Bourne toWrite... creative writing workshops

Forgive Me

by Francesca Ryan

“Can’t you just fucking forgive me?”

And right there is the problem, Mark. The fucking problem. Can I ever forgive the fucking? You fucked her. In our bed.

I’d come home from work early that Tuesday. Louise was off sick, so nothing could actually be finished until she was back. No matter. I could work at home. It’s a pretty little flat, ours. Second floor of a Victorian terrace, in the better part of town. The lime trees smelled so sweet as I walked down the road. You can just see the sea from the top of the road as you walk towards our little place.

“Sixpence for the first one to see the sea!”

I never tired of your childhood joke, the one you cracked every time we walked back from somewhere. Took me right back to trips to Eastbourne when I was little. Mum and Dad would scoop me up after school, Popsy in the back, too little to start wearing the green gingham school dress. I was so proud of my uniform. I sometimes refused to wear anything else, even on a Saturday, much to Mum’s irritation. Popsy wanted to wear that dress so badly. She got all my hand-me-downs; the blue-and-yellow summer one with the giraffe print was her favourite. She was wearing it that time we went to Holywell, when I ran up that little spiral mound with the shrubs on it.

“I’m the king of the castle! You’re the dirty rascal!”

“No, I’m not!” shrieked Popsy. “I’m not, I’m not!”

Fish and chips in the car going home, the steamy smell of them, the sharp scent of the vinegar cutting through the blissful, greasy heap in our laps. Mum happy she didn’t have to cook, Dad in a good mood. Happy days, Mark.

And when I met you, I tried to leave behind the pain of Dad leaving when I was twelve. I blamed Mum, of course. The woman who raised two daughters on very little money. I was a horrible teenager. But I was safe with you, Mark, in our little place.

It was a surprise to see our bedroom curtains drawn that afternoon. You were at the gym, I thought. Seemed to be quite an obsession with you at the time. I was concerned to see you come out of the bedroom looking flushed.

"Had to come back. I didn't feel very well."

It must have been quite a fever for you to have rumpled the bed so much. I made it up again while you were showering. I found the hair thing. Well, two, actually: little tortoiseshell plastic clips. You came out of the bathroom and stood there as I held out my hand and displayed them. It was only twice, you said. Only.

It was a bloody time over the next few weeks, wasn't it? We fought. We talked. I cried; you cried. But after the couples therapy, we started again. Bought a new bed. I really did try to forgive you, Mark. After all, we've all betrayed someone and been betrayed ourselves. I got together with you while I was still with someone else. Not proud of it. I don't know if he forgave me. He said he did, but you don't forget, do you?

I went up to Northumberland this last weekend for Popsy's second wedding. You didn't want to come. No Dad there, either. He'd been at the first one, though it was hard on Mum at the time. She's been gone four years now. I cried when Popsy made her vows. Cried for her, for you and me. For Mum. The woman who put up with so much when I was a teenager. The shouting matches. Throwing Dad's leaving in her face. The shoplifting phase. The flunked exams. I cried to remember how I failed her when she was dying in hospital. Not getting there in time for her passing because… because I was somewhere else. Somewhere I shouldn't have been. Not sure Popsy has quite got over that. But still. We're sisters, and that's a tough bond.

The day after the wedding, I was sitting in the big park nearby, like the one we used to go to with Mum. Wishing that I could say the words I never said to her. Wishing I'd been there to hold her thin, yellow hand as she laboured towards her last breath.

Then something happened, Mark. She spoke to me. Not like a whisper in my ear; it was an infusion. Into my heart, right there by the swings. I could see her sitting on the bench in my mind's eye. Holding the blue bag with the peanut butter sandwiches for after. Right into my heart came the absolute knowledge of her love.

Like a warm wave spreading through my chest, down my arms, into my stomach. I was completely suffused with her love. There was nothing to forgive. All that pain, washed out of me. She loved me so much, from somewhere I can't reach. Everything understood. A blessing on a damp bench, with the shrieks of small children a little way off. I was her child; I was already forgiven because there was nothing to forgive.

Did I sit there for a few minutes? Maybe it was an hour. When I come back, Mark, I'll be moving out. Because I can't forget, even if I was granted the grace to forgive. I don't love you enough, you see.

Can you forgive me for that?