

MR FRIPP TAKES A TRIP

A short story by A.A. Abbott

Disclaimer: this is a work of fiction. Any similarity to real people is completely coincidental and unintentional.

"More wine?" Keith asks. I realise it isn't really a question, when he splashes the rest of the bottle into my glass. He takes a twenty pound note out of his wallet and hands it to Tracy, the office junior. "Get a few more of those, will you," he commands.

I'm impressed. We're drinking quality stuff, Blue Nun, and it isn't cheap. At the supermarket, it's over the two pound mark. Goodness knows how much it costs at Sharkeys wine bar.

Tracy returns with four bottles and a pound coin. "Ah, a Maggie," says Keith. "Bright, brassy, thinks it's a sovereign." He fills all our glasses to the brim and gives Tracy a squeeze. "Thank you, my dear." To me, he asks, "How are you enjoying your new job with us?"

He doesn't wait for an answer, because he spots a client and hares over to talk to him. Just as well, because it saves me the embarrassment of lying to Keith. I hate my job already, and all the other staff detest theirs too. Every Friday, someone has a leaving drink at Sharkeys. Tonight, it's Ian's turn, but Keith is buying the drinks because it's his birthday.

Keith's secretary, Lynn, gives me a knowing wink. It's nearly eight o'clock and we've planned a special surprise for Keith. He's talking to a small group of men now, middle aged like him, none of whom I recognise. He's waving to me. "He wants to talk to you," Lynn says. "He's with Mr Fripp, your favourite client."

"No, you're having a laugh," I protest. Everyone at work had a good giggle after I met Mr Fripp. The joke is wearing thin a month later. Just then, one of Keith's companions turns round. It is indeed Nigel Fripp, suave in a brown leather bomber jacket, as he was when I encountered him before.

It was my fourth day at Keith's accountancy practice. I was beginning to realise why they'd been so keen to recruit me. There was stacks of paperwork; post six months old to which Lynn had written holding responses: "We will deal with your letter as soon as possible;" a total lack of morale. There was so much work that everyone wanted to leave, and when they did, there were even fewer people to do it. Ian bounced into the office. He was in a happy mood, having handed in his notice the day before.

"One of my clients is visiting in a minute. Nigel Fripp. Can you see him, Karen? I'm double booked; I have a meeting with someone else too."

"Could anyone else cover for you?" I asked. "I don't know Mr Fripp and there's no time to read his file if he's about to arrive." I looked around. No one else made eye contact, or appeared to be listening to our conversation. They all studied the paperwork on their desks.

Ian's mouth twitched at the corners. "You don't need to look at his file. He's only bringing in some information about his tax return. He likes a chat and a cup of coffee, that's all."

Lynn phoned shortly after that, to say Mr Fripp had arrived. "I'll make you coffee," she tittered. "Don't worry, he's harmless."

As I passed Keith's office, he beckoned me inside. "I hear you're seeing Nigel Fripp."

I nodded.

"Well, treat him with respect, please. He's a very clever man. A scientist. He's invented plastic boxes for sandwiches, a phone you can take with you in your car, all sorts of gadgets. He's one of my best clients. Always pays his fees on time."

"Why wouldn't I be respectful towards him?" I asked.

"People forget sometimes. He can be a bit strange." Keith waved dismissively. "You'd better be getting along to him. Enjoy the experience." He smiled. His mouth had developed a tic at the side too.

I was relieved to find that Nigel Fripp was polite, smartly dressed, even a bit of all right for someone of Keith's age.

"Karen King." I extended my hand.

"Nigel Fripp. You're new, aren't you? I never seem to see the same person twice."

"Keith likes every one of us to get to know his clients." The lie tripped naturally off my lips. Mr Fripp smiled. I ushered him to the sole meeting room, a triangular cubby hole overlooking the approach to the train station. At least it was private. Lynn had already left a coffee pot and he thanked me effusively when I poured him a cup. So far, so good.

"You've brought in some papers for your tax return," I ventured.

"Yes, I thought it best not to delay in case aliens burned them," Mr Fripp replied.

I spluttered into my coffee cup.

"Is something wrong?" Mr Fripp asked, his tone solicitous.

"Just a cough. Please excuse me." Another white lie. I was learning diplomacy.

"Yes, it's the season for coughs and colds," Mr Fripp responded. "I researched a cure for the common cold once, but there was no money in it. The big pharmaceutical companies made too much selling remedies for the symptoms to want to cure the cause. They'd rather destroy my research than invest in it. The aliens are just the same. I'm trialling a space travel mechanism at the moment. Like the teleporter in Star Trek, except this is real. It actually works. It's upsetting them because they don't want humans muscling in on their territory." He waved out of the grimy window at the sky. "They're from Alpha Centauri." He whispered conspiratorially. "The aliens you meet are just traders, of course."

I interrupted him. "I haven't met any."

"Count yourself lucky then." He was indignant. "They set light to my car, you know. That was their warning to me, if you like. I had a new Jaguar, cream leather seats. It was immaculate. And then – just a burned out wreck."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said. Another coughing fit.

"You really aren't very well," said Mr Fripp. "I hope it isn't catching. I'll just leave these papers with you. Give me a call if you have any questions."

That would be a job for the next new joiner, I thought. Two weeks later, Amanda started. She'd no sooner made herself comfortable with a coffee than my phone rang. "Mr Fripp's here," Lynn said. "He asked for you."

"Tell him I'm off sick." I looked hopefully at my new colleague. "Amanda," I began.

Her meeting with Mr Fripp didn't quite run to plan. "That poor man," she told me afterwards. "His house burned down last week."

"Aliens, was it?" Ian asked.

Amanda's face was a picture. "I thought he was so brave, making a joke of it." She ran her hand nervously through her tightly permed curls. "You're telling me he was serious?"

This evening, Amanda is a distant memory already. She only lasted the day.

Tracy and I clink glasses. "Is that Nigel Fripp?" she asks, staring dreamily at Keith's group. "Why does everybody laugh about him? He looks like Bobby Ewing in Dallas. I could eat him all up."

"He's a Flake," I tell her. Keith is still beckoning me. I ignore him as best I can, knowing he'll soon be distracted.

The DJ plays Land of Make Believe by Bucks Fizz. A large, no-nonsense man in a dinner jacket rushes up to Keith. "Special delivery for Keith Wilsome," he announces. Right behind him is an even larger lady, a blonde wearing fishnet stockings and a corset. She sings Happy Birthday to a blushing Keith.

"Put your hands together for Keith," she shrieks. We do as we're told. "Thanks for the clap," she screeches. Keith is getting redder.

"I've got a special present for you, Keith." Her minder hands her a whip. "Would you like to know what it is?"

"Yes," everyone shouts.

"You must be kidding," says Keith. He legs it, followed by Miss Whiplash. "I'm going to the gents," he yells.

She shrugs. Her minder places his jacket protectively round her meaty shoulders. "Have you got any B&H?" she asks him, as they leave.

Keith emerges, eyes darting cautiously around the room. Lynn's laughing fit to burst. "Who ordered the roly poly gram?" Keith asks, crossly.

"We had a whip round," Lynn says. "Oh my. Look Keith, your evening's getting even better."

Three aliens are approaching Mr Fripp. They're a little shorter than him, a greyish colour, with triangular heads and four arms rather than two. They wear shiny silver space suits.

Keith's eyes nearly pop out of his head. "An aliengram," he breathes. "They're good. Look, all their arms are moving."

The DJ, seizing his chance, plays the theme from 2001, A Space Odyssey. I glance at Nigel Fripp. He's petrified. He looks as if he wants to scream, but his mouth isn't making a sound.

The aliens don't appear to open their mouths, yet I still hear their leader. "We warned you, dogbreath." He's watched too many corny American crime shows, I think.

Two of the aliens grip each of his shoulders and manhandle Mr Fripp to the door as their leader clears a path. In the struggle, Mr Fripp finds his voice. "No!" Panic and terror spill from his lips. He yells to Keith for help.

Keith chortles. "They're amazing. I bet they're booked until Christmas. Karen, follow them and get a business card. Those guys need an accountant."

I rush to the door, chuckling too. Outside, the concrete wasteland that is the city centre on a Friday night is surprisingly deserted. A few yards away, I spot a brown leather bomber jacket and a scorch mark on the pavement.

I look up into the starry sky. Keith has followed me outside. He kisses my cheek. I stand, still and silent. Normally, I would slap his face. "My God, you're pissed," Keith says.

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