

THE WRITERS

I

It was her fingers he noticed first. They were not especially long but they were slim and shapely.

It was start of term at the Creative Writing Workshop, an evening class at the Norton Valley College (known locally as ‘The Tec’). Amy and Keith were both novitiates, and neither knew anyone else there.

About fifteen people had taken seats around the classroom tables which had been arranged into a U formation. The lights in the room were almost intolerably bright, especially as they reflected off the stark, clean white walls and ceiling. It had the atmosphere of an operating theatre, but Keith had no anaesthetic. Among the first to arrive but the last to sit, he took a place at a corner of the table. To his right, a trio of women were chatting, their voices clear and loud with the confidence of old hands. To his left, a set of slim and shapely fingers.

Keith arranged his exercise book, his pens and his bottle of water, and then re-arranged them for long enough to be sure that the shapely fingers were not engaged in conversation.

“Peppermint?” Keith asked, proffering a tube. He turned to face his neighbour for the first time.

Amy smiled. It was a warming-the-cockles-of-the-heart type of smile and Keith drank it in avidly.

“Thank you,” said Amy, taking a mint. Keith held firmly on to the tube. Now he had established eye contact, he meant to maintain it.

“I haven’t taken someone else’s place, have I?” he asked.

“No,” said Amy. “Well, not so far as I know, anyway.”

“Oh, is it your first time, as well?”

“Yes, it is actually.”

“Oh, great. I’m glad I’m not the only one. It’s all a bit nerve-wracking, isn’t it? My name’s Keith, by the way.”

“Amy,” said Amy.

“No – Keith,” said Keith.

Amy looked briefly bemused, then tittered politely.

“OK everybody. Let’s get started, shall we?” a voice from the front called out, and Keith’s and Amy’s eyes turned dutifully towards their tutor.

Keith and Amy sat next to each other again the second week. On the third, Amy did not turn up and Keith was miserable for days. But on the fourth, there she was again, although, much to Keith's chagrin, another student who eschewed a regular place sat between them. Keith was determined to find a way to get close to Amy.

He could not have said why he had taken to her so strongly, had you asked. It was not simply a physical attraction, although Amy's appearance was appealing. She was in her early fifties, he guessed; about his own age. She wore her hair short and frequently blonde. Her figure was full but not fat. Her warm smile was her default expression, Keith had soon discovered. It reflected her giving personality. She spoke rarely in class but, when she did, it was always to compliment others' work or, on one glorious occasion, to jump to Keith's defence when the tutor seemed to suggest his writing needed savage cutting. Amy's own writing was a little disorganised in Keith's view, but contained many good ideas. He longed to find a way to express his critique, but so far had just managed to stop himself saying he wished she would avoid poetry, which tended to be tidy, twee, trivial and too alliterative. Her prose was pre-eminently preferable.

Keith made up for the enforced distance between them by looking directly towards Amy while reading out his piece for the week. It contained his customary smattering of bad puns and self-conscious similes which elicited some genuine and some charitable chortles from the group. Amy's responses, Keith liked to think, fell into the former category. He was pleased to note that she was giggling generously and, more importantly, that she was steadfastly returning his gaze throughout.

"Splendid," said Neville, the tutor, when Keith had finished. "That rattled along brilliantly, I thought. Brimming with wit, as ever. Any comments?"

"Pungently punny," said Harry the haiku wordsmith.

"Winningly witty," added Peter the playwright.

"Lovely," said Millicent the mythologist, "But I wasn't sure where it was going. Perhaps if it had been a little shorter...?"

"Oh, no, I disagree," said Muriel the murder mystery writer. "I wished it could have gone on much longer." Keith nodded his appreciation but was not buoyed up significantly by her remarks; he had a strong suspicion Muriel fancied him.

"Well, it *was* beautifully written," said Penny the poet, "But I thought the underlying meaning was a bit obscure. What was it you were trying to *say*?" (This she addressed directly

to Keith.) “Was there some sort of allegory or metaphor that I missed? Because, if so, and I mean this with all respect, it wasn’t clear enough to me. Wasn’t it Forster who said……?”

“Margaret or E M?” interrupted Peter.

“I’m sorry?” asked a bemused Penny.

“It was just a comedy piece, wasn’t it?” Amy’s incisive voice cut through the by-play. “Isn’t that enough? It made us laugh.”

“Absolutely right,” said Neville the tutor, beaming at Amy. “Comedy need not dress itself up in metaphor – so long as it works. I say, I don’t know if somebody has coined that already. If not, I think I’ll claim it. It was rather good.”

But Keith was not listening. Amy had come to his protection again. He was all aglow.

When Amy’s turn to read arrived, Keith watched her closely the whole time, seeking to transmit his regard. Fortunately, his efforts were not undermined by her selecting a poem. Instead, she had prepared a short story highlighting the joy and sadness both implied by new love in old age. Everyone had fallen quiet, and the silence lingered after the story concluded.

Keith’s cheeks bore the briefest blush as he wondered if the story could conceivably concern Amy and himself.

“Well,” said Neville at length, “That was simply marvellous, Amy. You’ve taken my breath away. A really excellent piece. You’ve surpassed yourself.”

And the whole class enthusiastically endorsed their leader’s comments. Even Keith chipped in with a “superb – really involving” and maintained his admiring gaze. As his eyes met Amy’s he felt the connection surge through his entire frame, loitering especially in the loins.

Keith decided he would take the bull by the horns, cliché or no cliché, and try to make a move immediately after class.

Of course, nothing is ever that simple.

Neville remembered that he had not returned a few pieces which students had asked him to look at. When handing a poem back to Amy, he told her again how much he had enjoyed her story today and that she was really beginning to tap into her optimal work, and he went on and on. Keith hovered by the door, pretending to check the contents of his bag.

And then Muriel happened.

“Wasn’t Amy’s story lovely today?” she asked Keith.

“Mmmm, yes. It certainly was.”

“Although I must say, I prefer yours. You have such a lovely light touch. Have you ever been published? You really ought to be properly exposed. If you ever release something, I’d love to get hold of it.”

“Uh-huh? Well, that’s nice of you,” said Keith, noting with alarm that Amy was now packing up. How was he to get rid of this old bat?

“I hope you don’t think I’m forward,” Muriel was continuing, “But I wondered if you might like to pop around some time. You know, to compare notes and so on, see if we might collaborate or something. I think you might be able to help me with a sex scene I’ve been planning.”

“Er, eh?” Keith gaped at Muriel, only now tuning in exclusively to what she was saying. And only now did he realise that the odd sensation at his ankle was Muriel’s foot going up and down.

“Bye,” said Amy as she passed them, making for the exit.

“Eh? Oh, ‘bye,” said Keith, but he was too late to follow up. Amy had gone and he was stuck fast with Muriel.

4

Well, of course, Keith accepted Muriel’s invitation. It would have been churlish not to.

As things worked out, he was quite glad he had. He found that Muriel was a surprisingly athletic lover, leaving him, the younger by five years or more, quite worn out – especially after the third time.

But Keith was not satisfied. Well, yes, he was, but he was not fulfilled, shall we say. Muriel had little conversation, for example; or, at least, what she had was superficial. She didn’t have Amy’s warm and attractive personality. She might be good in bed but she wasn’t much to look at. And, well, she was getting on a bit.

So, after popping back to Muriel’s a couple of times, Keith was ready to make another play for Amy at the following week’s class.

He arrived fifteen minutes early in case of a chance to intercept Amy before she went in. He was surprised to see her Volkswagen was already in the car park. It was in a corner, tight up against another vehicle Keith did not recognise. He backed into a space diagonally opposite so he could see if and when Amy got out of her car. But once again Keith was surprised. Amy did get out within a minute or so, but not from her car. She was climbing out

of the back of the car next to it, adjusting her dress as she did so. And a few seconds later Neville, the tutor, struggled out of the other side.

Keith was very quiet in class that evening. When invited to read, he dissembled, saying he had nothing with him worth their attention. Keith's unwonted taciturnity discouraged Neville from cajoling for long.

At the end of the session, Keith left without a word to anyone, even Muriel.

5

Keith did not show up for class the following week. Neither, for that matter, did Neville. Amy was there, as was Muriel who suggested a symposium on whodunits in the tutor's absence with special reference to disposing of bodies, but she received little support. In the end, no consensus could be reached and the meeting broke up.

Amy felt unsettled and frustrated. She had wanted to see Neville – to tell him to leave her alone. Flattered at first by his offer of personal tuition, it had not taken her long to detect his shallows. And, frankly, the sex had not worked out as she might have liked. The first time was fine: passionate, quick and straightforward. But then he became more demanding. Rough sex in the back of Neville's car was not the summit of her ambition. And then when he wanted her to tie him up and use her imagination, ignoring his protests, well, that was where she had decided to draw the line.

She was quite prepared to put all that to one side and resume a distant teacher/pupil relationship – after all, this was the only convenient writing course for miles – but he seemed unable to do that. He could not stop calling or sending texts and emails, despite her unequivocal rejection.

But now, without any warning, Neville had not turned up. In an effort to clear the air beyond doubt, she tried to call him repeatedly the following day, without success. Was he trying to make her feel guilty? If so, tough. She had beaten off far worse than that in her time.

6

Keith had been spending a lot of time thinking. He had been hit hard by Amy's betrayal, for that was how he regarded it, although he knew that was both unfair and irrational.

He had attended the creative writing course on the advice of his therapist. His depressive feelings and anxieties had settled down a lot with her help over the years. They

had agreed that, on her retirement a few months ago, he should try to go it alone. Keith was struck by the irony: the course which was intended to help him engage with new people and turn him away from introspection had had the practical effect of propelling him backwards. He recalled that his therapist had warned him that there could be setbacks. She had given him a card for her colleague, Margaret McAlpine, recommending him to contact her if he felt the need.

Keith found the card and rang the number shown, expecting a Scottish voice to answer. He had always found a Scots accent to be oddly comforting – probably something to do with childhood viewings of Dr Finlay’s Casebook. In fact it was not Ms McAlpine who answered, but the haughty tones of the receptionist at the Wellbeing Centre, where a number of therapists from assorted disciplines had their headquarters. Keith explained his situation briefly and the receptionist, even more briefly, booked him in for a couple of days’ time.

Keith duly arrived at the appointed hour – or ten minutes beforehand, actually, for he could not cope with lateness. When called into the cosily furnished cubicle which served as Ms McAlpine’s room at, he noted, three-and-a-half minutes past the appointed hour, Keith was surprised to be greeted by Amy.

“Oh, ah,” said Amy.

“Oh, ah?” said Keith.

“It’s Keith, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Yes, it is. Look, I’m sorry, but there seems to have been some sort of mistake.....”

“No, no mistake. I’m Margaret McAlpine. I use my mother’s name, you see, for professional purposes.”

“Oh, ah,” said Keith.

A pause ensued.

“Well, take a seat,” Amy suggested at length. “We’d better try to work this problem out, hadn’t we?”

“Um, all right then,” Keith assented, but he sat gingerly, his eyes flickering around the room, anywhere but in Amy’s direction. He could not see how he could seek advice from Amy. There had to be a degree of detachment between counsellor and counselled, surely. Even if his desire for her had not been the cause of his current consternation, it would have been awkward enough.

“I didn’t see you at Creative Writing this week,” said Amy, buying time. She could not see how she could be Keith’s therapist, knowing each other as they did. Besides, she had taken rather a shine to Keith, and she could hardly counsel someone she found attractive. It would be utterly improper, speaking professionally.

“No,” said Keith. “I didn’t really feel up to it. The truth is...well, I’ve been feeling a bit let down – down, I mean. Was it a good session?” he asked quickly, covering up his slip.

“No. It was a complete washout, actually.”

“Oh? Just because I wasn’t there?” asked Keith, cheered by this news and catching Amy’s eye.

“Well, that didn’t help, obviously,” said Amy, smiling freely for the first time today, warming the cockles of Keith’s heart in the process. “But it was mainly because Neville didn’t show up.”

“Oh?” Keith’s heart and eyes fell again, encountering renewed evidence of Amy’s preference for Neville.

“You haven’t heard from him recently, I suppose?” Amy continued.

“No.”

“Sorry?”

“No,” Keith repeated, a little louder.

“No, neither have I – thank goodness.”

“Thank goodness?” Keith had perked up again. “I thought you and Neville were....” (he decided against ‘at it’) “...an item.”

“Oh, did you?” Amy said slowly. “Yes, I thought you’d seen us.”

Keith’s eyes darted off to far corners of the room again, focusing on one of many soft cushions.

“No, well, it was a bit of a disaster, to be a honest,” Amy went on before the pause became too embarrassing for Keith’s frayed nerves. “I was trying to give him the elbow for ages, and then he suddenly stopped calling. And then he didn’t turn up for class this week and I’ve heard nothing since.”

Another pause. Keith, meanwhile, was trying hard not to tap his feet in excitement. Eventually, Amy, who had been looking thoughtfully at nothing in particular, let out a deep sigh.

“Anyway,” she continued, “I don’t know why I’m telling you all this. After all, I’m supposed to be the therapist. But you’re a very good listener, you know.”

Keith smirked complacently, although he doubted he deserved the tribute. After all, he had a vested interest in listening just at the moment.

“And, to be honest, I really do think you’re the best writer at the class. I was really disappointed you weren’t there.”

Keith’s smirk expanded almost to bursting-point.

“I don’t know that I’d bother going again, if it weren’t for your witty little stories.”

“I love you!” Keith spoke at last.

7

When Amy and Keith, hand-in-hand, Keith’s short, stubby digits merged with Amy’s slim and shapely fingers, arrived for the following week’s class, they found that Neville was missing again. Neither was Muriel there this time, but an official from the College was present, recognisable by a tight-fitting skirt and jacket and an air of quiet desperation. With her was a uniformed policeman. Keith, on spotting the latter, felt decidedly uneasy, his stomach lurching queasily. He rushed to a vacant chair. Amy, apparently oblivious to Keith’s turmoil, sat next to him and commenced a conversation with a fellow student.

When everybody had taken a seat, the college official coughed a couple of times and the buzz of susurrations ceased almost instantaneously.

“Good evening, everyone,” opened the official, “My name is Felicity and I’m the adult learning co-ordinator here.”

“Good evening, Felicity,” murmured a few of the gentlemen present. All eyes were on her; the congregation had unanimously decided to pretend the policeman was invisible, it seemed.

“I’m sorry to appear before you so, er, formally, but I presume, since you are all here, that you have not heard about Neville.”

Looks were exchanged but nobody else spoke.

“Yes, well, anyway,” Felicity went on, “I’m not really the right person to give you chapter and verse on that. Obviously the College will be looking out for another tutor but we’ll have to cancel classes for the rest of the term. In the circumstances, the College has decided to reimburse your fees in full.”

Nobody applauded, although Felicity appeared to expect it. Instead, she was met by a sea of bewilderment.

“As to other matters, I need to hand you over to Constable Sturgess. Constable?”

So saying, Felicity stood back and PC Sturgess, who had previously looked like one auditioning for a waxwork model, came to life. At least, he stepped forward a couple of paces and his jaw worked when he spoke; otherwise, the wax dummy impression continued credible.

“Thank you, Felicity,” he said. “Can I have everyone’s attention, please?” He need not have asked. Now the elephantine presence in the room had been acknowledged, as it were, all eyes were fixed upon the officer.

“Now, is there anyone here who has seen...” he consulted his notebook, “.....Mrs Muriel Brady in the last seven days – or indeed heard from or about her in any way, shape or form?”

“Muriel?”

“Did he say Muriel?”

“Muriel?”

“Doesn’t he mean Neville?”

“What’s Muriel got to do with anything?”

“Who’s Muriel?”

Silence.

“I’ll take that as a ‘no’ then,” said PC Sturgess. “Oh, well, I’m not really surprised. Still, if any of you have any idea at all of Mrs Brady’s whereabouts, please call the local station or the number on my card.” He proceeded to hand out cards to everyone in the room. Keith dropped his, so carefully was he avoiding meeting the policeman’s gaze. Amy picked it up for him. Fortunately, the constable did not seem to notice Keith’s discomfiture.

“Are you all right, Keith?” asked Amy when they got back to his car, the class having broken up in the absence of further information. “You’ve looked really unwell ever since we arrived.”

“Oh, you noticed, did you? I thought I’d been covering rather well.”

“Of course I noticed. I’m a trained therapist, remember. Whatever is it?”

“Oh, well, you know,” Keith muttered, starting the engine.

“No, I don’t know. Tell me.”

“Oh, it’s just a guilt complex sort of thing. I see a policeman, or anybody in uniform really, and I assume I’m in trouble. Something to do with childhood and Boy Scouts, I expect.”

“Oh, were you in the Boy Scouts?”

“No,” Keith answered simply. “Perhaps it was Girl Guides, then.”

8

The truth came out over the next few weeks: through the television, national and local newspapers, gossip, and one rather indiscreet scenes of crime officer who had been referred to Amy for counselling for post traumatic shock.

It transpired that the police had received a letter from Muriel which enclosed a key to her house. This arrived a few days after the creative writing class which Muriel had attended but Neville had not. The letter suggested that the police should visit her house and that they would find there one Neville Nuttall, poet and teacher of creative writing.

And so, in the fullness of time, two members of the Norton Valley constabulary toddled along to Muriel’s house. Once inside (which necessitated their returning to the station to collect the key they had omitted to bring), they found a house almost devoid of furniture or consumer durables, except in an upstairs room, the door of which was closed and bore a notice to the following effect: ‘Removers – please leave this room untouched. Mrs M Brady’. A suspicious and, indeed, noxious odour appeared to be emanating from behind this door.

Having had the presence of mind to summon a fully equipped forensic team, whose equipment included devices to cover their noses (to wit, a handkerchief each, regulation issue), the police entered Muriel’s bed-chamber.

On the bed was a body, somewhat whiffy and completely naked. Naked, that is, except for a pair of handcuffs, a rope pulled tight around its neck, a pair of spectacles, and a daffodil protruding from its back passage. On its face, it wore a stupidly self-satisfied grin. The body belonged to Neville Nuttall.

On a bedside table, propped up against a bedside lamp (which had been left switched on – presumably against the possibility that Neville was afraid of the dark), was an envelope addressed ‘To Whom It May Concern’. Inside the envelope, which was violet by the way, was a pretty floral notelet with a message as follows:

‘Dear Sirs,

‘I’m so sorry to give all this trouble, but I couldn’t think of any other way. Please rest assured this is not a murder scene – at least, I don’t think it is – but you never know what those lawyers will make of it, do you?’

‘Perhaps I’d better explain. You see, I write detective novels, or I try to. Neville is (or was) a creative writing teacher – and a very good one, I might add. Neville and I also had in

common an appetite for very vigorous sex. We only discovered our mutual taste a few nights ago, and an extremely happy discovery it was.

'So, anyway, I've had an idea for a sex scene in my current novel for a long time but I wasn't sure it would work, and Neville is (or was) a very enthusiastic masochist. I told him the outline of my scene and he encouraged me to try it out plus a few embellishments he thought up – hence the rope. And he specifically told me to pull the rope tighter and tighter and ignore all his protests. So I did. Well, I thought he must have checked it out before to ensure it was safe.

'I went to my next creative writing class. Obviously Neville could not attend, but I was quite keen on getting some ideas on how to dispose of bodies. Unfortunately, nobody wanted to talk about it. I tried for a few days to think of something practical and convenient but without success.

'So, in the end, I decided it would be easier to dispose of myself. By the time you read this, therefore, I'll be well away. You'll forgive me if I don't give a forwarding address.

'With all best wishes and deepest apologies for the inconvenience,

'Muriel Brady (Mrs).

'PTO'

And on the reverse.....

'A Tribute to Neville

'So farewell Neville Nuttall,

'You wrote some lovely verse,

'And filled us with your grace.

'Now Death makes his call.

'Well, it could have been worse.

'You have a smile upon your face.'

THE END

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