

Betrayal

by Francesca Ryan

Dear Rob,

Another letter for your collection. Please feel free to add it to the pile in your mother's pine dresser, bottom drawer. Betrayal is a big bad word. But you betrayed me alright. Not in a big way. Not in a way other people would notice. Your sister Anna did, though.

You liked to tease me, say I was a bit of a drama queen. Was I?

I remember sitting and your mother's kitchen. I loved the yellow walls, and that macrame plant holder. Three tiers of spider plants, cascading down. So pretty. The jolly sun-face clock, above the big posh silver fridge. Dotted pretty magnets, holding curling snaps to its door. You, in Malta wearing an absurd kaftan and grinning at the camera. Sitting next to a girl with a shiny brown bob sipping a cappuccino. You could almost smell the coffee from that cafe. I remember your darling mumsie laid ladling out the bean soup, cutting me a big chunk from the sourdough loaf she'd baked yesterday. Plenty of butter on it, a big wodge of cheese beside. You need a little meat on those bones my dear. She laughed as she caught your eye. Your blue, blue eyes; her blue-eyed boy. I remember that Christmas do, all those people in their red and green polyester finery. Those jumpers must have got a bit sweaty as the evening wore on, but mumsie always did like the heating turned up, didn't she.

It was Boxing Day when she sat me down, pulled out another lot of photos. Showed me all those lovely ones of you. With Miriam. With Vanessa. With Sue Lynn. With Hannah from your graduation do. Even an engagement photo of you and Shelley, all dressed in a blue and white sprigged monstrosity. Pretty girl, mumsie murmured. Very good family.

Water under the bridge you said, as you passed by with a beer in your hand. Why are you showing her all that old stuff? She loved that, laughing with her special whooping trill and asking you to bring her a Baileys. Those photos. I could have left it there; after all there were also so many other snaps. You at scouts. You, collecting your Duke of Edinburgh ward. You, with your French exchange family. Family history, she said smiling.

Later on, it was different. That weekend stay where she left a pile of old letters on the kitchen table while you two went to church. One of them, smoothed out on the pine table; from Jessica. Big looping handwriting. Detailing how much she'd enjoyed that Malta break with you. The details about what you'd done to her; what she'd done to you. I was in a cold shock. But I couldn't stop reading. Not that one, not several more, from different girlfriends. All from a battered old Clarks shoe box. Why would mumsie even have them? I knew you moved back in for a bit after you lost your job, but still. Didn't take them with when you left.

We had a row about it, upstairs in the spare room. You told me to keep my voice down. The final straw was when you told her about that. She mentioned it the next day, shaking her head and smiling. You mustn't be put out, she said to me; after all you're thirty-two, both of you are bound to have a bit of a past, aren't you? I knew then there were other things you told her about me. You said betrayal was an absurd word. It wasn't as if you'd been unfaithful. I was making a big deal out of it - what was it what was it you said? A nothing burger. Later, when it was over, when mumsie had to all to herself again, I saw Anna at a party. She took my wrist and told me about how it worked. About the many mumsie had seen off.

I'm writing this because I know it will eventually end up in the dresser drawer. There are no victims, only volunteers in love, you said. So, whoever comes across this; take my advice. Get yourself the hell out of there, dear unknown reader. Betrayal isn't always dramatic. It doesn't always result in someone's execution. Just in a smaller, painful kind of death.

To be fair to you Rob, you were always true. Always faithful. But only to your mother. She knows how to punish betrayal, doesn't she? No public execution, no loud denunciations. Revenge is a dish best served cold; from a shoe box, in a pretty kitchen.