

Jelly Selves

By Heather Burt

“You find me a little ridiculous, I believe, Wilmet.”

“Oh, Keith.”

We were making elderberry jelly from a recipe I’d found in a magazine. He wasn’t cross. But his smile was ... *wistful* ... or at least not the same smile with which he had just been smashing the lurid berries.

“Perhaps even *very* ridiculous?”

“Keith. Don’t be —” I hesitated.

“Ridiculous?”

We shared a laugh, and I hoped that might be the end of it, but Keith leant back against the counter and began rubbing at a spot of purple on the bib of his white butcher’s apron (my own apron was a sensible navy). The rubbing only made it worse, of course, and soon he was sporting a rather gruesome Romish smudge in the vicinity of his heart. It occurred to me that I had not exactly refuted his claim about my finding him ridiculous.

“Keith, what is it? What’s wrong?”

He looked up with an expression now closer to puzzlement.

“Is it Piers?” I suggested. “Is he in one of his tempers?”

Keith gave an amused sniff. “Piers? If his tempers had the power to put me out of sorts, I’d have evicted him from here long ago.”

I refrained from reminding him that Piers was the original occupant of the flat.

“So you *are* out of sorts?”

“Not in the least.” He smiled again. “*You* don’t have that power either, Wilmet, regardless of what you might think of me.”

Flustered, I turned back to the recipe. “Do you have anything for straining? A sieve of some kind? I completely forgot about that step.”

“A crucial step — for jelly, that is.” Keith stroked an imaginary beard. “Now, if we wanted to do a nice jam instead, we could skip the straining altogether.”

This last remark had a provocative edge to it, the meaning of which escaped me but nevertheless managed to fluster me more.

“The recipe is for jelly,” I replied weakly.

“Then jelly we shall have.” He wrestled with an unwieldy lower drawer, muttering about our muggy weather causing the wood to swell, then straightened up, waving several large muslin squares of the sort that sometimes appears on the kitchen supplies table at a jumble sale. “Cheesecloth,” Keith intoned. “Have you ever used it?”

“Well ...”

“I didn’t think so. It’s the traditional way.”

“And you just happen to have a supply at hand.”

“You look shocked. Sometimes the traditional way is

best. Don’t you agree, Mrs. Forsyth?”

“I suppose.”

He retrieved a heavy ceramic bowl from an overhead cupboard and set about draping the cheesecloth over top and anchoring it underneath. I was annoyed, for suddenly the jelly project — *my* project, or at least a joint one — had become his, and he was orchestrating it all with the haughty pretension of a French master chef. I’d been pleased to have Keith to myself that afternoon, but I found myself increasingly wishing that Piers would come home, moody or drunk or both, and interrupt whatever it was Keith was up to.

“Though sometimes the traditional way is simply the *easiest*,” he continued. “And *that* isn’t necessarily best.”

He was certainly up to something. I began to wonder if he and Piers were regularly up to something, some joke or other at my expense, possibly going back to that very first tea we shared in their flat. The idea that the two of them might have suspected my silly infatuation with Piers came to me, morbidly fascinating as the crimson stain on Keith’s chest.

“Why would you think I find you ridiculous?” I said. I intended to sound cool and unconcerned, but I feared my tone was closer to petulance.

Keith had plucked a ladle from an oriental urn and now paused, head cocked toward the wireless, playing softly in the background.

“Do you like Cole Porter, Wilmet?” he said. “Tell me you do.”

He danced the ladle back and forth like a conductor’s baton.

“I’m not sure,” I said, rather helplessly. “Is that who’s playing?”

“Well, it’s his composition. ‘Begin the Beguine.’ Bing Crosby is doing the singing.”

“Rowena likes Bing Crosby.”

Keith made a face. “She would. Frank Sinatra’s version of this song is much better. Of course, one could say that about any of Sinatra’s recordings. They’re always the best version. But especially the Cole Porter material. Crosby couldn’t be romantic to save his life.”

“Perhaps we should have Rowena here to defend him.”

“Unnecessary. I’ll play Frank’s ‘Beguine’ for you, and you’ll hear for yourself.”

Once again we seemed to have lost the thread of Keith’s original complaint. I considered simply surrendering to his conversational whims, but I’d become defensive.

“I *don’t* think you’re ridiculous, Keith,” I said. It wasn’t a lie. I suppose I would have said something of the sort when we first met, but now ... well, ridiculous wasn’t the right word.

Keith began ladling the berries onto the cheesecloth.

“What word would *you* use then?” he said, apparently reading my mind.

I realized in that moment that I’d never before spoken as candidly to another person — not Rowena, or Mary, or

Rodney, certainly not any of the vicars who'd received my occasional confessions over the years — as I was preparing to speak to Keith. I recalled standing at the summit of Monte Solaro (an excursion from Naples with Rowena, Harry, and Rodney — or was it Rocky?), looking down from a dizzying height at the landscapes of Capri.

“An actor,” I said. “Someone who is always performing. Your gestures and the sound of your voice ... the way you would greet Piers if he were to come home now — like a housewife.”

Keith went on ladling. The music had changed to something melancholy. I glanced down at the aquamarine cotton skirt I'd selected that morning after trying on and rejecting two others, the complementary beadwork in my sandals. *How do I look?* I'd asked Rodney on my way out, and he'd given precisely the answer I was expecting: *Beautiful, darling.*

“I'm the same, aren't I?” I confessed. “Though I suppose my role is so ordinary that no one notices it.”

The ladling was done. I hadn't been at all ambitious in the quantity of elderberries I'd accepted from Mary Ransome's garden, not having any idea at the time what I would do with them. Keith prodded the purple mash sagging in the cheesecloth. “I wonder what our jelly selves are like,” he mused.

“*Jelly selves?*” I laughed. “You *are* ridiculous.”

“I'm quite serious. If we strained away all the skins and pips and fibrous bits — all the costumes, if you like — what would be left of Wilmet Forsyth and Keith Baker? Would we even recognize each other?”

I thought his analogy was flawed, for surely pips should correspond to something quite profound and essential — the heart, or the soul even. But the point would have sounded dangerously close to something Sybil would say, and fear of sounding like one's mother-in-law is a powerful deterrent.

“I'm not sure,” I said. “Perhaps we would just be slithering, incoherent blobs. Perhaps we *need* all those accoutrements to get by in the world.”

I was pleased with my impromptu bit of philosophy, and Keith seemed to be giving it due consideration.

“The recipe says to strain this for at least an hour,” he said at length, removing his apron. “How shall we pass the time?”

I draped my own still-spotless apron over the back of a chair. I was about to suggest tea at the stylish new shop down the street (where I had intended my skirt and sandals to make their greatest impression), but the idea seemed so dreadfully in character that, despite my argument about the necessity of roles and costumes, I stopped myself.

“You said you'd play some Frank Sinatra for me.”

Keith's face brightened. “I did indeed!”

I'd scarcely ever noticed the battered radiogram in a corner of the tiny lounge, or the collection of record albums stacked against it. Keith seemed quite enamoured of it all, however, taking great care with handling and positioning the selected record and manipulating the various controls.

“Well?” he said, a few measures into the crackly piece. “Much better than Crosby's, wouldn't you agree?”

Having heard only part of that other rendition — and in a distracted state — I could hardly say. “It's lovely,” I answered truthfully.

“I've no idea *how* one dances the beguine,” Keith said. “Have you and Rodney ever tried it?”

“Rodney and I? No.” The idea of Rodney and I engaged in anything associated with *tropical splendour* was almost inconceivable, though I did fleetingly think of Rocky Napier and that long-ago infatuation from my time in the Wrens. “Rowena and I learned the rhumba and the cha cha when we were in Italy. Along with wireless telegraphy for the war effort, of course.”

“Italy. How exotic. I'm afraid the Cenerentola is the closest I've been.”

He pronounced the name of the coffee bar where he used to work in a distinctly English way. Recalling Keith's background, I felt badly for having mentioned Italy. I made a point of telling Piers he must arrange a Continental tour for the two of them. Portugal in September, or an Alpine ski lodge over Christmas. Perhaps Rodney and I could join them and cover some of their costs. But those plans of course did nothing to ease the wistful longing I detected in that moment.

I raised my arms to a suitable height. “Shall we try it, then?”

“You mean dancing? But I don't ... I've only ever ...”

“It's all right. I can lead. And it's just for fun. No one's watching.”

Stepping forward to meet me, Keith looked as nervous and excited as a schoolboy. “All right, Mrs. Forsyth. Let's give it a go.”

Up close, he smelled of Lux soap; his impish face was faintly shadowed with razor stubble. I positioned his hands, then my own, then I counted us in as I remembered Rocky doing.

There wasn't much floor space between the chairs and end tables and other furnishings, and the faded Persian rug was treacherously buckled in spots. Keith's feet were always a beat ahead of the music. But he sang along in a light, melodious tenor.

*“To live it again is past all endeavour,
Except when that tune clutches my heart,
And there we are, swearing to love forever ...”*

He giggled. “It really is impossibly romantic, isn't it?”

“Mind the table,” I said.

My own heart wasn't exactly *clutched* or fluttering, the way it had been in Rocky's arms. It did, however, feel connected to something deeper inside me. My jelly self, I decided, for no other term came to me. As Keith and I danced, and the elderberry juice seeped and dripped in the kitchen, that mysterious and slightly intimidating part of me stretched out a little from its confines and quietly sighed.