Bourne toWrite... creative writing workshops

Clara

by Francesca Ryan

The letter arrived three days after Clara's funeral, written in her hand and warning me not to attend. I wasn't surprised, but it made me so very sad. Oh, Clara, Clara, Clara. Painfully typical of you to worry about others, not yourself. Even while you were dying.

He was there, of course. In the front row, wearing an immaculate dark-grey suit and an ochre silk tie. Right by the tall lilies spreading their fragrance through the chapel. He still has that same shock of blond hair, only a little more faded now. It must be thirty-odd years since I last saw him, at the school reunion.

It was a beautiful service, Clara. I didn't cry when your coffin came in, though. I didn't cry when those lovely things were said in the eulogies. Bobby gave a particularly fulsome one. I watched him as he squeezed his wife's hand before making his way to the lectern. He lowered his head as he grasped it between his two hands, steadying himself. His eyes lifted and he looked over the assembled people. He saw me, of course, though he didn't catch my eye.

He talked about what a fine woman you were, what a fighter. How those last few weeks had been an inspiration to him. Your strength. He actually choked on his words as he told us how much the family were hurting. I shoved my hanky into my mouth at this. I was angry. I am still angry. I know him for what he is, and so do you.

Do you remember the first time I told you I had a crush on him? Well, who wouldn't? When I was thirteen, Bobby was a prince to me. This gangly older lad who took pity on a spotty girl at the school Christmas disco. I'd slathered myself in Coty's Aqua Manda and sneaked my sister's Rimmel lipstick. Hot Peach.

You and I were huddled in the corner, watching everyone shuffle to and fro in the middle of the room, pretending they were on *Top of the Pops*. He came over, grinned at us and yanked me into the centre with him. *Ride a White Swan* by T. Rex. If I'd actually been riding a white swan, I couldn't have been more transported. This sixteen-year-old dreamboat had picked me to dance with!

We didn't say anything to each other, just shifted from foot to foot like everyone else around us. Hardly looked at each other, either. I was too overwhelmed by the one glance that showed him smiling down at me. That was enough to live on for months.

Clara, do you remember that time after school when we'd been smoking behind the Nissen huts? He came out of the side building and caught us. You giggled; I froze. Bad girls. He was a prefect by then. Perfect, prefect Bobby. Even his school uniform made him look good. God, I would have done anything for him.

He told you to go home, so you did.

"And you," he said, "come with me."

I won't go into detail about what he did, Clara. It hurt a lot. He said it would hurt less the second time. But there was no second time after I ran away crying. The next day, he caught me on the way to assembly.

"If you say anything, I'll tell everyone what a little slag you are."

I didn't see you after you left school. You couldn't come back. Pregnant schoolgirls stayed home. Your baby was adopted.

We'd hated Miss Duke, the deputy head teacher with that dyed black hair and thick glasses. But she was kind to you, wasn't she? Came round to give you lessons at home. She got you through your exams after you moved schools to take them a year later.

That was something you told me much further down the line, when we were friends again as adults. And you told me who had got you pregnant. You'd refused to tell your parents. I held you while you sobbed your heart out. And then I told you about what had happened to me.

You went white.

Oh, my lovely Clara. I know why you didn't want me to go to your funeral. It was shame. Fear of it all finally coming out. Because you'd never told anyone either, you little slag.

The shame wasn't yours to carry, though, Clara. It was Bobby's, wasn't it?

Your precious brother.