers

by Rosalyn Hurst

The family met to decide what was to be done with the child. Not all of them lived in the big house, some lived down the lane, or in isolated cottages, but no more than a ten minute journey on horseback. The child knew she was related to them all, but how was a mystery. She remembered evening gatherings with laughter because some uncles were younger than their nephews, that the two older women were sisters and a strange quiet man, the only person with a title, Mr John. He had come for a weekend years before the child was born, but in all that time he had never left.

The big dining room table was extended to its full length, chairs found from all the bedrooms, even the outside stable. As more people came to the house, the exuberant children were told to hush, and found places on the floor, under the table, or standing at the back with the men. All that is except the child who stood by Mr John.

The oil lamps were lit and the room was alive with light and chatter.

She looked shyly around. So many names, sometimes in full glorious sound such as Madeleine, who would thump anyone who tried to shorten it to Maddy. Lounging back against the wall of the room, hands in pockets, there was Mikey, Johnny, Frank, Art, and Jim. The two old women sat at the top of the table, surrounded by Peggy, Jane, Susie, while Madeleine rushed in and out from the kitchen with pots of tea and scones straight from the oven. She smiled at the child, though did not dare to give her one, for these were for the adults only. The child did not mind, Madeleine was her favourite, she would sometimes come up and tell her stories.

Now there was a cough and shuffling in the ways of men not used to standing still.

Mr John stood up.

“So what’s going to happen to the child?” someone shouted, the children from the floor suddenly fell silent.

“She’s going to school,” said Mr John.

There was a gasp, mutterings of a waste of money, money spent on a girl and from the floor laughter from the children.

“She’ll be beaten, she’ll be eaten, that one, she’s wild.”

Then from Peggy, “but surely not, I heard.....” she started a name.

“Will you hold your tongue,” came an order from the top of the table.

Peggy dared to continue, “well that one has been sent by the education office to teach here. I saw her.”

There were shocked noises, the child wondered why, although the news of going to school was itself something to wonder about.

“There was nothing we could do to stop that,” said one of the old women and the other added, “we could hardly give our reasons why she should be kept away.”

And Mr John added, “that child is very bright, and it is time I did something for you all, so don’t you worry I’ll pay for the books and the pencils.”

There were mutterings from the men standing at the back, it was about time, they said, because Mr John never paid for much all these years, nor helped with the cattle or mending the fences.

Early September, the child and Madeleine walked down the lane passed the hedgerows. The child was stopped from picking the blackberries in case it stained her pinafore.

They walked in the school gate. Madeleine froze as two teachers walked up to them, the older saying, “Ah the new child at last” and looking down added, “and what’s your name?”

The child was perplexed for she was not sure.

With a sigh the teacher turned to Madeleine, “and are you the mother?”

And the child with a rare dash of courage laughed and said, “no, I have no mother.”

There was a silence, Madeleine turned and left without a word and the child looked up as the other teacher put a hand out and they walked together into the school building. The child was shocked, there was something about the touch, something about that look and the quiet voice saying,

“My dearest, everyone has a name and everyone has a mother you only have to look.”