

## Sub Rosa

by Francesca Ryan

“How much are you getting?” I whispered.

“Bit hard to make out exactly which one is talking.” Maria sat up, pulled the rug up from beneath us and crouched down, ear to the floor. I did the same, tuning in once more to the kitchen below. “Better.”

It was definitely auntie Irene speaking now.

“Well, we're all married here.”

The other two women murmured agreement. I poked Maria in the ribs. She stifled a giggle.

“Dear, dear Connie.” That was Auntie Cheryl. Older than Auntie Irene, though most people would have guessed it was the other way round.

“Poor dear Connie. What shall I say. All a long time ago now” replied auntie Irene. “Thank you, Margaret dear. I wouldn't say no to another drop.”

They were all having yet another top-up, that was clear. The aunties had manoeuvred my sister and I upstairs before getting down to business. No matter that Maria and I were a couple of years older than Margaret, our new sister-in-law; the wedding to our brother had been celebrated that afternoon. Only properly married women were entitled to discuss matters sexual, regarding the wider family. The men were out of the way at the Bosun's, having a few more beers. Any ribald talk that might happen there was irrelevant.

“Poor Connie. He's lucky, dear Euan would have lamped him if he'd known. Army champion boxer back in the day, Margaret.” Cheryl now. “But then I don't suppose he knew the whole of it.”

Oh yes, he did. I found myself saying it out loud. Maria squeezed my arm fiercely. Her breath came warm and boozy between our two faces pressed hard against the floor. Yes, you did know Dad. Our mother Connie told you right before she died.

“You only had to look at Harry to see he was her real father. Same nose and everything.”

“Is that why there was a divorce?” Margaret was lapping it all up. I could hear it in her voice.

“Huge scandal. Moira and Harry had to move to the Isle of Wight after. Connie was only little then, wasn't she. Grew up there. Mind you, we loved visiting after the war, didn't we Cheryl?”

“Oh yes, good times. They had great dances down the Legion. Band and everything. All the farmers used to go. That Hudson lad was gorgeous, wasn't he. Built like a tank”

“And didn't he just know it. Engaged to that whatsername. Didn't stop him dancing with you Cheryl, did it. And then you'd get up to sing your Vera Lynn number.”

“Did Connie go too?”

“Oh no. Harry wouldn't let her. Not after the, you know what. Awful business it was. They took her to London to have it done. She nearly died.

“Poor Connie.” I could practically see Margaret's greedy little face drinking it all in. Storing it up in those pink hamster cheeks of hers.

“Oh yes, dear. Cheryl was a great dancer. Weren't you? All the boys fancied her. There was a fight once, after the Christmas dance. Lawrence Hooper took quite a pasting. Still walked you home didn't he. You didn't come in for ages. I was asleep by that time. Didn't ask what you'd been up to.

“Well dear. You know what we've always said. What happened on the Isle of Wight stays on the Isle of Wight.” Cheryl's voice dropped to a giggle.

I could picture her face, slightly flushed from the evening's jollity. The lovely dark hair, still raven with help from the hairdresser. Still pinned up in that neat French pleat, a style she'd worn since she was a young woman. Carefully shaped eyebrows framing those blue Irish eyes. Lipstick red mouth. At fifty-six, Cheryl was the ageless glamour girl, in comparison with her more practical sister, Irene. She had married Tim after her first husband died.

“Let's just say she didn't marry Timothy for his brains,” cracked uncle Jim one time, winking at the guests round his Sunday table. I remember my dad roaring with laughter. Maria kicked me under the table. We got the joke, though being teenagers, the sex life of older relatives was faintly disgusting.

“What happened on the Isle of Wight?” hissed Maria, her nails digging into my flesh now, tense with excitement.

We heard the clatter of the men crowding back into the kitchen. Many voices now, no telling one from another in the happy raucous kitchen. Time to retreat and regroup under the orange and brown covers of the twin beds.

“Wanted us out of the way to talk Sub Rosa, didn't they? You know,” said Maria, whose legal Latin came with her job. “Under the Rose. Secret. Just between ourselves kind of thing.”

“More like under the Rosé,” I said. “And you didn't hold back yourself, sis.” I chucked a screwed-up tissue at her. Maria blew her nose on it, scrunched it up and threw it right back at me.

“Dad already knows what mum's stepfather did to her.”

“Shut up now and go to sleep. Some detective work to do in the morning. Isle of Wight!”

We never did manage to winkle that story out of the aunties. Permanently Sub Rosa. “Isle of Wight” has been our secrecy signal ever since.