

Love, Lies and Literacy

by Frances Johnstone

Netta and Carl had the worst teeth I'd ever seen: Elizabethan teeth, jagged black stumps in the front, crooked and gappy further back, deep sockets empty inbetween. If they laughed – and they laughed a lot in our lessons – it was hard not to recoil from the horror-show display. He was a van driver at the hospital, she was a healthcare assistant.

They held hands and kissed as they met, and again as they parted outside the training room. I'd watch them trudge along the path that led from the wards to the learning centre, arm in arm, in matching fleeces, chatting. Both were chair-threateningly large. They finished each other's sentences. They told me, when I saw them separately, how proud the other one made them, how hard they worked, how kind and funny they were: 'He has me in stitches', 'She makes the best tea ever.'

Netta came first. The hospital was introducing new standards; she needed a qualification in literacy. She was good at her job. 'I love the old dears,' she said, 'they all know me on Geriatrics.' Her long shifts were spent feeding and cleaning demented old ladies. Her arms often had scratches or bite marks. 'They don't mean it, bless 'em.' She couldn't get to the next point on the pay spine without a Level 2. 'It's the spelling,' she said, 'it does my head in.' She was sweating as she took the assessment test. Her hands trembled and she kept apologising. 'I'm sorry. I'm ever so sorry. I'm so stupid. Carl says it's nerves.'

Carl, according to Netta, was the clever one. Carl had no problem with words. He wrote. He'd failed at school because of his condition. He was plagued by poor health, mental and physical. 'He's had a load of breakdowns, haven't you, love?' Netta said.

Netta, six months in, sailed through her Level 1. She phoned Carl when I told her the result and burst into tears. Carl joined her for Level 2. Literacy can be dull old stuff: spelling, punctuation, grammar. I tried to make it interesting. We laboured through. Carl loved it. He

was proud of his semicolons and his spelling of five-syllable words. He started a collection: *apocalyptic, disingenuous, pulchritudinous.*

‘Pulchri-*what?*’ Netta asked.

‘It means beautiful,’ he said, ‘like my wife.’

They applied every piece of material directly to themselves. A reading about tattoos reminded them of their neighbour, an exercise on apostrophes made them think of their problems with the council. Their problems were endless. They’d lost a house and now lived in a mobile home. It was damp. Their clothes smelled of mould and they both had what Netta called ‘productive coughs’. They delivered catalogues in their spare time and were convinced they were going to win a cruise by reaching the next sales target.

‘It’s New York this time, isn’t it, Carl? Three nights in the – what’s it?’

‘The Waldorf Astoria,’ said Carl, ‘the Presidential Suite. It has a grand piano.’

Carl brought his poetry, pulling crumpled verses out of his fleece pocket and flattening them with a big fist on the table. His poems were like naked new-hatched chicks, ugly with clumsy life. I used to make us cups of tea, partly to escape their accidental comedy, partly to toast their agonising wholeheartedness.

Carl took Level 2 and passed. We celebrated with cake and he decided to sign up for a GCSE, but then his condition got worse and he had to delay, which left Netta. She tried once and narrowly failed.

‘I’m so sorry. I let you down. I froze.’

Her confidence began to leave her. Each new thing she learnt seemed to blot out the one before: paragraphing in, conditionals out. She reverted to writing in all capitals and forgot how many ‘c’s in necessary.

The second time she took it, I was in charge of the exam. It was multiple choice. I signed the official invigilation forms and watched sweat gather at Netta’s hairline. She was sighing and shifting in her chair. She kept dropping her pen.

‘I can’t. I just can’t seem to..?’

After she left, I marked her answer sheet. It was a bad fail, much worse than the time before.

I threw it away and did the stupid paper for her.

Somewhere out there a healthcare assistant is wrongly being paid an extra thruppence over the minimum wage for taking care of old ladies who bite.

Keep it to yourself.

Copyright © 2017 Frances Johnstone