

# Stories for lipreading

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## PLAYING WITH FIRE by Kath Whiting

[This text is read aloud at the beginning of this video:]

Welcome to Stories for Lipreading. If you haven't used our website before, we suggest you look at our 'How to Use' page before you begin. We hope you enjoy this short mystery story called 'Playing with Fire' by Kath Whiting. It has been filmed in two episodes. This is episode One.

### [Playing with Fire by Kath Whiting. Episode One.](#)

I polish glasses and ponder the clientele. Betrayer and Blackmailer sit by the wood fire. It is a hobby of mine, making up our guests' back stories. We are a cosy establishment, only fifteen beds. The owners are away, so I'm pretty much running the place. Which suits me.

The bell goes, summoning me to Reception. I leave the bar and go to check in my last reservation. Marks and Spencer grey suit, white iPod earphones, handsome in a consciously nondescript way. I wonder if he is a plainclothes policeman. His suitcase at least lends him a bit of character. It has seen many better days, scuffed and bashed in; nobody would want to steal it.

'Good evening... Sarah,' he says, squinting at my name badge, 'Johnson. One night please.' He composes his face into a smile. His teeth are slightly see-through at the ends.

When I'd looked at the list of check-ins earlier I'd assumed this was a fake name. Smith or Jones would be too obvious. So probably having an affair. However, now Mr Johnson is here in front of me, I know I was wrong; he has no excitement or anticipation about him.

I show him to his room. I offer to carry the battered case, but Mr Johnson declines.

'Can I get food here?' he asks, putting his case on the clean floral bedspread.

I glance at my watch. 'We're still doing bar snacks.'

Mr Johnson follows me downstairs. I feel uncomfortable with him behind me; he is very quiet, almost not there.

He orders a flame-grilled chicken sandwich and a whisky. I make his food and he eats it at the bar. Usually people who sit at the bar chat to me but Mr Johnson is silent, his behaviour is measured and deliberate. I feel like I am providing an alibi.

Betrayer and Blackmailer finish their bottle of red wine and say their good nights. They tell Mr Johnson he must visit the cathedral but to go to a service so he doesn't have to pay. He laughs enthusiastically at Blackmailer's joke about God charging admission. When they leave and Mr Johnson turns back to me, his briefest glance means I am complicit in his ridicule.

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Now we are alone. Usually this is when middle-aged men open up or make clumsy passes at me that have to be handled in such a way to maintain or even increase my tips. Mr Johnson just takes his mobile out and starts texting.

I collect all the glasses, make sure the fire is dead and start the dishwasher. Finally I say, 'Breakfast is from seven. Would you like a wake-up call, newspaper?'

He looks up at me from the glow of his phone, like he'd forgotten my existence. Now I feel like he's eating me with his eyes. The hairs on the back of my neck prickle.

He says, '6.30, please. No paper, thank you.'

Mr Johnson is the first guest to check out in the morning. He asks if he might leave his suitcase. I point to the baggage area and say my standard patter, read from the sign on the wall: 'Please note, we accept no responsibility for lost, stolen or damaged items.' I can't help but smirk when I say 'damaged.'

'Thank you. I'll collect it presently,' he says, leaving it there and going out into the rain.

I'm having a kip in one of the vacated rooms when the reception bell being pounded wakes me up. I hurry down to see Mr Johnson at the desk, soaking and wild-eyed, all his haughty decorum gone.

'My suitcase, my suitcase. Have you moved it?' he asks.

'No, Sir.' I look around the reception area. 'Oh dear, I think it must have been stolen.'

**End**

## [Playing with Fire by Kath Whiting. Episode Two.](#)

*Start with repetition of:*

*'No Sir' I look around the reception area. 'Oh dear, I think it must have been stolen'.*

'What? Who can even get in here?'

'Well, during the day we leave the door unlocked.'

'What!?' he shouts.

I get around the other side of reception desk to put a barrier between us.

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'I'm really sorry; I'll call the police.' I pick up the phone receiver but Mr Johnson leans across and cuts it off.

'No, that won't be necessary.' He sags onto the reception desk.

'Are you ok?' I ask, 'Was there something valuable in it?'

He rubs his hands through his wet hair. 'Oh, a bit of money; two, three thousand.'

'What?'

Mr Johnson bats away my exclamation. 'Just spending money.'

He falls into the antique armchair by the desk. 'You see....Sarah, it's what it represents. That case is my home, it's all I have. I can't afford any sentiment in my line of work but small things become important. All my possessions, everything. Every sock is significant. Christ, my shaving kit.' He holds his head in his hands. 'Oh, I know it's all replaceable. And of course, nothing was incriminating; I still have my phone.' He gets his mobile out and looks at it.

'Oh God, it's 10.30; I'm going to be late for my appointment.' He wipes sweat off his upper lip. 'Can I book another night?' he asks.

I look down at today's check-in list to prolong his anxiety, even though I know there is space. 'Yes,' I tell him, then add, 'You can even have the same room.'

Mr Johnson gives his first genuine smile. 'Thank you so much; you don't know what that means.'

'Are you sure you don't want me to call the police?' I ask.

'No. No, thank you, Sarah,' he says, then picks his keys up from the reception desk and hurries back out into the rain.

The jangle of room keys wakes me up. I must have fallen asleep at the reception desk. Mr Johnson is standing in front of me, even wetter than before. I look at the grandfather clock; an hour has passed.

'Is it too early for a drink?' he asks.

'I'll open up,' I tell him, stretching.

'I'll be right down,' he says and goes up to his room.

Mr Johnson comes into the bar ten minutes later, smelling of our complimentary soap. He has had to put his wet clothes back on. I decide to be kind and light the fire for him.

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He looks around the empty bar. ‘How do you -’ he begins.

‘- Keep myself from going mad?’ I finish his sentence, while I’m building kindling around the flames. ‘I’m interested in our guests. I’ve got one of those faces that people open up to. It’s not in the job spec but I’m basically a hired friend.’

He looks me up and down with his lizard eyes.

‘Not like that, no funny business,’ I say and go back behind the bar, closing the latch. I like him now he is vulnerable though. And wet. I pour him a whisky.

‘And if they don’t open up?’ he asks. ‘Don’t spill their guts to you?’

‘Then I like to sleuth. That couple last night, she’s cheating on her husband, and he’s using her for money. Maybe he’ll go on to blackmail her.’

‘Really?’ he says, wrinkling his nose.

I straighten the drip tray. ‘I’m not saying I’m Sherlock Holmes; I just like making stories up about people.’

Mr Johnson smiles at me. ‘Sorry, I don’t usually notice people, or care about them. I mean, of course, my job is with people, for people, but I,’ he rubs his forehead, ‘I don’t usually *connect*.’ He pauses, then stares at me with interest. ‘So what story did you make up about me?’

‘At first I thought you were a plain-clothes policeman.’

He actually laughs, spluttering his whisky out.

I carry on, ‘You had no distinguishing elements.’

‘Except my suitcase,’ he says.

‘Yes, your case didn’t fit. It looked designed to be undesirable.’

He laughs again, a little more coldly. I notice his strange, translucent teeth. ‘I know what I desire,’ he says, letting his words hang in the air for a long moment, before carrying on. ‘Another whisky. And a drink for yourself, Sarah.’

‘Err, thank you, that’s very generous of you,’ I say and pour two whiskies. ‘Are you sure you won’t let me call the police about your suitcase?’

‘No, I have a feeling it will turn up,’ Mr Johnson says.

I nudge the case further under the bar with my knee and take a sip of my drink.