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The Coffee Shop Book Club

Edited by

Fanny Blake for *Woman & Home*

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the
COFFEE
SHOP
Book Club

Foreword

BY CATHERINE TATE

*I*t is my pleasure to introduce this year's collection of short stories by such a great range of writers who, like you, are supporting the work of Breast Cancer Care by the sale of this book. So first and foremost, thank you!

Hearing the devastating news that a loved one has breast cancer can make casualties of us all; it is a frightening and overwhelming time leaving many of us feeling vulnerable and at a loss as to what to do. Breast Cancer Care is there for us all. It is the only UK-wide charity dedicated to offering emotional and practical help to everyone affected by this life threatening illness not just the person diagnosed. Their helpline, website and online forums offer a friendly ear and support which can make a world of difference on a bad day.

For every book sold, Breast Cancer Care receives £1 towards these vital services which are all provided for free. A big thank you also goes to *woman&home* and its readers for supporting us for the past nine years and helping raise over £7,000,000.

Every day more people hear the news that they have breast cancer and you are helping to support them by buying this book. I hope you enjoy reading it. Maybe see you at the next Pink Ribbonwalk*? Come on, we're all in it together.

Anyone worried about breast cancer can visit Breast Cancer Care's helpful website www.breastcancercare.org.uk or call their free confidential helpline on 0800 800 6000

*Breast Cancer Care's Pink Ribbonwalks in association with *woman&home* are held every year during May and June. For details of these and other fundraising events visit www.breastcancercare.org/fundraising-events

the
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Stories by

KATE MOSSE, JOJO MOYES, IAN RANKIN,
PENNY VINCENZI, KATHERINE WEBB

and many more . . .

EDITED BY FANNY BLAKE FOR

woman&home



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Letting Go

BY FANNY BLAKE

*T*wenty-five years of marriage. Not bad. No, better than that. A wonderful, happy achievement. Or would have been, if Tom had only lived to see it.

The joke (a bad one) was that he had been at the leisure centre when he died, eight long years ago. Clare had always viewed the place with suspicion. Rightly, as it turned out. He had been on the running machine when he keeled over. Dead by the time the ambulance arrived. That had been some time before she had been tracked down to the farm where she was cajoling a cow through a difficult labour. Professional to the ends of her rubber-gloved fingers, she had to wait for the birth before she made her terrible journey to the hospital.

Tom would have laughed if he'd known. Instead, he was lying in the mortuary, pale and cold as marble, waiting for her. Her determination not to let him down was what had got her through those initial pain-fuelled months. That and Mel, who was only nine when it happened. Clare still felt the agony of seeing their daughter's small face tilted towards her as

she asked when Dad was coming home, and of her own inability to answer.

Tom always had such a robust attitude towards life and death. One of the things she loved about him. 'We're born, we die. It happens.'

But not yet, a voice inside her had screamed, and continued to scream, for a long time. Somehow she had found the inner strength she needed to cope and, over the following years, the character of her grief changed until it became a reluctant acceptance. She had thrown herself into her work at the veterinary practice, and into the business of bringing up an increasingly bolshy young teenager.

This anniversary could be both celebration and opportunity for some much-needed family bonding. She would inveigle their prickly seventeen-year-old daughter into coming away with her for a long weekend, during which they would remember Tom together. They rarely spoke of him now. In fact, they rarely spoke to one another at all.

After spending weeks delving into the attractions of different city breaks, Clare settled on Granada in southern Spain. After their never-to-be-forgotten honeymoon, she and Tom had often talked about returning there, but they never had. What better time than this?

When invited to come, Mel's reaction had been predictable. 'How am I supposed to know what I'm doing in May?'

'But I'd like you to come.'

Letting Go

Clare could see from the pout – a frequent weapon of choice – how much the idea appealed. ‘Mum, I’ll try, but I’ve got exams in June, and it’s Emma’s birthday on the second . . .’

‘I’m only talking about four days. That’s all.’

‘Maybe. I’ll have to check with Matt. I’ll let you know.’

Clare sighed. Matt had been Mel’s on-off boyfriend for a year now. Their relationship, which veered between the dizzy heights of romantic love and despair with what was becoming monotonous regularity, was a mystery to her. In fact, so was her daughter. Theirs had become a relationship of delicate negotiation, one in which eggshells were frequently trodden on.

She glanced at her laptop, at the pictures of Granada left open in the hope of seducing Mel. On that honeymoon, Tom had bought her Washington Irving’s *Tales of the Alhambra*. Where was the book now? Had she lost it deliberately because of the memories it evoked? The photo of the fortress at sunset whispered to her of ghosts and legends, including her favourite, the Rose of Alhambra, who wept for the faithlessness of man.

Ghosts.

Her daydream fractured as Blue, their leggy young lurcher, skedaddled towards a knock at the back door, barking. On the doorstep, she found her friend Jenny struggling to get off her wellies. Having freed her second foot, she followed Clare into the kitchen. Soon, they were sitting at the long pine table, mugs of

tea and a tartan tin of biscuits between them, the day's post and newspaper pushed to one side.

'What's this?' Jenny pulled the laptop towards her. 'Looks amazing. What are you planning? Not you and Nick? Already?'

After a drink and a couple of meals out together, Nick, a recently divorced local farmer, was obviously hoping their relationship would develop. Clare recollected their kisses. Perhaps it would.

'Bit soon for that,' she said hastily, thinking of the speed of small-town gossip. 'I do like him, but he's a bit insistent. No, I thought I'd celebrate Tom's and my anniversary with Mel. A family thing.'

Jen reached across the table to put her hand over Clare's. 'Oh, Clare. I thought you'd moved on.'

Clare withdrew her hand sharply. 'I have, but whatever happens, I won't forget Tom. I don't want to. He's Mel's dad. The idea was to make a girls' weekend out of it and remember him together.'

'And she's said no.' Jenny knew them too well.

'Mel's got her own life now. I shouldn't have expected otherwise.' Clare often found herself making excuses for her daughter. She picked out a Jammie Dodger, hesitated, then put it back.

'I'd come with you, but I couldn't, not without Brian. He'd go mad.' Jenny's husband kept her on an unenviably short leash. 'Why don't you go on your own?'

'No way. I wouldn't know what to do with myself.'

Later that night, Clare lay awake, mulling over their

Letting Go

conversation. She had *come to terms* (how she hated that phrase) with Tom's death. She hadn't locked herself inside her grief, but had involved herself in the community, as much as doubling up as a vet and a mother would allow.

Eventually despairing of ever finding an available single man, she had trawled various online dating sites. Some of the men had been sad and lonely, and dragged her down to their level of disappointment. Others, such as Roger, a dentist from Swindon and Jack, a haulage company owner, had been great. She had danced, drunk and had fun with them. She'd made noisy love in hotel rooms and shared secretive moments of passion at home, anxious about waking Mel. And now there was Nick. But none of them had replaced Tom. Not yet. Mel had vetted each and every one, raising an eyebrow or screwing up her nose, making her distaste obvious.

Of course her daughter didn't want to travel with her. Would she have wanted to accompany her own mother on holiday? Perhaps Jen had a point, and she should break with habit and go alone.

The following evening, after a draining morning of consultations and an afternoon of minor ops and a visit to a mare in foal, Clare sat down in the kitchen with her laptop.

'What are you doing?' Mel leaned over her shoulder and peered at the screen.

Clare bit back her reproof about the acrid tang of cigarette smoke in Mel's hair. How many times had

they had the smoking conversation? She was too exhausted to have it again.

‘Looks wicked.’ A deep-green-varnished fingernail pointed at a narrow, white-walled street in Granada’s old town. ‘But where’s the sea, the sangria? Isn’t that why people go to Spain?’

‘Not me,’ Clare returned firmly. Bikini-clad beach days had lost their appeal the moment she’d lost her waist. ‘No. I want to go back and show you where we started out together. Dad would have liked that.’

‘Pity he didn’t stick around then.’ Mel’s interest had wandered on to a celebrity magazine.

‘*Mel!* That’s an awful thing to say.’ But Clare had heard the anger in her daughter’s voice. Anger she hadn’t realised Mel still felt. ‘What do you mean?’

Mel turned a page and her voice wobbled. ‘He should have looked after himself better, shouldn’t he? He had us to think about.’

Clare looked at her daughter. ‘I can’t believe you just said that.’

‘Well, I did.’ Mel spoke slowly. ‘And I’ll decide about the holiday later.’

Clare fought to be reasonable. Normal. ‘The prices will go up if we leave it. Do come. I don’t want you remembering Dad like that.’

But the only response was the sound of Mel’s footsteps on the stairs.

Clare scrolled down to stare at the Court of the Lions, remembering wandering through the arched gallery with Tom, holding hands. She looked down at

Letting Go

her wedding ring. Suddenly her mind was made up. She would go on her own.

As the day of departure drew nearer, so Clare's reluctance about travelling alone deepened. She had asked Mel to join her again, casually, but hoping for the right answer.

'Look, Mum, I can't. There's a gig that weekend that Matt says we mustn't miss. Take Nick.' But they both knew that wasn't going to happen. Not this time.

On the day itself, Mel wasn't even there to say goodbye. Something else had prior claim on her time. Pushing her disappointment in her daughter to one side, Clare caught the train to the airport.

On the plane, she had time to reflect. Mel wasn't a bad girl. Perhaps it was time they started to let each other go. This would be a rite of passage. If she didn't speak to anyone for four days, she'd survive. She'd explore, she'd read, she'd go to bed early. And when she came home, Mel would be pleased to see her and Nick would be waiting. She was surprised by a flutter of pleasure at the thought.

She wheeled her hand luggage towards Arrivals, the bright spring day a relief from the wind and rain she'd left behind. Suddenly she felt unaccountably nervous, and dug in her bag for the piece of paper with the name of the hotel.

In her room, she poured herself a gin and tonic from the minibar and lay on the bed. She jumped when the phone rang.

'Mrs Collins? I have a message for you.'

‘A message?’ Alarm bells sounded. Either something had happened to Mel, or there was an emergency at the practice.

‘A taxi will be picking you up for dinner at eight thirty.’

She must have misheard. ‘A taxi?’ she repeated. Dinner?

‘It’s booked in the name of Nick Johnston.’ The concierge hung up.

Nick! He couldn’t have. Their relationship had moved on to another level, but he knew why she had come to Granada. It was completely inappropriate for him to turn up uninvited. She knocked back her drink. She couldn’t cope if he was jealous of Tom. She wouldn’t meet him. She poured another, smaller gin. Yes she would, and she wouldn’t mince her words.

By eight thirty, she was ready. A pashmina over the shoulders of her smart blouse and jeans, she stepped into the waiting taxi. She watched the street life through the windows, every minute more excited to be there, anxious to get this over with.

Walking through the tapas bar, hectic with customers shouting their orders over the counter, she was shown into a restaurant. She looked around at the other diners before being shown to her table. He must be in the candlelit annexe.

The maître d’ showed her through. Nick was obviously late. Another black mark.

At one table, a young woman sat alone. As Clare

Letting Go

approached she looked up, a smile spreading across her face.

Clare stared at her in disbelief. 'Mel! But the gig . . . Nick?'

'That fell through weeks ago, so I decided to surprise you. Nick helped. I borrowed his name for the taxi. Was that awful?'

Stunned, Clare took her seat.

'I couldn't let you celebrate the anniversary on your own.' Mel held out the tourist guide she'd been reading. 'And I've found an amazing spa quite near the hotel. Look.'

Wiping away a tear, Clare burst out laughing, then leaned over and kissed her daughter's cheek.