Bourne toWrite... creative writing workshops

So Quick

by Juliet Robinson

I roll the leaflet between my fingers and let it spring back, repeating the process until the laminated surface is worn soft by the play of my hands.

The door opens and the young receptionist appears. He smiles, his eyes gentle, his body language coaxing, as if I'm a horse about to bolt. It's entirely possible.

'Please come with me, Mr Greer.'

He leads me down a dimly lit corridor painted taupe or mushroom—some sort of non-colour. Stopping at a door, he turns to me.

'If you could change into the clothes provided.' He glances at my ear loop. 'You'll need to remove your piercing. Once you're ready, just make your way through the launch door.'

I reach for the door handle, but my hand refuses to close round it. I can feel him behind me, preparing to say something soothing and understanding, like, 'It's all right, Mr Greer. Most people hesitate at this point.'

His whole demeanour sets my teeth on edge. Opening the door, I stumble into the room before he gets the chance to cajole me.

The changing room is unsurprisingly beige. A cream-coloured jumpsuit waits for me. I almost laugh at its careful neutrality. As I dress, however, I struggle with the zip.

Once changed, I sit on the bench occupying the exact centre of the room. I've come this far. A lifetime of regret has led me here. I suck in a deep breath, feeling the warm, velvety air expand my lungs, then propel myself to my feet and head for the launch door at a near trot.

The room beyond carries the quiet, clinical tones of a doctor's waiting room—a posh private one, not a worn-out NHS surgery. There are plush chairs—no hard edges here—and a corner set aside for children, with beanbags, books and soft toys.

I cross the room and pick up a cuddly lion. It's identical to the one I mentioned during my intake call—the one I lost on a bus. Bramble. I press it to my chest, and for a moment, it feels exactly as I remember my lion. Though this one has both eyes.

A door opens. I turn, clutching the lion, as a young boy enters the room. He's dressed in worn denim jeans, with a repaired rip hitching over the left knee, and a faded Snoopy T-shirt with a stain covering Woodstock, turning him from bright yellow to muted brown.

He looks up at me, his brow furrowed with the innate caution of someone who doesn't understand where he is. I know what they've told him: that he's been chosen to help a doctor by answering a few questions about toys and growing up.

His gaze falls on the lion.

'They told me you have a lion like this,' I say, my tongue thick and heavy in my mouth.

'Bramble. But I lost him…'

I scramble to remember that day—frantically searching under the seats as my bus stop approached, the hollow ache that engulfed me when my hunt was unrewarded. The lesson that the things you love can disappear in an instant.

He bites at his lip, small white teeth flashing as they graze the pink flesh.

Resentment scorches my chest. A sneer curls my lips as I take in the slump of his shoulders, the hesitant way his eyes keep flashing from the lion to my face, then to the door through which he arrived. He takes a step back, and I almost laugh.

So quick to give up. So quick to let things slip through your fingers. This is where it started—all those doors slammed in my face, all those opportunities wasted—all of them born right here, with this pathetic creature who can't even cross a room to reclaim what he's lost.

I want to shake him, to scream at him to fight for himself. But the rules of the clinic are clear: no details about the future, no revealing who I am.

This is a mistake. I want my money back. I take a stuttering breath and turn away, forcing myself not to run for the exit. I'm shaking, my body a taut spring.

I'm halfway across the room when I hear a small voice.

'I tried to find him. I went to the bus station, but they didn't have him.'

I turn around. The boy hasn't moved. His small chin is set and his lower lip trembles, but he holds my gaze. He hasn't given up.

'Every time I get on the twenty-three, I look for Bramble.'

The twenty-three. The memory comes rushing back: crawling on grimy floors, craning my neck beneath cracked vinyl seats while other passengers grumped at me or stepped over me. The sticky grime under my fingernails as I searched beneath every single row, route after route, week after week.

The sneer dies on my face. He hasn't given up.

The failure isn't his. It's mine. I've spent sixty years hiding behind the ghost of a timid child, using him as a convenient scapegoat for my own adult cowardice. I blamed him for every door I lacked the courage to push open, every risk I was too fearful to take. He isn't weak. He's a child.

I stoop and hold out the lion. He hesitates, but only for a moment.