

THE STRANGER

Gerald was flustered. He detested being late. He was anxious enough as it was, attending his first Creative Writing class, and he had made himself late because, uncharacteristically, he had forgotten to bring a notebook and pen and he had had to stop to buy them. He arrived at the venue with barely a minute to spare.

Gerald squeezed through the narrow entrance door and looked about him. He noticed a seat near the door but there was something about the look of the small, whiskered chap next to it that he did not like so he made gratefully for a space in the far corner of the room and sat down.

“Well, here we all are then,” said an authoritative figure wearing spectacles, a black gown and a mortar-board.

Ah, this must be our teacher, Gerald surmised.

“First of all, I think we should introduce ourselves,” said the teacher, and gestured to the first scholar on his left.

“Hi, everyone. My name’s Andy and I’m an alcoholic. Whoops! Sorry, wrong meeting,” said the first, chuckling.

“I’m Basil and I’m a gardener by trade,” began the next, a green-haired man. “I had to take early retirement – Dutch Elm Disease.”

With each introduction and as his moment approached, the butterflies in Gerald’s tummy increased both in magnitude and activity. His nervousness was all the greater because none of his class-mates had even acknowledged his presence yet. Once or twice he thought he caught one of them looking at him out of the corner of an eye, but that was all.

The teacher invited the student on Gerald's immediate right to join the fray. Gerald's heart started thumping. He hardly heard their remarks.

"I'm Patrick and I'm a retired ptarmigan," he seemed to be saying, "And I want to write about life in the raw from a ptarmigan's viewpoint."

Gerald gathered up his courage to take his turn – but the teacher's gaze swept past him in an instant, settling on the person on Gerald's left. Gerald could not understand why he was being so studiously ignored. He sat in deep despair while Phyllis the pheasant had her say; then Hortense the hare and Arbuthnot the armadillo.

Gerald wanted to crawl into a hole and disappear. Unfortunately, there was no hole around of the necessary girth. He felt utterly humiliated. He sniffled slightly. Then he felt a sneeze coming on. Hard as he fought to suppress it, he knew it was useless. Sure enough, a gargantuan trumpeting ensued. Well, at least they could not pretend to have missed that.

Gerald surveyed the room. Apparently he was mistaken. Gordon the gazelle was continuing his introduction without breaking his stride.

Gerald collapsed back into melancholy while Belinda the badger and Marigold the mole held forth about how they'd lived next door to each for years without realising they had a shared love of nature poems.

The teacher now invited the last member of the group to introduce himself, the diminutive student with whiskers. He hesitated before he spoke.

"Mmm? Oh, yeah, I'm Marmaduke Mouse," he squeaked. "But look – is it just me?" He was staring straight at Gerald. "Or has anyone else noticed there's a bloody great elephant in the room?"

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