

## The Writing Class

We stand in twilight in the visitor car park behind University Building Two, its dark, plate glass shape looms above us. I consult the map and directions on my iPhone.

"Ready?" I look at Gwen who has been fiddling with a carrier bag, which probably holds her writing materials.

"Well of course."

Yes - her enthusiasm is undiminished. I wonder why I am here? Well, Gwen relies on her friends to ferry her around. OK, perhaps Gwen's transport needs are not the only reason I am here - I don't want to think about it now. I start walking.

"Hello, are you going to the Writing Class?" A man's shape appears out of the shadows.

"Yes. Are you?" It occurs to me that Gwen's voice is quite sexy in the dark.

"If I ever get there - I've been around this building twice and can't find the entrance." He has a quiet, gentle voice.

"I have a map," I say - rather too brusquely.

"Lead on, then." He lets me pass and falls into step with Gwen.

It turns out that the entrance to the only part of the building open in the evenings is via the Library, which was not explained in the directions. We have to show the letters confirming our places on the course before we can go through the security barriers. Naturally, Gwen can't find hers, so the security guard has to call the tutor. Finally we find room 205, out of breath from climbing two flights of stairs. There are about eight people sitting at desks. No one is sitting in the front row, so David (he of the quiet voice and, now that I can see him clearly, warm brown eyes) takes the initiative and we three sit at the front. Teacher's pets or the three monkeys, I wonder?

Why do they always have to start these courses with a 'tell us a bit about yourself. Why does creative writing interest you? Have you been writing for a long time? etcetera?' I was the first to go: "I am Gwen's driver.....", God, that sounds bad. Try again: 'I don't know whether I do like creative writing - I've never tried it before, so I thought I ought to find out how its done.' That will do. Only, I know that is a half truth. What is the real truth? Well I'm not going to tell them. I just need to get out, to be myself, think for myself, do something for myself. I need to be away from Greg, and his control. It's taken me twenty years to work that out, but now I've admitted it. That's the truth.

Gwen launches into an autobiography. School, at home with the kids and editing the village magazine, am-dram days, pottery, poetry, family history, including writing a biography of a relative killed at the Battle of the Somme. The tutor is clearly well used to cutting such drivel short with a platitude and a charming smile. He's young enough to be my son. David's turn: he is a widower and finds the evenings long and so started writing to amuse himself. He wants to learn more about technique. Good for you, David.

We have got to the third row, I am doodling on my writing pad - always a bad sign. There's a draught of cold air as the door flies open and a young woman in tight jeans and jumper almost falls into the room. Breathlessly, she apologises for being late and plonks herself on the chair nearest the door, next to me. The tutor - Dylan is his name - finishes the round of 'why are you here' and turns to the new girl.

"Hello, perhaps you could give us your name and tell us a bit about yourself...", and so on. There is a silence that goes on until it becomes awkward. I can hear her taking deep breaths. Poor kid, she's scared stiff. Must be shy, I suppose.

"Melanie Campbell. I - I - need to write. Always have done since I was at school ....", her voice fades away. The silence returns. Dylan has been glancing at a sheet of paper with a list on it - probably our names. He looks puzzled, rouses himself and give us his winning smile. His teeth are uneven.

"Great! This is going to be a terrific class. Now it's my turn. I have an Honours degree in Creative Writing from the University of East Anglia. I am currently working on my Ph.D." Huh, probably never done a proper days work in his life, all talk and fancy ideas.

Dylan starts us off with a short exercise. We have to write about something we did or that happened today. It can be anything, and, says Boy-wonder, it doesn't matter if it is mundane. We have 15 minutes. My mind is blank and somehow the white writing pad in front of me seems to be getting bigger, and whiter. Shit. Gwen is bowed over the desk, scribbling away. David is leaning back in his chair, the words flowing from his biro in even lines. Perhaps he can focus better with the paper at arm's length. Someone towards the back of the room is humming quietly. Bloody annoying. I've got to write something. A germ of an idea begins, at last my pencil is poised when my thoughts are interrupted by a long, shuddering sob. It's Melanie. I give her a quick, side-ways look. Her page is almost full with small, erratic writing, her pen jerking across the page at a terrific rate. Strangest of all, she's crying. She dabs a tissue to her face as she writes. Evidently her day must have been more eventful than mine. Perhaps she split up with her boyfriend, had an argument with her husband, the cat died .....

"You have another five minutes", says Dylan.

"Who would like to read out their piece?" Dylan looks hopefully around the room. Crikey, do we really have to do that?

"I don't mind starting", Gwen's voice purrs. She is like a soft, plump cat, supremely confident, expecting to get the cream. She reads, and everyone listens. She does have a nice voice. When she has finished she looks up at Dylan with a coquettish smile. Oh, please! He nods, knowingly, and consults some notes he has been making.

"Gwen, was the sunrise really like that this morning? Did you actually see it rising over the meadows in the picturesque way you describe? You see, your writing is nicely descriptive, but I think that is what you may have hoped the sunrise was like. Did you actually see it at all?"

She looks uncertain now, non-plussed. "Well, I - um - actually .... It was a sunrise I saw when I was on holiday."

Dylan looks around the room. A bit too smug, I think.

"Ah, yes, I thought so. Now, what I am after is raw description, fresh in your mind. I want to be there, feel the objects you are describing, smell them, touch them. Sunrises and sunsets have been described thousands of times. But, has loading a washing machine, making a sandwich and eating it, walking down an escalator? " I look, self-conscious, at my sheet of paper sporting two short paragraphs. Maybe describing cleaning the kitchen windows wasn't such a bad idea after all.

We listen to several more offerings. Everyone has a different style, and all the pieces are interesting in their own way. I am actually beginning to feel more relaxed, although not enough to want to read out my piece. It's time for a coffee break. We all file out to a small lounge area; I get two cappuccinos from a vending machine. Gwen is quiet.

"You OK?"

"No"

"What's the matter? Ugh, this coffee is disgusting."

"I'm - well, I'm feeling artistically traumatised."

"Ah - got the sunrise blues?"

"It's not funny. I was the one bravest to go first and he - he pulled my piece to shreds."

"Oh, come on Gwen. He was waiting for someone to do just what you did, so he could make a point." I lean in, so that we cannot be overheard.

"Look, if that chap who keeps humming on the back row had read his piece first, Dylan would have said exactly what he said to you. That chap's vegetable plot was definitely too good to be true. I'm sure it isn't burgeoning with enormous carrots and marrows as he described. More like veg he has seen at a village show... or he has a penis complex and it's wishful thinking."

Gwen looks brighter, "I suppose you're right. We musn't be precious about our work - we have to get used to criticism. I'm so glad you came, Kim. What did you write about?"

I would have told her, but it was time to get back to the classroom. I dispose of the rest of my coffee in a hydroponics plant pot: at least the plant looks well nourished. We are the first back. As we enter the room, Dylan is moving away from the front desk, where Melanie is still seated. She avoids any eye contact with us, just stares down at her piece of paper. It looks crumpled, as if it had been screwed up and then flattened out again. There's tension between the two of them, I can feel it.

Once the class has returned and is seated, Dylan clears his throat, "Melanie is going to read her piece next." His voice is edgy and hard. I hear her snuffle and we wait. Finally she starts, she falters, and then gradually her voice gets stronger as she gets further into the piece. My God, what writing is this?

She is alone, she feels trapped, she cannot bear all the years of silence, she cannot bear her life any more. She is walking along a path. It doesn't matter that it is raining and she is getting wet. She has no coat and her slippers are soaking wet, so she takes them off. She is in a wood and she knows she has been there before, several years ago, when she was at school. Why this wood? Why has she come here? Here, where a boy from the

sixth form followed her, where he raped her? She is running now, out at the other side of the wood and there, there is the reservoir. There she is going to enter the water, there she will let its silky embrace wash all the hurt and guilt away. Except, she can't do it. She waits, tries again, starts to wade in. She stops. She can't do it. She can't do it.

There's a stunned silence. Melanie seems quite calm now, I follow her gaze to Dylan. He is staring back at her, very white, his hands knotted and clenched together on the desk.

Gwen sucks in a deep breath: "Oh Melanie, that was so - so dramatic, so atmospheric. What brilliant writing." She turns and whispers something to David. There's shifting of seats and a clearing of throats as everyone tries to ease the tension in the room. Can Gwen really be this dense? Can she not see that this was for real. I get an insane urge to laugh as I watch Melanie and Dylan, frozen in the moment.

Before I can stop myself, I'm saying: "Melanie, you did do it. You have done it - far more effectively than if you had.... You have confronted it - him. You are free." Then I'm looking at Dylan. Why did he want her to read it out? Why did he want her to nail him? As the thoughts float through my brain, he gets up. I don't think I have ever seen true anguish before. That's the expression on his face now. He stands in front of her desk, trembling, and he is asking her to forgive him.

I am aware that David is standing and gesturing to the rest of the class to leave. Gwen is tugging at my sleeve. I stumble after her, blinded by my own tears. Yet in those last few minutes I know that Melanie has shown me what I have to do.

'Should we leave them alone?' Gwen is asking David. "We'll tell the security guard to check up on them as we leave," he says.

Once we are outside he turns to me and Gwen: 'Don't know about you, I could do with a bloody good drink.' I have recovered some sort of composure: "That's the best idea I've heard all evening, I had no idea creative writing could be so emotional, or..." I am searching for the right word.

"Liberating?" David suggests.

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