

Words That Float

by Jennavieve Strub

From the time Clara had learned to read at the age of four, she'd dreamed of a bigger world, far from their house and The Eastern Townships in Québec. Clara had seen the world through a different lens; always watching, learning, and searching for what people were not saying. She knew she could learn much more through listening and keeping her gaze down, because meeting people's eyes was overwhelming. It felt like looking into a jam-packed closet or opening the door to your own.

When Clara entered the real world, she watched for details people didn't know they shared. She noted a hand playing with a necklace or a finger twisting a ring. An eyebrow raised; interrogative or dismissal? The way little kids' shoulders would creep up near their ears when a bully approached.

Occasionally, she would send one of her stories to her brother, Rowan, her best friend, who was away on a swimming scholarship at university. *This is what I see.*

Maybe you can make worlds after all, he wrote back.

When Clara listened, she heard the pauses, the falters, the emotional floods of surprise or anger. The details were best noticed at her family dinner table, where all the truth was hidden. If given the choice, Clara would have taken her dinner plate down into the cool, dark space beneath the tablecloth. From there she'd watch her mother's fingers tighten on her lap along with the conversation, or Rowan's shoes point toward the exit during their father's interrogations. Children, of course, did not eat under the table, so Clara's tendency toward napkin-dropping would have to suffice.

When an author came to visit Clara at her school, she understood for the first time that books were written by real people. People whose mascara flecked down onto the soft pale curves of their cheeks, and who wore sweaters with too-long sleeves.

While Clara was disappointingly average when it came to math and geography, she was always at the top of her English classes.

"You could be a teacher someday," her teachers told her, year after year.

Why don't they ever say 'writer'? she wrote to Rowan.

Because you're the one with the imagination, he said. *That's your door out, Clara girl. Use it.*

So, Clara decided to train herself. If writers were magicians, then surely there were tricks she could learn. She was old enough by that point to know that magic in the real world was just a series of

illusions, carefully crafted to distract you from what was really going on. A wall of medals. A fresh pie every Sunday. A father home for dinner every night. *Look here, not there.*

People didn't see reality; not because it wasn't there but because they didn't want to. It stood to reason that writing was no different, and she vowed to study so all the tricks would become clear. After that, along with her weekly trips to the library, Clara spent her allowance buying books about writing, as well as novels she could dissect.

She imagined Rowan would be proud of her, becoming her own magician. He would glance over at her and smile with unspoken words; pride pouring off him. But then she looked for a moment into his eyes.

Too much in there, Clara thought.

Without him there, it was just a feeling. Words that floated on water, just like Rowan did.

Clara was fourteen when Rowan quit college, four months before his graduation, and took off for parts unknown.

I can't wait anymore. The world is so much bigger than we've seen, Rowan wrote. *I'll keep you with me on my adventures.* Over the years he sent Clara postcards.

On a picture of a rocky coastline in Maine he wrote to her: *I wish you were here.*

At the colorful market in Egypt: *The bustle and bustle of the Bazaar is loud and chaotic, but the food stalls smell delicious.*

And in California, Mono Lake, with its limestone formations rising out of the blue water like castles: *Clara girl, this place is magical, you would love it.*

In her final year of high school, the eloquence of Clara's application essay helped her receive a scholarship at a small, tree-lined college in Maine, an easy acceptance with the reminder of how much Rowan loved it there. She found a postcard at the university gift shop and wrote to him. She wrote how excited she was to be in a place that reminded her of him. He hadn't written in a couple of months, but she sent her address, in case he wanted to visit.

In the first semester, Clara signed up for four classes. Two in science, one in economics, and the last item on her schedule was a fiction writing course—small and innocuous as a white rabbit.

In the first week of school, Clara dutifully attended what she thought of as boring classes. Then, it was time for writing class.

Professor Miller appeared to be in his sixties and had a kindness that surprised her.

"If you think about it, every story, even the most fantastical, is grounded in details we already know and every book is about questions that have already been asked," Professor Miller began. "Bilbo may be a hobbit, but we were all small at some point. And if you want to be a writer, chances are you might have experienced what it's like to be an underdog."

“How does that theory apply to serial killers?” interjected a young man in the second row. Clara looked over, observing the sprawl of his body in the chair. *No underdog there*, she thought.

“Well,” Professor Miller said, “of course serial killers do exist, although in far fewer numbers than your average airport bookstore might have you believe. But the serial killer genre asks one of the most common questions of all: what are humans willing to do to each other? Or for each other?” A beat. “The trick for a writer, is to take those eternal questions, those known bits and pieces, and put them together in a way that helps us see our world in a different light.”

Professor Miller turned to the board and wrote the words *memory manipulation*. “For your first assignment, let’s start at the beginning. Dig into your memory bank, take an experience you had or heard about, then make it into something new. Write me a story.”

Clara had been waiting her whole life for someone to say that.

She worked day and night hammering out detail after detail of what she thought to be her best work. She turned it in the night before it was due with a feeling of complete and utter satisfaction. At the end of the next class, Professor Miller handed back the stories. In red ink, he’d scrawled across the top of her first page: *Let’s talk. My office hours are Tuesdays, 12-2.*

Professor Miller’s office was small and tidy, with bookshelves from floor to ceiling. She put down her backpack and sat across from him, looking at him expectantly.

“Clara,” he said. “You’ve got incredible talent. I’ve never had a student with such a command of details.”

This is where it happens, Clara thought. This is where it starts. “Thank you,” she said. Then she saw it, the way his fingertips reached for his pen, brought it closer. “But?”

He smiled. “You, see? Details. That’s what makes your writing strong.”

“The world you’ve created on these pages is extraordinary,” he said, “but it feels like watching a beautiful movie from the back row. I suspect that’s because you’re removing yourself too.” He paused. “If you’re going to write the book you’re meant to, you’ll have to let life in. You’ll have to let us in.”

“I don’t know...” she said, but inside her, the sentence was shorter, instinctive. *No.*

“I understand,” he said, nodding. “And I’ll teach you everything else I can, but that one’s on you.”

Clara knew there were some cans whose lids were meant to stay closed. This was one of them. She would do anything else, though; learn anything.

After her first year of university, at the beginning of August, Rowan came back to town.

“Hi, Clara girl,” he said in a soft voice.

Clara ran to him and hugged him. He was so thin she felt like her arms could wrap around him twice.

“You’re back,” Clara said.

That night at dinner, he told her about climbing a flight of five hundred steps to a temple. About a train ride across Russia, the rumble of the wheels on the tracks. Of hitchhiking across France, the car accident, the family who took him in for a week while he healed. Got better.

Clara tried to listen, but two questions kept crossing her mind.

Where have you been? Why would you come back?

There was something about Rowan now—not new, but more so.

She saw him three more times before she went back to college. While their parents were at work conferences on the weekends, Rowan would cook her dinners on the sleek stainless-steel stove that commanded the attention in the kitchen. A curry. A pozole. A pasta Bolognese. They ate sitting on the floor, not at the family dinner table. Between bites, Clara had thought how it seemed something had loosened, unraveled, in the person sitting across from her. However, the details behind his eyes made her close her own, they were too much.

“Sometimes I wonder,” he said, his back to her as he did the dishes, “what it would have been like, just to be in the water by myself. No voices, no thoughts, but my own. Nobody else in my head.”

Clara felt wounded at his words but wondered if it was the entire bottle of wine he drank talking or if it was truly the nuts and bolts coming loose, as she had observed. She wondered if his own demise was happening right in front of her.

“Rowan,” she wavered, standing up, moving toward him. “I’m sorry, I should have...”

“What?” he said, not turning around. “What could you have done?”

I could have loved you so much that nothing else would matter. I could have made you a world, bidden you under the table with me.

“It’s okay, Clara,” he said. “I’ll be okay.”

Because he was her big brother, and because she wanted to, she believed him.

Clara got the news three days after she returned to college that fall. She listened, silent, to her mother’s voice on the phone. “Rowan died of an overdose. They found him in the bathtub.” Her mother added, “He chose a way that wouldn’t make a mess... He was always a neat child.”

“Was there water in the tub?” Clara asked.

“No,” her mother said. “What an odd question.”

But Clara knew it was the only one worth asking.

She flew home for the funeral. In the church, she stood pinned between her mother and father as the pastor spoke. Her father’s back was straight; her mother curled over like a pill bug. Clara closed her eyes, breathed in the smell of anguish and guilt.

Too late, she thought, and took the night flight back.

She stopped going to her classes, even the one with Professor Miller. She couldn't write—how could she with only one word at her disposal?

Why? Why? Why?

The word floated on top of the water, like Rowan *used* to. Never diving too deep, always right at the surface.

It reminded her of what Professor Miller had wanted her to do; to go deeper, not just look at the world, but go inside of it. To open those cans, she was afraid to touch.

She didn't feel liberated, though, as Professor Miller said she would.

Clara wanted to remain on the surface, the cans sealed, untouched, their contents a mystery.

She didn't like this all-consuming feeling.