

Katherine Stott

Dear Katherine,

I hope that this letter finds you keeping well. It was lovely to meet with you last month in relation to working with you on your short story '*A horse in the race*'. As agreed, I have undertaken a developmental edit of the work as presented; I can certainly see the influence of Raymond Carver and Alice Munro in the style of your story. This is a good story Katherine; and with some structural changes and a little fleshing out, it will be an outstanding story.


My aim in this process is to provide you with a reader's perspective of the story and, from that position, offer you constructive comments and suggestions that will assist you with refining and strengthening your work, in addition to discussing with you some ways in which you might be able to provide greater clarity around key plot points.

There are a number of strong themes in the story that weave together coherently. Family violence, alcoholism, racism, entitlement, love and bitterness, loneliness, desire for acceptance, and tragedy are subtly placed within the story. I could feel Ruth's sense of loneliness in the emptiness of the house in '*rooms that are never entered*' and the '*large kitchen table that seats twelve*'. The shift in the girls enthusiastically greeting their father at the end of the day to Rebecca and Rachel hiding in their rooms while Ruth makes herself small and hides in nooks, illustrates for us one way the sister's relationship with their father changed. Grandpa's love for his wife is clearly illustrated in the obituary he wrote for her; young Ruth's love for Grandpa is shown when Robert disposes of Grandpa's old chair and Ruth's fear starts to change to anger.

As I read the story I can picture Ruth's desperate need to be accepted and feel a part of her family. I sense her disappointment when she fails to live up to what she believes her father wants. I feel her shock in the stables, as she remembers all of the lessons she has been taught and then she finally pulls the trigger.

Timeline:


There are a number of items I would like to address in relation to the timeline. Most noticeable to me is the ages of Rachel and Rebecca. Both girls are married and have children of their own, while Ruth is still at home, living alone with their father Robert. Ruth feels that she is often treated like a child along side her nieces and nephews and plays tag and Marco Polo with them. This presents an inconsistency. While quite young children can play tag, Marco Polo is a fairly sophisticated game if played swimming in water, so at least some of the nieces and nephews would need to be a little older than toddlers. This then leads to a conflict with the age of their mothers at twenty-four and twenty-two respectively, and the age Rachel, Rebecca and Ruth were when their own mother (Miranda) left her marriage and children. I feel that Ruth is at the right age in the story. One way to address the conflict in the age of the three sisters would be to make the age gap between Ruth and her sisters greater, making Rachel and Rebecca older. At the same time, it would be necessary to increase the number of years since Miranda left the family so that Rachel and Rebecca are still living in the family home when she leaves. This provides other benefits to the timeline.

For example, Ruth tells us of the family holidaying in first Montana with Miranda's family before Miranda leaves the family and then Mexico 'for years' after Miranda left. With her sisters eventually marrying and no longer going to Mexico, Ruth and Robert continue to go on their own. (Where is Grandpa?). Mexico happened after Miranda left the family and 'Dad made his money with Care-All Drywall'. If Miranda only left the family six years prior, there is hardly time for the business to make money, the family to go the Mexico together, and Rachel and Rebecca to get married and have children and then for Ruth and Robert to go to Mexico on their own and then miss a year because of the court case. 

Ruth remembers that at some (undefined) point her father went to 'dry out for a month' showing us that at some point, Robert tried to become a better person, although we are unsure if there was a particular catalyst for this. Was he forced to go into rehabilitation, or did he choose to go on his own? It is unlikely that Grandpa forced him to do it as he tells Ruth not to judge people and to stand on her own two feet to get along in the world. Giving this event a proper place in the timeline, as opposed to being a memory for Ruth, would provide more information to the readers on the sort of person Robert was before the court case.

Characterisations:

You show young Ruth's character very well. She clearly has conflicting feelings for her father, both fearing him and yet seeking his approval. While her older sisters are obsessed with makeup and boys, she wears overalls and muddy shoes to be the son he always wanted and trying to gain his approval. Ruth's relationship with her grandfather is less clear. I think you have written good indicators that the relationship between Ruth and her grandfather was very strong, but then this is confused by Ruth's self-doubt and inner dialogue. Grandpa left Ruth small pieces of himself; in the obituary for his beloved Ruth-Anne (how else would she have gotten it?), and his Purple Heart. Ruth deserves to have at least one person in her corner, and Grandpa is well situated to be that person for her. Rather than separating Ruth and Grandpa with him calling her kid, I would rather see him calling her 'kiddo' as a term of endearment and forging a special relationship with her. This would also be more consistent with Ruth's distress when Robert disposes of Grandpa's old blue chair. Ruth clearly feels she does not fit in with the rest of her family, feeling 'spare' to their requirements.

Unlike Ruth, I think Robert's character would benefit from some more definition. I want to simultaneously dislike him and pity him. He has raised his children on his own. He has lost his sister, mother, father, and wife and is being judged by those who perhaps should be supporting him. He cried when his wife left, and when Lucy the dog was killed and again when Grandpa dies, so we know that he has capacity to feel strong emotions, but we don't know what drives him. Was he bitter before Miranda left, or is that *why* he is bitter? Was he always a racist opportunist, or is this also a product of his relationship failure and his desire to succeed? With a mother who is portrayed as loving as Ruth-Anne, it is hard to imagine that he was emotionally neglected while he was growing up, and Grandpa seems to lean more towards pacifism after his wartime experiences. Was his childhood unhappiness because he grew up poor? The conversations that Grandpa and Ruth have could offer an opportunity for Grandpa to give his version of Robert's childhood. There is also the question of his irrational behaviour as evidenced by the compulsive purchasing of garden ornaments and his get rich schemes. Is this because he is drunk, or is there another underlying issue? 

Clarity required:

I became a little confused towards the end of the story. When Ruth and Robert are in the stables, Ruth says 'him' referring to Robert, then 'him' referring to the horse. When she says 'him' the third time, is she talking about shooting Pony Up to 'end this' or considering shooting her father 'to end

this'? In the last paragraph, it could be assumed that Robert is the one that is shot, but it could also be the horse. Some clarity here would be good and could be as simple as using a name or title instead of just *him*, unless your intention is to leave the decision of who is shot with the reader.

Actions:


Some of the actions in the story seemed difficult or awkward. I would like to suggest that you test some of the simpler actions to see if they are powerful as you would like them to be, or if perhaps, they should be changed in the story.

The first one I would like you to think about is when Ruth tells us 'My fingers grip the edge of the table...'. Ruth is scared of her father in this moment. I imagine her hunching over the table to make herself as small as she can and gripping the edge of the chair in the process, rather than the edge of the table. When Robert 'pounds his fist on the table', Ruth continues on to tell us that he 'wields his hand like a weapon, fingers splayed'. Rather than 'pounds his fist', 'slaps his hand aggressively' provides a more consistent image. Likewise, when [Robert] 'pushes his chair too hard so that it knocks into the table, sending a shiver through me' I struggle with the imagery. I would change this to 'He stands with a violent jolt and his chair careens into the wall, sending a tremble through me'. To me 'shiver' evokes either the obvious sensation of cold, or a delicious sensation, such as a shiver of delight, whereas 'tremble' evokes fear, and I am sure we agree that Ruth is fearful in this moment.

It would benefit the story to have the following incorporated:

- An explanation of why Miranda left the marriage and, more importantly, why she left her children. Perhaps Ruth could relay this information in the form of speaking about a conversation she overhears between her father and Grandpa, or her father and her sisters.
- An explanation of the timeline for the court case from the time that the subpoena was served on Robert until the judgement when he loses the court case.

Questions

-  Aside from the obituary for Ruth-Anne (Grandma), what is the purpose of the obituaries placed throughout the story? It is difficult to understand the need for their inclusion.
- Where did Robert get the money to buy the land and build the house they were living in? The family was living on acres before Miranda left and when she inherited the horse Cletus. It feels illogical for this to have been Grandpa's land and home as Robert resents his father because they grew up poor so how could he own property.

Katherine, I want to again express my delight in this short story and thank you for providing me the opportunity to work with you on something that is obviously important to you. I hope that you will give some consideration to the comments and questions I have raised. I also hope that we will work together again on this and other projects.

I look forward to reading the next version of '*A horse in the race*'.

Yours respectfully,

Vivian Fry