

## **GREEN ROOM BLUES**

### *Cast of characters:*

Daniel Waters, novelist

Joanna Johns, organiser of the Little Gissing Literary Festival

Alison (A. X.) Morris, novelist

### *Setting:*

The Green Room at the Little Gissing Literary Festival

A table and two or three chairs

### *Properties:*

Daniel's notes

Alison's notes

The Little Gissing Literary Festival programme plus other 'literary' magazines e.g. The Bookseller, the London Review of Books, the Times Literary Supplement

Tea

Coffee

Kettle

Mugs

Two (empty) bottles of wine

Wine glasses

Sparkling water

Still water

Crisps

Biscuits

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*Daniel is sitting at the table with a sheaf of notes, rehearsing his talk.*

**Daniel**            *(under his breath)* Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. My name is ... blah, blah, blah. Such a great joy – privilege – such a great privilege to be here today at *(consults notes)* ... at the Little Gissing Literary Festival ... etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. The title of my talk is ... rhubarb, rhubarb, rhubarb. *(stops, puts down his notes, gazes up at the ceiling)* Why in God's name am I doing this?

*Joanna enters, followed by Alison.*

**Joanna**            *(in full flow)* And this is what we like to call our 'Green Room' although for the rest of the year it's where the scouts and guides keep their camping kit, and the church warden leaves her moped. Do please make yourself at home. Tea, coffee, biscuits, crisps, still water, sparkling water, red and white wine ... Now then. May I introduce you to Daniel Waters. Daniel is another of our distinguished guest authors. Daniel, this is A. X. Morris. Or can I call you Alison?

*Daniel stands. A momentary frozen silence.*

**Joanna**            But perhaps you already know each other?

**Daniel**            }

**Alison**            }

**Daniel**            Yes, we do.

**Joanna**            Of course. The literary world is such a close-knit community, isn't it? Everyone knows everyone else. You all attend the same literary events. Review each other's books. Run creative writing courses together. In one another's pockets, so to speak. In one another's beds, too, I wouldn't wonder.

*Another momentary frozen silence.*

**Joanna**            I'm so terribly sorry. That rather popped out. There's been so much going on this afternoon, and I'm a little bit flustered. I'm not even sure I introduced myself properly, did I? I'm Joanna Johns, the poor soul whose job it is to organise the Little Gissing Literary Festival. Such a responsibility. I always get there in the end but it does take a toll. Now then. Will you be all right if I leave you to your own devices for a short while? I must check on Cecilia Peachey and see if she needs anything. *(to Alison)* You know her, of course? Cecilia Peachey, the agony aunt? I think she calls herself a self-help guru these days.

**Alison**            No. I'm afraid I don't.

**Joanna**            Really? *(to Alison)* 'How Best To Be a Better You'?

**Alison**            No ...

**Joanna**            *(to Daniel)* 'The True You, You Never Knew'?

**Daniel**            Sorry. It must have passed me by.

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**Joanna**            (*disappointed*) I am surprised. Miss Peachey's seen as something of a national treasure in some quarters. Such a loyal following. The village hall is packed to the rafters. Standing room only. We're probably breaking all sorts of health & safety rules but never mind. It can't be helped. Now then. If you don't mind, I think I'd better leave you to it and see how everything's going ...

*Joanna exits.*

**Daniel**            Good afternoon, Alison.

**Alison**            Good afternoon.

**Daniel**            I didn't realise you'd be here.

**Alison**            Didn't you?

**Daniel**            Your name isn't in the programme.

**Alison**            Neither is yours.

**Daniel**            I'm a last-minute replacement.

**Alison**            Me, too. (*beat*) Who are you replacing?

**Daniel**            I don't know. You?

**Alison**            No idea.

*Pause.*

**Daniel**            This is all a bit awkward, isn't it?

**Alison**            Is it?

**Daniel**            Isn't it?

**Alison**            I don't see why it should be.

**Daniel**            Good. Fine. Whatever you say. (*beat*) How have you been, Alison?

**Alison**            There's really no need to make polite conversation.

*Alison takes out her notes.*

**Daniel**            In that case I won't.

*Alison takes out his notes.*

*Joanna pours herself a glass of still water and resumes reading her notes.*

*Beat.*

*Daniel pours himself a glass of still water and puts away his notes.*

**Daniel**            What's your talk called?

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**Alison** 'Writers and writing in the age of AI.'

**Daniel** Oh.

**Alison** Oh, what?

**Daniel** That's the title I was given.

**Alison** Really? I'm sure you'll have heaps to say on the subject of AI.

**Daniel** I know nothing about AI. I was planning to wing it.

**Alison** So was I.

**Daniel** Then let's hope no one in the audience knows any more than we do.  
(*beat*) What on earth are we doing here, Alison?

**Alison** My agent said it would be a good idea.

**Daniel** Mine, too. She said it would 'up my profile', the clear implication being that my profile is very much in need of 'upping'.

**Alison** I don't think upping your profile in Little Gissing is going to make a lot of difference.

**Daniel** (*gloomy*) No, I don't imagine it is.

**Alison** We might sell a book or two, I suppose.

**Daniel** I doubt that very much. I've spoken to the chap from the local bookseller. A spotty lad with glasses. They don't stock any of my novels and never have.

**Alison** They might stock mine, I suppose ...

**Daniel** (*doubtful*) They might, but I wouldn't bank on it. (*beat*) Can I ask you a very delicate question?

**Alison** If you feel you must.

**Daniel** Are you getting paid for this gig?

**Alison** (*defensive*) Of course I am. Aren't you?

**Daniel** (*deflated*) No.

**Alison** (*relenting*) Sorry. I lied. Neither am I.

*Beat.*

**Daniel** That was the only redeeming feature of the Baggot Manor creative writing course. At least we were being paid.

**Alison** Baggot Manor. (*shudders*) We earned every penny.

**Daniel** 'Scribbling for Beginners'. We should have known what to expect.

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**Alison** Wasn't it dreadful?

**Daniel** Truly terrible.

**Alison** Not a whiff of talent between the lot of them.

**Daniel** Madeline and her turgid verse play ...

**Alison** Olivia and her frankly repellent erotic novel ...

**Daniel** Simon, on the verge of tears every time he was asked to read out one of his poems ....

**Alison** Those endless question-and-answer sessions ...

**Daniel** And agonising one-to-one tutorials ...

**Alison** Never again.

**Daniel** Never.

*Joanna enters, urgently.*

**Joanna** Cecilia needs more 'fortification', she says. She's been speaking for well over an hour. (*picking up each wine bottle in turn*) Oh. Nothing left. (*slightly accusingly*) Better see if I can unearth another bottle somewhere.

*Joanna exits.*

**Alison** (*amused*) Dutch courage?

**Daniel** Don't look at me. Both bottles were empty when I arrived.

**Alison** If you say so.

*Alison and Daniel watch Joanna as she enters with a bottle of wine and then exits.*

**Daniel** So ... Tell me. Did you go?

**Alison** Did I go where?

**Daniel** You know where.

**Alison** Tell me.

**Daniel** The King of Bohemia.

**Alison** Ah, yes. The King of Bohemia.

**Daniel** Did you?

**Alison** Did I go?

**Daniel** Yes. We said we'd meet there the Friday after the Baggot Manor horror show.

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**Alison** We said we might meet there. *(beat)* If it still seemed like a good idea.

**Daniel** So ...?

**Alison** Plainly you didn't go.

**Daniel** How do you know?

**Alison** Fairly obvious, I'd have thought. If you'd gone to the King of Bohemia, either you would have seen me there or you wouldn't.

**Daniel** You might have been late.

**Alison** You'd have waited, wouldn't you? *(beat)* You didn't go, did you?

**Daniel** No.

**Alison** There we are then. Neither did I.

**Daniel** Why not?

**Alison** *(suddenly angry)* Why do you think, Daniel? Go on. Take a wild guess.

*Beat.*

**Daniel** *(abashed)* You read my review. I hoped you mightn't see it.

**Alison** My agent sent it to me, the sadistic cow. The review in which you savaged my novel.

**Daniel** 'Savaged'? I don't think it was as harsh as all that.

**Alison** Don't you? Lame plot. Cardboard characters. Lumpy prose ...

**Daniel** Did I really write that?

**Alison** Don't you remember?

**Daniel** To be honest, Alison ...

**Alison** Yes?

*Joanna enters, flustered.*

**Joanna** A slight organisational hitch, I'm afraid. Miss Peachey has overrun somewhat. More than 'somewhat', in fact. She was due to finish an hour ago. But I can't very well stop her, can I? Not while she's in full flow. And the audience simply adores her. The thing is, everything's gone slightly awry. I was planning ... Actually I'm not quite sure what I was planning. We weren't really expecting Miss Peachey, you see. Her agent called me the day before yesterday to say she wasn't well. That's why I ... Oh, dear. This is so embarrassing.

**Daniel** Then you don't need me?

**Alison** Or me.

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**Joanna** But you've both come so far. *(beat)* Perhaps you wouldn't mind sharing the stage? A sort of literary symposium? Questions and answers from the audience. That sort of thing.

**Alison** *(doubtful)* Well, yes ...

**Daniel** *(doubtful)* I suppose ...

**Joanna** *(overjoyed)* Wonderful! Wonderful! Thank you both so much. Let me see how close Miss Peachey is to finishing.

*Joanna exits.*

**Alison** What have we let ourselves in for?

**Daniel** The usual, I expect. 'Where do you get your ideas from?'

**Alison** 'What's your writing routine?'

**Daniel** 'How can I find myself a publisher?' *(beat)* Shall we make a run for it?

**Alison** We can't.

**Daniel** No.

*Beat.*

**Alison** My chief problem is I simply don't feel qualified to talk about writing. A debut novel and a mixed bag of short stories ...

**Daniel** That's nonsense, Alison. You're a very talented writer.

**Alison** That's not what you said in your review.

**Daniel** Would you allow me to explain?

**Alison** There's really no need. You have every right to express your opinion. You hated my novel, and that's what you told the world.

**David** I'm not sure the *Wessex Sentinel* reaches very much of the world. And it wasn't all negative. I'm sure there were positives, too.

**Alison** One or two. But it's not the positives you remember, is it?

**Daniel** No.

**Alison** What really hurt is that you didn't warn me. We'd spent that whole weekend together and I thought we'd established a sort of friendship ...

**Daniel** I hoped we'd established rather more than that.

**Alison** Yes. Maybe. In any case, we had a whole weekend with those miserable scribblers and you said not a word about your poisonous review.

**Daniel** The truth is, Alison, I'm an idiot.

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**Alison**                    (*miserable*) That's the problem, Daniel. You're not.

**Daniel**                    Please listen. My agent – who, incidentally, is just as sadistic as yours – had just forwarded a review of my novel to me. It was highly critical although, if I'm honest, not entirely unfair. Anyway, I was feeling sorry for myself, and I'd had a drink or two, and the *Wessex Sentinel* had invited me to submit a review, and there was your novel sitting on my desk ... It's so much easier to be belittling than complimentary, don't you find? Anyway, it seemed like a chance to exact some sort of revenge on the world. (*beat*) I really am very sorry, Alison.

**Alison**                    That doesn't explain why you didn't warn me.

**Daniel**                    As I said, I'm an idiot. 'A. X. Morris'. 'Alison Morris'. I didn't put two and two together. It was only on that Friday that the penny finally dropped. (*beat*) What does 'X' stand for by the way?

**Alison**                    'Xavyera'.

**Daniel**                    'Xavyera'?

**Alison**                    It's a Basque name. It means bright or splendid.

**Daniel**                    Oh. Are your people Basque?

**Alison**                    It's not really my name. But 'Morris' is eminently forgettable and my agent thought 'A. X. Morris' might bring me more to the fore.

**Daniel**                    Your agent sounds more on the ball than mine. 'Waters' is a disastrous name. In a bookshop, you're always on the bottom shelf and not many people can be bothered to bend down below 'P'. (*beat*) Will you forgive me?

*Joanna enters.*

**Joanna**                    There's good news and bad. Which would you like first? I'll start with the good. Cecilia Peachey has finished speaking and has gone home.

**Alison**                    And the bad news?

**Joanna**                    The audience has gone home, too. The village hall is completely empty. Such a shame. I'm certain there were lots of Little Gissing residents who would have loved to ask you questions. I have one or two of my own, in fact ...

**Daniel**                    Next year, maybe, Joanna?

**Alison**                    If you invite us, that is.

**Joanna**                    Oh, I will. I will. I'm so terribly sorry. Now, I hope you'll excuse me. I promised our bookseller I'd help him pack up. Such a pity he didn't have copies of any of Miss Peachey's books.

*Joanna exits.*

**Daniel**                    Well? What now?

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**Alison** I'm going home.

**Daniel** Shall we try again? The King of Bohemia next Friday?

**Alison** Maybe. It depends.

**Daniel** It depends on what?

**Alison** You might not want to see me again.

**Daniel** Why not?

**Alison** There's something I should tell you, Daniel.

**Daniel** That sounds ominous.

**Alison** I've written review of your novel.

**Daniel** *Nursing the Devil?*

**Alison** Yes. For the *Wessex Sentinel*, as it happens. It's coming out on Thursday.

**Daniel** Did you ...?

**Alison** Did I what?

**Daniel** Did you like it?

**Alison** I liked the title.

**Daniel** What about the book itself?

**Alison** I'm afraid you'll have to wait until Thursday. After that, it's up to you. I'll either see you on Friday at the King of Bohemia – or I won't. Goodbye, Daniel.

*Daniel watches as Alison exits.*

THE END