

FINDING JOHN KEATS

A Play in One Act

by

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INTRODUCTION

Early in 1929, Canadian writer Raymond Knister, at the age of thirty, published what would become his best-known novel, *WHITE NARCISSUS*. Later that same spring, Knister brought his bride of two years, Myrtle Gamble, back to her hometown of Port Dover, Ontario. They rented a small farmhouse, overlooking Lake Erie, on the Old Lakeshore Road a few miles east of the town. It was Knister's intention to spend the next few months, with the assistance of his wife, researching the life of his favourite English poet, John Keats, and to write a biographical novel about him. The couple needed to escape the distractions of their life in Toronto and find a quiet, congenial place in which to work.

NOTE

A number of the speeches in this play contain phrases and sentences taken from the writing and the letters of the characters.

Cast of Characters

| | |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------|
| <u>Raymond Knister:</u> | Canadian writer, age 30 |
| <u>Myrtle Gamble Knister:</u> | His wife, age 27 |
| <u>John Keats:</u> | English poet, age 23 |
| <u>Fanny Brawne:</u> | His beloved, age 18 |
| <u>Charles Brown:</u> | His close friend, age 32 |

Scene

Scenes 1-3: A small farmhouse on Lake Erie, two and a half miles east of Port Dover, Ontario.

Scenes 4-7: Wentworth Place, a double house in Hampstead, London, England.

Time

Scenes 1-3: July to mid-October 1929

Scenes 4-7: April 1819 to September 1820

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ACT I

Scene 1

SETTING:
farmhouse

The livingroom of a small

overlooking Lake Erie, near Port
Dover, Ontario. It is furnished
with a table, sofa, and chairs.
Books and papers are piled
everywhere, and a typewriter is
prominent on the table. UPSTAGE
LEFT and CENTRE doors lead to the
bedroom and to the kitchen,
respectively. CENTRE STAGE
a door leads outside to
DOWNSTAGE CENTRE and RIGHT
where there are flowers, some

tools

lying about, two lawn chairs,
evidence of a vegetable garden
UPSTAGE RIGHT, and a ramshackle
gate STAGE RIGHT of the garden.
DOWNSTAGE a path leads OFFSTAGE
LEFT.

AT RISE:
MYRTLE,

Morning in late July, 1929.

carrying a tennis racket, runs in
from DOWNSTAGE LEFT. She drops the
racket in one chair and flops in
the other. RAYMOND, also carrying

a

tennis racket, flies out the door
of the house and bounds toward the

chairs, then stops abruptly.

MYRTLE (laughing)

I win! I told you it was farther going through the house.

RAYMOND

(coming to her)

I love the way you laugh.

(He leans over her chair
and kisses her lightly.
They kiss again, more
passionately, then he helps
her out of the chair.)

MYRTLE

Now you have to pay the bet, Raymond. Make my dinner.

I-1-

2

RAYMOND

I'd make dinner for you anyway, sweetheart.

MYRTLE

I want some of that new corn from the garden.

RAYMOND

(moving UPSTAGE toward the garden)

And what else?

MYRTLE

The spiced ham from last night.

RAYMOND

(beginning to pick some cobs)

Did John Keats like spiced ham, do you suppose?

MYRTLE

Is that a serious question?

RAYMOND

If you can find the answer, yes.

MYRTLE

(picking up the tennis rackets)

No detail about the great poet is too insignificant, is that it?

RAYMOND

Exactly.

MYRTLE (decisively)

Well Mr. Keats is not coming to dinner today! It's a Myrtle and Raymond exclusive. No research until after dinner.

RAYMOND

(bringing the corn)

Let's go in and change. It's only eleven o'clock. There's time to fix the door on "Beulah" before I start to cook.

(They go into the house and continue talking, RAYMOND through the open kitchen door and MYRTLE through the open bedroom door, leaning their heads out as they speak.)

I-1-

3

MYRTLE

Why do men always call their cars "Beulah" or "Nellie" or "Lizzie"? Why are cars always feminine?

RAYMOND

(teasing her)

You could look that up, Myrtle, but you said no research until after dinner.

MYRTLE (saucily)

I don't need to look it up. Cars are always feminine because—like women—they're indispensable.

RAYMOND

I'm afraid John Keats didn't find women indispensable. He told his friend Bailey that whenever he was among women he was full of suspicions and in a hurry to be gone.

MYRTLE (knowingly)

That was before he met Fanny Brawne. He didn't find her indispensable.

RAYMOND

Fanny Brawne is an entirely separate matter. I'm talking about the other women Keats knew.

MYRTLE

(She comes out of the bedroom in a casual but stylish housedress.

RAYMOND comes out of the kitchen.)

But I'm not talking about any of them! Not until after dinner!

(They kiss briefly. RAYMOND goes into the bedroom, MYRTLE into the kitchen. They talk as before, occasionally leaning their heads out through the open doors.)

RAYMOND

(calling out sweetly)

Myrtle!

MYRTLE

I'm busy.

I-1-

4

RAYMOND (cajolingly)

Sweetheart!

MYRTLE

(in pretended exasperation)

What do you want?!

RAYMOND

I can't find my overalls.

MYRTLE

Why can men never find anything?

RAYMOND

I found you, Myrtle.

MYRTLE

Never mind that sweet talk! Look on the hook behind the door, get dressed, and get out there and fix "Beulah"! I'm getting hungry.

RAYMOND

I could make supper instead of dinner.

MYRTLE (laughingly)

I don't think so, Ray.

RAYMOND

(coming out of the bedroom,
fastening his overalls)

Keats didn't cook for Fanny Brawne.

MYRTLE

(coming out of the kitchen,
putting on gardening gloves)

How is that relevant to anything?

RAYMOND

(a little sheepishly)

It's not. I'm just musing.

(They go outside.)

MYRTLE

He might have cooked for the lady he met at Hastings.

I-1-

5

RAYMOND

Oh, I think he did more than cook for her.

MYRTLE

The biography doesn't say that.

RAYMOND

It says he "warmed" with her and kissed her. In Regency times "warmed" had sexual connotations and "kissed" was often used for the sexual act itself.

MYRTLE

(picking up garden tools

and moving to the flowers)
But you can't prove it.

RAYMOND

(picking up tools for the car)
I don't have to prove it. The possibility is undeniably there, so why not let John Keats have his happy initiation. He was twenty-one already. (More soberly) He didn't have much time left for happiness.

MYRTLE

Then make that part of the novel as romantic as you can.

RAYMOND

I'll do my best.

MYRTLE

And now go and fix that car!
(She comes to him and they kiss.)
No more Keats!

RAYMOND

Aw, Myrtle.

MYRTLE

Don't you "Aw, Myrtle" me!

RAYMOND

But it's just so natural to say.
(He demonstrates pleadingly.)
Aw, Myrtle. See?

I-1-

6

MYRTLE

No, I don't see.
(She holds up a large trowel.)
But do you see this?
(She runs after him and hits him once or twice on the "backside" as he exits on the path.)
And as soon as you get that door handle fixed, you get in the house and cook my dinner!

(She turns back toward the flowers.)

RAYMOND
(poking his head onstage)

Aw . . .

(MYRTLE turns very deliberately back toward RAYMOND and glares, unspeaking. After a second or two, RAYMOND'S head disappears. The sound of a car door opening and closing a few times and some tapping of tools is heard. MYRTLE begins weeding the flower bed, facing UPSTAGE. More tapping, opening and closing of the car door. RAYMOND appears and tiptoes over to MYRTLE where he stands silently behind her.)

MYRTLE
(calling loudly without turning around)
Raymond, are you almost finished?

RAYMOND (quietly)
Yes, dear.

MYRTLE
(jumping in alarm, then getting to her feet)
Raymond Knister!

RAYMOND
I couldn't help it, Myrtle. I can never resist teasing you when you're vulnerable.

I-1-

7

MYRTLE
And the rest of the time?

RAYMOND
(taking her in his arms)

I can't resist you then either.

(He tries to kiss her but
MYRTLE noticeably turns her
head and he kisses her cheek.
He releases her.)

You did that the first night we met, and I still don't like it.

MYRTLE (smilingly)

I can never resist teasing you when you're vulnerable.

RAYMOND

But you couldn't have known how vulnerable I was that first night. I'll admit I was smitten, but you couldn't have known that.

MYRTLE

I know you kept your arm around me during all of the poetry recitations. You seemed pretty smitten to me.

RAYMOND

You were evidently quite determined not to be kissed those first few times we met.

MYRTLE

As a proper young lady should be.

RAYMOND (seriously)

I was smitten because in appearance you were my ideal. I thought, Now at last has this girl come.

MYRTLE

You are a poet, Raymond.

RAYMOND

(Pause. He sits down.)

Poor as a poet, too. It's a good thing Mr. Powell only wants seventy-five dollars rent for the whole season.

MYRTLE

But Harcourt has just taken *WHITE NARCISSUS*, and he wants the Keats book next.

I-1-

RAYMOND

We won't get any more money until *NARCISSUS* comes out in the States, or until the Keats is finished and accepted. I'll have to do some hack-work to keep the pot boiling, and you'll have to help me even more with the Keats research. No more magazines. No more newspapers.

MYRTLE

No more fun is what it sounds like! You know my way is to have a good time while I'm going along. I'm sure that I do better, and I'm sure I do more work when I kick up my heels once in awhile.

RAYMOND

We'll still have the tennis club, sweetheart. And the garden. And swimming in that big cork lifebelt.

MYRTLE (plaintively)

I miss my job in Toronto. And my salary.

RAYMOND

You're working with me now, Myrtle. For us. You know I can't write this book without your help.

MYRTLE

I'm not a scholar, Ray. All those literary books—on Shelley, Hazlitt, Leigh Hunt—they're quite a trial for me. It's not my field.

RAYMOND

(He stands up, and moves
close to her.)

But you're learning so much! And you're so delightfully clever when you argue with me about Fanny Brawne.

MYRTLE

It will be your version of Fanny in your novel, not mine.

RAYMOND

All the more reason for you to convince me of the rightness of your view.

(Pause. MYRTLE turns away
from him.)

You're so intelligent, Myrtle. You're indispensable to me, like Fanny was to Keats.

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MYRTLE

All the same, Ray, I'll be very very glad when you go to Toronto to the library next week. One whole day, all to myself.

RAYMOND

(putting his arms around her
from behind)

Aw, Myrtle.

MYRTLE

I told you not to say that.

RAYMOND

But you will miss me a little?

MYRTLE

(turning to face him, both
he and she sideways to audience)

Like a really bad toothache, Raymond. That's how I'll miss you. Imagine the dentist removing the tooth for one whole day. Blissful. That's how it will be.

RAYMOND

(warning her)

There'll be more books to read when I get home.

MYRTLE

(twirling about the lawn)

I know—but one whole day without books. It will be heavenly. You can drop me off in town at my mother's, and there will then be cooking and sewing and reading of magazines the like of which you cannot imagine.

RAYMOND

I'd like to get in on the eating part of that cooking.

MYRTLE

(teasing him)

Well that depends.

RAYMOND

On what?

MYRTLE

On how early you get home from Toronto.

I-1-

10

RAYMOND

You know it's a long drive.

MYRTLE

I'm counting on it. Hours and hours to do just as I wish.

RAYMOND

So you want me to come home late?

MYRTLE

(sweetly solicitous)

I want you to be safe and not drive too fast.

RAYMOND

(a little confused)

But late for dinner would be all right?

MYRTLE (pause)

Sort of.

(He comes to her and kisses
her tenderly.)

RAYMOND

I love you, Myrtle.

(He moves toward the house.)

This may be the last trip for books.

MYRTLE

I'd be reassured if I didn't already know you'll bring home
a carful.

RAYMOND (seriously)

I have to bring home a carful.

MYRTLE (sympathetically)

I know you do.

RAYMOND

(turning towards her)

What I'd really like is to spend ten years reading about Keats and his contemporaries. Then I could write the novel straight through, out of a full mind and heart.

MYRTLE

You're too thorough, Raymond.

I-1-

11

RAYMOND

Good research is always exhaustive.

MYRTLE

You're too clever, as well. Your cleverness offers you far too many possibilities. They're overwhelming.

RAYMOND

It's a good thing it does. The poetry alone won't support us.

MYRTLE

And you work far too hard.

RAYMOND (vigorously)

I like to work hard! A man should work hard! It's a very bracing thing to do.

MYRTLE

(hugging him)

Sometimes you inspire me, darling.

(stepping back)

But this is not one of those times. At least not exclusively. I'm a little bit inspired, but mostly I'm just hungry.

(She pushes him up the steps
into the house.)

See that typewriter, sweetheart. This afternoon I will begin to type out the letters of John Keats to Fanny Brawne. I will try to find something bracing in this task, according to your recent definition of "work".

RAYMOND

(mistakenly delighted)

That's excellent, Myrtle!

MYRTLE

There's more. If I don't find anything bracing, I'll go swimming. And if that isn't bracing enough, I'll read my new Ladies' Home Journal. I assume the prohibition against reading for pleasure doesn't take effect until you come home from Toronto.

RAYMOND (admiringly)

If you were a man, I'd call you a firebrand.

I-1-

12

MYRTLE

I am a firebrand. That's why you married me. Remember?

RAYMOND

(taking her hands in his)

I don't think "smitten" is quite the word for how I felt when I met you.

(He kisses her.)

"Besotted" is the word.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

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ACT I

Scene 2

SETTING: The same.

AT RISE: Evening in August, a month later.

A

bright moon and lights from the house illuminate the yard. A few bars of "Claire de Lune" begin the scene. There is a distant background sound of waves on the shore. We hear the voices of RAYMOND and MYRTLE, unintelligible at first, OFFSTAGE UP AND RIGHT, becoming clearer.

RAYMOND (forcefully)

I tell you that it's only with the development of a truly Canadian literature that Canada will ever find a truly national identity. When our own authors are respected, when their work is accepted as valid, when they are paid a living wage, then a truly Canadian literature will begin to form.

(He enters the stage through the ramshackle gate and holds it open for MYRTLE to enter.)

In face of the physical difficulties of building this nation, it has taken more than usually vigorous talent to

achieve any sort of adequate literary expression. Not many writers have successfully attempted it, but of some of these men and women it's not unfair to claim that in happier circumstances they might have been great.

MYRTLE

But what more can you do, Raymond? You help other writers whenever you can.

RAYMOND

I can edit a second anthology of Canadian short stories. That kind of exposure helps the author and the literature.

MYRTLE (worriedly)

You can't do that until you've finished with Keats. Not with so much research already done. You'd forget it all if you stopped now!

I-2-

14

RAYMOND

I wouldn't forget it. . .Keats is quite lodged in my brain. But he's in my heart, too, and I might forget that. I might lose the passion, and it's the passion I need. This novel has to show Keats as the great flower of the human race that he was. His philosophy approached that of Shakespeare! I have to enter into Keats' own life experience, imaginatively, not merely intellectually, or there is no reason to write the book.

MYRTLE

(sitting in a lawn chair)

Can you do that, Raymond, really enter into his life?

RAYMOND

I think the secret lies in recognizing that Keats' poems reflect his constant view that nature and beauty are precious parts of human experience. He translates this experience into art with an unrivaled power of phrase. Remember how he says, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, - that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." He means it, Myrtle, because his life experience has led him to this conviction. I need my imagination to connect the

biography and the poetry. Then I'll know the truth about his life, as it impressed itself upon him.

MYRTLE

It's a good thing you're so intellectual, Ray. You understand his poems completely.

RAYMOND

You like his letters, don't you? They're some of the best ever written by an English poet.

MYRTLE

I do like his letters. Except the ones to Fanny Brawne that have cruel thoughts in them.

RAYMOND

(sitting down, speaking
confidently)

She tortured him.

MYRTLE (arguing)

She didn't torture him. He was obsessed with her.

I-2-

15

RAYMOND

He was a genius poet, so he was more sensitive than the rest of us. And he had a harsh life: his parents dead early, his brother George gone to America, and his brother Tom, dead of tuberculosis just after John met Fanny. She should have been kinder to him. We know she was clever. She should have seen what he needed.

MYRTLE

She was only eighteen!

RAYMOND

He was only twenty-three!

MYRTLE

Old enough to understand a young girl's fancies, and tolerate them.

RAYMOND

She tortured him.

MYRTLE

(standing up)

I think you're beginning to be as obsessed with your idea of Keats as he was with Fanny. I wish we had her letters to him. It would be easier to make a judgment.

RAYMOND

It wouldn't matter. You can see in his letters to her how he is suffering. His jealousy is like a scorpion in his flesh. She should have behaved differently than she did.

MYRTLE

It's not that simple. You said yourself that he was oversensitive, and that he was virtually alone in the world. Add to those burdens his continual lack of money, his failure to please the critics or the buying public with his poetry, and his own beginning lung disease. A lesser man than John Keats would have collapsed under the weight. You can't blame Fanny Brawne for all of his unhappiness. And remember, we have those five excerpts from Fanny Brawne's letters to Keats' sister, written after he died. Or do you utterly reject that biographer's view that those letters suggest that he wronged Fanny more seriously than she ever wronged him?

I-2-

16

RAYMOND

I'm not like that American critic who thought that meeting Fanny Brawne was the worst thing that ever happened to John Keats. At her best, she inspired him. He wrote his greatest poetry in the year after he met her.

MYRTLE

Well then?

RAYMOND

I'll read the "cruel" letters again. And I'll try to be Fanny, not John, while I read them.

MYRTLE

I'm glad you can be so fair, Raymond.

RAYMOND
(standing up with purpose)
A reward would be very nice.
(He moves towards her and
they circle the chairs,
RAYMOND in pursuit.)

MYRTLE
You always say that virtue is its own reward.

RAYMOND (playfully)
What else do I always say?

MYRTLE
(stopping, reciting the
words seriously)
"Turn under, plow, My trouble; Turn under griefs And
stubble."

RAYMOND
(already standing still)
Do you like that poem?

MYRTLE
(with conviction and warmth)
Yes. It's you.

RAYMOND
What else do you like?

17

I-2-

MYRTLE
I like the sound of your idea that "sorrow can be sweet at
last."

RAYMOND
But you don't believe it.

MYRTLE
Not absolutely. I worry that there will be a sorrow that
can never be sweet, no matter how much time passes.
(She pauses to think, then

continues enthusiastically.)
But Ray, I do believe that at one time or another we all
act like the characters in one of your poems, "as though
there were no such thing As death, (pause) and nothing else
but Death."

RAYMOND (smilingly)
Joy flying in the face of mortality.

MYRTLE (cheerfully)
That sounds just right to me.

RAYMOND
(beginning to pursue her again)
Speaking of joy, let's get back to my reward.

MYRTLE
(moving away from him)
Still wanting a reward?

RAYMOND
(still circling)
Oh, yes.

MYRTLE (retreating)
The price has gone up.

RAYMOND (surprised)
Has it now!

MYRTLE
Oh, yes.

18

I-2-

RAYMOND
And this is because. . .

MYRTLE
Because I've been quoting your poems to you. It's your turn
now.

RAYMOND

Do you want me to recite one of my poems?

MYRTLE

No. You know the poem I want.

RAYMOND (thinking)

Oh, that one. The sonnet.

MYRTLE

Yes, that one.

RAYMOND

(with a smile in his voice)

I'm not sure you deserve the sonnet, Myrtle. You're being difficult about Fanny Brawne, and you only recited five of my lines.

MYRTLE

You know I deserve the sonnet! And you know very well you want to say it to me.

RAYMOND

What if I can't remember all of it?

MYRTLE (happily)

Then you'll have to improvise. You're a poet. How hard can it be?

(He recites the octet as he moves towards her. She takes his hand as he recites the sestet, then leads him into the house when he has finished speaking.)

I-2-

19

Who would have thought that eyelids could be
dear,
Or anything as tangible as hands?

Who would have thought that mere material strands
Of hair could have the power to draw me near?
That shoulders with my heart could interfere,
Sending out strange imperious commands?
And is there any sage who understands
The pleasing convolutions of an ear?

So if I will not let you read in peace
Because of yearnings quite beyond control,
Ponder with me what vital facts are these—
The lure of soul for flesh and flesh for soul,
And meditate how faintly lags behind
Our long-extolled supremacy of mind.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

ACT I

Scene 3

SETTING: The same.

AT RISE: Late afternoon in mid-October. MYRTLE is sitting at the typewriter in the livingroom. Suddenly a door slams, there are crashing noises in the kitchen, and RAYMOND staggers into the livingroom, knocking over a chair and some books. He is apparently inebriated. MYRTLE stands and backs away from him.

RAYMOND

(cheerily enthusiastic)

Hello, Myrtle!

(MYRTLE is speechless and incredulous.)

Hello, Myrtle!

(still no response)

What's the matter, Myrtle? Cat got your tongue?

(He laughs uproariously.)

MYRTLE

Raymond Knister, you're drunk!

RAYMOND

Oh, no! No-no! I couldn't be drunk. The apple cider hasn't had time to ferment. Everybody knows that, Myrtle. And now you know it too.

(He bursts out laughing again.)

MYRTLE

(unable not to smile)

Ray, you are drunk.

RAYMOND

(groping to find a chair)

No, no! I was just over visiting Mr. Powell and he gave me some apple cider. They've been making it all week. It's harmless.

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MYRTLE (sweetly)
What else did Mr. Powell give you, Ray?

RAYMOND
Just plenty of apple cider, sweetheart.
(He manages to sit down.
Then he looks at MYRTLE
directly.)
Last year's apple cider!
(He laughs unrestrainedly.
MYRTLE waits. Finally he
gets up and totters over
to her.)
What's for supper, Myrtle?

MYRTLE
You could have a piece of my mind.

RAYMOND
(trying to hug her)
I love you, Myrtle. You can bite my ear if you want to.

MYRTLE
Tempting. . .but not just now. I'm busy thinking.
(She moves away from him.)

RAYMOND
(following her)
What are you thinking about, sweetheart?

MYRTLE
How many cups of coffee and how many hours it's going to
take to get you sober.

RAYMOND
(sitting down again)
I think I've been sober for far too long.

MYRTLE
Sober suits you.

RAYMOND
Is that so?

MYRTLE

Of course it's so.

I-3-

22

RAYMOND

(pause, considering)

I had a good time visiting at Powell's.

MYRTLE

I'm glad.

RAYMOND

They wanted me to bring you some of their apple cider.

(pause)

I told them you were a firebrand.

(pause)

Because you are, Myrtle. You're a firebrand.

MYRTLE

(straightening papers on
the desk, her tone now
one of resignation)

That's right, darling.

RAYMOND

And a cook. You're a good cook, Myrtle.

MYRTLE

That's right, darling.

(RAYMOND watches her work
and at length gets up easily
and moves close to her.)

RAYMOND

(speaking deliberately in her
ear, clearly not inebriated)

Maybe if I tell you that you're a better cook than my
mother, I can convince you to make dinner.

MYRTLE

(stopping her work abruptly)

Raymond, you're not drunk!

RAYMOND

You sound disappointed.

MYRTLE

You were very entertaining.

I-3-

23

RAYMOND

Thank you. I practised on my way home.

(MYRTLE sits heavily at the table, and begins moving papers again. He watches for a moment.)

Are you tired, sweetheart?

MYRTLE

(stopping her work)

I've been typing most of the afternoon, since I came home from town.

RAYMOND

You must have finished all those notes I wanted. That's wonderful.

MYRTLE

(pause, then slowly, deliberately)

I've finished everything, Raymond.

RAYMOND

I'm not sure I understand.

MYRTLE

(not looking at him)

I think you do.

RAYMOND

(with the hint of an edge in his voice)

No, I don't.

MYRTLE

I've finished all the reading and all the typing I'm going to do for the Keats research.

RAYMOND (incredulously)

Why?

MYRTLE

Because the research is complete.

RAYMOND

(somewhat harshly)

I haven't told you that.

I-3-

24

MYRTLE

You didn't have to tell me.

RAYMOND

(still prickly)

Then how do you know?

MYRTLE

You said it yesterday. You said you felt like Keats did when he said he was just coming into his powers. You felt as though you were just coming into yours. You said the world was before us. You wouldn't feel like that if you hadn't found your own imaginative way into Keats' life—the reason you're writing this book.

RAYMOND

(pause, then a comment,
not a question)

And that's what you think.

MYRTLE

I think the research has exhausted us both, and I think you have exhausted the research. There's nothing you don't know about Keats. There's nothing left in the books to help you. (Pause.) You have to turn inward now.

RAYMOND

(pacing a little, then
stopping)

I can't decide about Fanny Brawne.

MYRTLE

I know.

RAYMOND (accusingly)

You think I should soften the portrait.

MYRTLE

I think you should give her the benefit of the doubt.

RAYMOND

(raising his voice a little)

There is no doubt that she tormented him.

I-3-

25

MYRTLE

(matching him)

There is no doubt that he was obsessed by her. His behaviour to Fanny was sometimes beyond the pale.

RAYMOND

(still impassioned)

You can't blame him for loving her too much.

MYRTLE

(with finality)

You can't blame her if she loved him a little less than that. Besides, no woman could have matched his obsession. He needed a lover, he needed a mother, he needed all the things that life had robbed him of. It's all there. In his letters.

RAYMOND

(with his own finality)

Exactly.

MYRTLE

What does that mean?

RAYMOND

(angry again)

Maybe she should have destroyed his letters, not sold them.

MYRTLE

Her children sold them, not Fanny. You know that.

RAYMOND

(at his peak)

She made it possible. And the whole educated English-speaking world was appalled at the sacrilege!

MYRTLE

Not everyone. Not those who read the letters carefully enough to perceive some of what Fanny's own words and actions must have been.

(pause)

Not those who research objectively.

(pause)

Not you, Raymond.

RAYMOND

(pause, with a sigh, sitting down at the table)

No, not me.

I-3-

26

MYRTLE (pause)

You can do this. You can write this book. Straight through, out of a full mind and heart, like you said.

(pause)

Raymond, I know your plan for the book is finished. It's time to begin writing.

RAYMOND

I have to be sure, Myrtle. There's an immense emptiness in front of me, waiting to be filled. I'm not afraid of it. On the contrary, I welcome it. But I can't afford to take a misstep.

MYRTLE

But it's not like a regular novel. You'll be following the biography so you can't misstep. And you have your plan.

RAYMOND

But do I have John Keats? Do I have his spirit?

MYRTLE

Like no one else. Like only a poet can.

RAYMOND

And Fanny Brawne?

MYRTLE

You'll find out her mystery as you go. I'm certain of it.

RAYMOND

And I'll be kind to her? For your sake?

MYRTLE

You'll be kind to her, but it will be for Keats' sake, not mine.

RAYMOND (thoughtfully)

Yes, you're right. It will be for his sake.

(pause)

When did you become so wise, Myrtle?

MYRTLE

(standing, speaking cheerily)

I've always been wise, Ray. Surely you knew that.

RAYMOND

I expect I did. I just never saw it so clearly before.

I-3-

27

MYRTLE

(gathering steam)

That's because you hardly ever see what's right in front of you.

RAYMOND

Now, Myrtle. That's a bit harsh.

MYRTLE

(She begins to take a
turn about the room.)

Nevertheless, it's true.

RAYMOND

You mean to say I'm missing something else? Right now?

MYRTLE

(She stands sideways to

the audience and pokes her
stomach forward.)
I mean to say that very thing.

RAYMOND
Why are you standing like that, sweetheart?

MYRTLE
(mimicking him)
Why are you standing like that, sweetheart? Raymond, use
that marvellous brain of yours and think about it!

RAYMOND
(looking at her for a long
moment, then all astonishment)
No.

MYRTLE
(standing normally now)
Yes.

RAYMOND
Truly?

MYRTLE
Yes, Ray.

RAYMOND
A baby?

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MYRTLE
In June.

RAYMOND
(standing slowly, then
going to MYRTLE and
touching her stomach)
I don't feel anything.

MYRTLE
You'll have to wait a few months.

RAYMOND
(bending, putting his

ear against MYRTLE'S
abdomen, then with a smile)
I don't hear anything.

MYRTLE

(She draws him up so they
are holding each other
close. Finally, she speaks.)
You will, sweetheart. After June, you'll hear a great deal.

(They back up and look at
each other for several
moments. MYRTLE turns slowly
and goes into the bedroom.
RAYMOND watches after her,
then turns toward the table.
He approaches the typewriter,
takes out the paper in it,
inserts a blank page, sits
down, and after a second or
two, begins to type vigorously.)

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

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I-4-

ACT I

Scene 4

SETTING:
Brown's
Hampstead,

The back parlour of Charles
half of Wentworth Place,
England. It is furnished with a
sofa, chairs, and a table with

books and papers on it. UPSTAGE
LEFT a door leads to the rest of
the house. CENTRE STAGE a door
leads

outside to the garden, which is
DOWNSTAGE CENTRE and RIGHT. There
are a statue and a bench in the
garden. STAGE RIGHT of the garden
is a gate. A path leads from the
garden OFFSTAGE LEFT.

AT RISE: Late morning in April, 1819. A
little Mozart sets the change in
the time period. KEATS is in the
parlour looking out at the garden.
BROWN calls from OFFSTAGE.

BROWN

Keats!

(pause)

Keats, where are you?

KEATS

Here, Brown, in the back parlour.

(BROWN enters from UPSTAGE LEFT.
He halts and studies KEATS.)

BROWN

I thought you were working on "Hyperion."

KEATS

(not looking at BROWN,
slightly irritated when
he speaks to him)

I told you yesterday. I can't finish it.

(Pause. He turns to
BROWN and speaks more
cheerfully.)

It is what it is. A fragment, that's all. Besides, my mind
is elsewhere.

I-4-

30

BROWN

A new poem?

KEATS (mischievously)

You could say that.

BROWN

And what is the subject?

KEATS (smilingly)

Let's call it the fusion of Love and Death.

BROWN (impatiently)

Keats, you're always on about Love and Death. It's spring!
Forget Death! Write about Love!

KEATS

There's plenty of love in this poem.

BROWN

You may well think that. But let's hear the ending.

KEATS

As you wish.

(He takes a piece of paper
out of his pocket and
unfolds it.)

"And this is why I sojourn here, Alone and palely
loitering,
Though the sedge has wither'd from the lake, And no birds
sing."

(Pause. BROWN looks at him
askance. KEATS begins to
protest.)

The middle half of the poem is filled with love.

(Pause. He argues more
forcefully.)

Strange, wild, passionate love!

BROWN

I don't trust you for a minute on this. The ending is
bleak!

KEATS

It's spring, Brown, as you pointed out. Let's forget our
writing for a day or two. My mind is elsewhere.

31

BROWN

(sitting down)

Dare I hope it's on the garden? Now that you're living here, will you lend a hand?

KEATS (carelessly)

Of course.

BROWN

Yet I must not forget—your mind is elsewhere.

KEATS (pause)

I should confess to you how much I admire Miss Fanny Brawne. I'm waiting for her to appear in the garden, since it is now her garden as well as ours.

BROWN

Miss Brawne?

KEATS

Yes.

BROWN

But we've only met her rarely.

KEATS

(with satisfaction)

You must speak for yourself on that account.

BROWN

Aha! Well done, my friend! But do you recall that the Brawnes only moved in yesterday morning? They'll still be getting settled.

KEATS

Nevertheless, I think she will appear.

BROWN

Then Miss Brawne returns your admiration?

KEATS (lightheartedly)

Brown, I'm a failed poet, trounced by the critics. I scarcely have any money, nor prospects of any. I'm barely

five foot one inch tall and I have periods of despondency.
How much is there to admire?

I-4-

32

BROWN

You've hardly given a balanced description of yourself.

(enthusiastically)

You have an excellent sense of humour, strong shoulders,
and a fine head of hair. I've even heard it said that your
eyes are extremely brilliant. Perhaps Miss Brawne might
admire your eyes.

KEATS

She knows I want to see her. She will appear.

(He sits down.)

Everyone has been so kind since my brother Tom died. You
above all, Brown, inviting me to live here. Were it not for
you, I feel I would have dwindled to nothing. Instead, I
have written one or two poems that I think are not without
merit.

BROWN

(with an upbeat)

And you have admired Miss Fanny Brawne. Happier times
indeed!

(FANNY Brawne appears on
the path STAGE LEFT)

KEATS

(jumping up)

You see! She's there!

BROWN (standing)

Yes, I see.

KEATS

The first flower of spring! Is she not, Brown?

BROWN

The first flower.

KEATS

(moving towards the door)

CENTRE STAGE)

I must go out to her.

BROWN

Keats, wait!

(He picks up a coat from
the arm of a chair.)

Your coat.

I-4-

33

KEATS

Why would I need a coat on such a day as this?

(KEATS goes out to FANNY
and approaches her quite
closely. BROWN watches for
a few moments, then exits
UPSTAGE LEFT.)

Here you are, Fanny, just where you belong.

FANNY

In a garden?

KEATS

In my garden.

FANNY

(twirling away from him)

Would you have me like this statue, never to leave?

KEATS

Not like a statue, no. Never to leave me? Yes.

(pause, then cheerfully)

My wants are simple enough: fine weather and health and
books, and a fine country, and a contented mind, and a
diligent habit of reading and thinking.

(pause)

But all I really want is you. If I cannot have you, these
other things are an opiate to my brain.

(pause)

They must suffice to sustain me.

FANNY (lightheartedly)

I have just arrived and I have no plans to leave!

KEATS

Brown always rents out his half of the house for the summer because people pay so well for summer lodgings in Hampstead, but I won't have to leave until then. We'll have the entire spring to ourselves.

FANNY

(twirling again)

If you don't count Mr. Brown, and my mother and sister and brother.

I-4-

34

KEATS

They won't be walking with us on the Heath. And we must walk there this afternoon, and every afternoon! I will read my new poems to you.

(earnestly)

I need to make my living as a poet, Fanny. Nothing else will satisfy me. And I must earn enough for us to marry.

FANNY

You sound quite hopeful.

KEATS

My mind is made up. I know that I possess abilities greater than most men, and I am determined to gain my living by exercising them. Some think me middling, others silly, others foolish. I am content to be thought all this because I have in my own breast so great a resource. I feel that I am just coming into my powers, and I believe it is greatly to do with you.

FANNY

(sitting on the bench)

If you are coming into your true powers, John, it is all to your own credit. You told me that you meant to follow Solomon's directions: "Get learning—get understanding." You have spent years reading and writing so that now you have learned, now you do understand how to fulfill those powers.

KEATS

I hope that may be so, but I must explain your part. In the past year, I believe I was losing my will to try to live by

my poetry. My work was coarsely abused by the critics and ignored by the public. I was left alone when my brother George went to settle in America, and a few months later Tom died. At the same time, because of my own intolerance, I seemed to be dropping my friends, one by one, unable to forgive their failure to be exactly as I wished them to be. The world was a grim place for me.

(slight pause)

Then you came, and slowly and slenderly the light began to shine its way back into my life.

FANNY

(turning away from him
just a little)

I am glad of that. But you mustn't depend on me, not for your poetry. And not for all your happiness.

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35

KEATS

I do depend on you, Fanny. If you are here with me, if you love me, why may I not depend on you?

FANNY

(rising and moving away
from him)

Because I am too young. I don't want to be so serious yet. I want to dress up in my lovely clothes and go to balls and parties.

KEATS

Even if I will not go with you?

FANNY (determinedly)

Yes!

(more softly)

Though I do wish you would. But you wouldn't have me give up dances because you don't like them?

KEATS

If you loved me as I love you, you would not ask that question.

FANNY

Of course I love you—can you doubt it still? But what good can it do to make me unhappy?

KEATS

(a little harshly)

Oh, you can be happy away from me? I could not, away from you, and knowing you to be unhappy.

FANNY

I wish you would not be so intense.

KEATS

You must not make light of our love.

FANNY

(moving back to sit
on the bench)

Come here: sit down.

(KEATS sits with her.)

I am not making light of it, John.

(She runs her fingers
through his hair.)

Why, your hair is soft and thick as the plumage of a bird!

I-4-

36

KEATS

I could almost believe you when you speak so. Keep your hand there.

FANNY

Someone might see us.

(She removes her hand
from his head.)

KEATS

I would kiss you. Now.

FANNY

This afternoon, on the Heath.

KEATS

A thousand times!

FANNY

(teasing him)

We must be back in time for tea.

KEATS

A thousand times, no less!

FANNY
(petting his head)
You are my pet. My passionate poet.

KEATS (solemnly)
I am your priest, and you are my goddess.

FANNY
You must not say that. It is blasphemy.

KEATS
What can be holier than love, Fanny?

FANNY
Still, you must not say that.

KEATS (happily)
I shall be calm—because you wish it.
(A quiet moment passes and
then BROWN enters through
the gate STAGE RIGHT. KEATS
jumps up to greet him.)
Brown, come and say hello to Miss Brawne.

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37

BROWN
(He comes to FANNY and
bows slightly over her
hand, then moves away.)
I bid you welcome to Wentworth Place, Miss Brawne.

FANNY
Thank you, Mr. Brown. My family and I are very pleased to
be here.

BROWN
(looking at FANNY)
Keats, I think you must be right. We are indeed happy in
our new neighbours.

KEATS (good-naturedly)
Fanny, you must be wary of this fellow. He is genial and
hearty and full of everlasting puns. He also knows

Shakespeare and has had a play performed at Drury Lane. So he is not to be trifled with.

BROWN (jokingly)

I am certain Miss Brawne never trifles.

FANNY

You are too clever by half, Mr. Brown. I will be wary indeed.

BROWN

No need for that. I shall be on my best behaviour whenever we meet. Shall I not, Keats?

KEATS

You are a marvellous good fellow, Brown, but, you must confess, a little unpredictable from time to time.

BROWN

(smilingly indignant)

I do not confess to unpredictability!

KEATS

What, then, are these vacillations in your behaviour to be called?

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38

BROWN

(pausing to think, then
speaking with conviction)

Variety! And according to Mr. Cowper's play, it is the very spice of life.

FANNY

Then we are fortunate in your company, are we not, John?

KEATS

Fortunate indeed. . .were it not that spice is costly. We must consider the price of this variety before we subscribe to it too heavily.

BROWN

I am a sturdy fellow, of no inconsiderable girth, as you see. I will prove a sound investment, never fear.

FANNY (playfully)

Not only various, but unshakeable, too. He is almost irresistible.

KEATS

(joining in)

I have always found him so. Almost irresistible. But he likes his own way far too well, so one must resist.

BROWN (laughing)

I've come to call you to dinner, Keats. Will you resist that?

KEATS

Dinner should never be resisted. I'll come right away.

BROWN

(turning to go)

Then I bid you good-day, Miss Brawne. May your stay at Wentworth Place be a long and pleasant one.

(FANNY nods. BROWN exits
STAGE RIGHT.)

KEATS

(pause, taking a few steps
away from FANNY, then turning
back toward her)

You appear to like my friend Brown.

I-4-

39

FANNY

He is genial, as you said he was.

KEATS

And amusing?

FANNY

He is amusing enough, I suppose. I was not taking inventory of his qualities.

(pause)

I think you would be happy for me to like your closest friend, and for him to approve of me. Some of your acquaintances do not.

KEATS (firmly)

And I will not see them again.

(pause)

Oh, Fanny, you must have found out by this time that I am a little given to bode ill—like the raven. I cannot see you talk to other men—no, not even Brown—without jealousy. To be troubled with sad prophecies is my misfortune, not my fault. It has proceeded from the unhappy circumstances of my life, and renders every event suspicious.

FANNY (impatiently)

It is difficult enough to have horrid people speaking against me! Must I also be expected to bear this unhappiness in you? Your jealousy is unreasonable.

KEATS

I know it is. But I know this too: While we laughed with Brown, whenever we are laughing, the seed of some trouble is put into the wide arable land of events—while we are laughing it sprouts, it grows, and suddenly bears a poison fruit which we must pluck.

FANNY

(pause, then determinedly)

Our love will be the antidote to that poison.

(She stands and goes to
him, taking his hands
in hers.)

All will be well, John. Go in now, and have your dinner.

(KEATS grasps her hands more tightly, then releases them. They turn away from each other and she exits STAGE LEFT, KEATS turning back to watch her go before

he exits STAGE RIGHT.)

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 5

SETTING: The same.

AT RISE: Six months later. It is mid-afternoon in late autumn, 1819. KEATS is sitting at the table, writing. FANNY enters STAGE LEFT along the path and through the garden and knocks on the door of the house CENTRE STAGE. KEATS goes eagerly to let her in.

KEATS

I've been back for many weeks, yet each time I see your face I feel the same delight as on that day of my return.

FANNY

(removing her coat)

Let's not think of the summer. You were away too long.

KEATS

(very seriously)

I can't leave you again. You realize that.

FANNY (playfully)

You learned to live without me on the Isle of Wight.

KEATS

I learned to die without you on the Isle of Wight.

FANNY

When you wrote to me from Winchester, you said you were endeavouring to wean yourself from me. You were in a train of writing and feared to disturb it. You admitted to a heart of iron, and to a mind so hard that the generality of women would hate you for it because it would allow you to forget them.

KEATS

Yet within a few weeks I had ventured into the fire and come to you, had I not? So much for an iron heart.

(He begins to cough.)

FANNY

Your cough persists.

KEATS

No, it is better. Dr. Sawrey says there is nothing the matter with me but that I must not get any of my sore throat through the winter. I am to wear my heavy greatcoat and thick-soled shoes every day. And I shall do so.

FANNY

(sitting down)

And we will walk on the Heath only on days that are fine.

KEATS

And on foul afternoons I will write. I must earn my living. I have been wretched and indolent for too long.

FANNY

But you will have a new book in the spring! All of your wonderful poems from this year!

KEATS

Perhaps by spring. Still, it is a long time to wait, and who can tell what the financial success will be? I want us to marry soon, Fanny, for I have never known unalloyed happiness for many days together and I despair of those days if you are not my wife.

FANNY

We have time.

KEATS

(pause, then sombrely)

I have fears.

FANNY

(accusing him)

You think of death! You think of Tom!

KEATS

Yes, I think of death and I think of Tom. I believe that death is part of life, and that is why I think and write about it. In the summer, away from you, I had two luxuries to brood over in my walks—your loveliness and the hour of

my death. Oh, that I could have possession of them both in the same minute!

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43

FANNY (alarmed)

Don't join me to your death in that way! Why must you be morbid? Are we not together? Are we not happy?

KEATS

I am a coward. I cannot bear the pain of being happy.

FANNY (frustrated)

Where is the pain in being happy?

KEATS (slowly)

In its inevitable lockstep with sorrow.

FANNY

(pause, then standing
quickly)

You are far too dreary, my Keats. Let us have a new subject!

KEATS

(rallying to match her)

You are right, my sweet Fanny, I am far too dreary.

(pause)

I choose beauty for our subject.

(He coughs a little.)

FANNY

Beauty in the abstract, yes. But don't speak about my beauty. Mr. Brown said you once told him you never intended to spend any time with ladies unless they were handsome. That is not right, John. Beauty is a very little thing to value in a person.

KEATS

But without your beauty I never could have loved you. I cannot conceive any beginning of such love as I have for you but beauty. There may be a sort of love for which, without the least sneer at it, I have the highest respect, and can admire it in others. But it has not the richness,

the bloom, the full form, the enchantment of love after my own heart.

FANNY

But you must value me for myself.

I-5-

44

KEATS

And so I do. Forget what Brown said. Don't listen to him. That was another time when even a bit of riband was a matter of interest with me. You alone absorb me. You alone have a fire in your heart like the one that burns in mine.

FANNY

(She sits down again.)

I have a heart that admires and values you.

KEATS

But not as far as sight goes. I cannot be admired. I am not a thing to be admired.

FANNY

I will not hear you demean yourself or my admiration. Beauty in the abstract. That is our subject.

KEATS

I translated a sonnet of Ronsard the other day:

"Love poured her beauty into my warm veins."

What do you think of that for a line?

FANNY

"Love poured her beauty into my warm veins."

It is very rich. It makes the abstract real.

KEATS

Beauty is real. With a great poet, I think that beauty overcomes every other consideration. Not merely sensuous beauty, but the beauty that comprehends passion and sorrow.

FANNY

I don't understand how beauty comprehends sorrow. Sorrow is a disagreeable thing in life.

KEATS

(explaining carefully)

If beauty is partnered with truth—and I believe the imagination must be free to seize beauty as truth, because our senses are the avenue to truth—then together beauty and truth make it possible to live with the disagreeables of human existence, to see them as part of an eternal process.

I-5-

45

FANNY

I don't think I can see it all as clearly as you do, John. You have a rare gift, a rare vision of the world.

KEATS

It seems so long ago when I wrote that a thing of beauty is a joy for ever. The idea of beauty being inseparable from truth has been deepening within me ever since, and I have loved the principle of beauty in all things.

FANNY (standing)

I remember something now. When we first met, you told me that your idea of beauty in all things had stifled your desire to marry. You said that an amiable wife and sweet children would be part of that beauty, but that you must have a thousand of those beautiful particles to fill up your heart, and that married happiness would not be so fine as your solitude was sublime. What do you say to that?

KEATS

I was trying to impress you. I expect I sounded like a ranting actor.

(He coughs hard for a longer time. He sits down. FANNY hovers in concern. BROWN enters UPSTAGE LEFT.)

BROWN
(alarmed, going to KEATS)
What's this? Is your cough worse?

KEATS
(waving him off)
It's nothing. My cough is better.

BROWN (accusingly)
You went to town yesterday without your greatcoat. I saw it
in the hallway.

KEATS
The day was mild. The sun had melted all the snow.

BROWN
But you came home on the late coach and the night turned
cold. I suppose you rode outside, on the top, as your
custom is.

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46

KEATS
I'm afraid I did.

BROWN
Why did you not climb down and go inside?

KEATS (cheerfully)
I had half a mind to do that.

BROWN
Miss Brawne, you must convince him to change the habits
that endanger his health.

FANNY (insistently)
John, you must promise always to ride inside the coach.

KEATS
I will try. But sometimes the coach is full.

FANNY
Then get to the coach early and secure a place. And you're
to wear your greatcoat and boots, no matter how mild the
day.

KEATS

(shaking his head and
smiling)

This young lady is full of good advice, is she not, Brown?

BROWN

You see how futile it is, Miss Brawne? He is all smiles and deception. He will do as he pleases.

FANNY (lightheartedly)

Then we should treat him badly until he reforms.

BROWN

What do you propose?

FANNY

Oh, you must think of your own punishment for him, Mr. Brown.

(pause)

Although—you might consider hiding your brandy—and the claret. John is very fond of your brandy but would not hesitate to substitute the claret, should you conceal only the brandy.

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47

BROWN

She is a clever young woman indeed, Keats. You will not easily find the brandy or the claret while you still behave so recklessly.

FANNY

And he will not have tea, or walks on the Heath, while he remains careless of his health. At least not in my company.

KEATS

(laughingly, to both
of them)

Would you take all my pleasures from me?

FANNY

Only the ones you love best. And do not smile. We are quite serious, are we not, Mr. Brown.

BROWN (solemnly)

Serious, indeed. There is nothing funny in this.

KEATS (standing)

All right! I will mend my ways.

FANNY

Then I will leave you to do so in the close company of your friend, who I know will be watchful over you.

KEATS

To be sure, Brown may be trusted in this endeavour—if in no other.

BROWN

(arguing good-naturedly)

I may be trusted in many endeavours, despite what you say.

FANNY

(moving to the door at
CENTRE STAGE)

You may both come to tea with mother and me, if you can behave. About half an hour.

(She exits.)

KEATS

(calling after her)

Thank you, Fanny!

I-5-

48

BROWN

(sitting down)

I have been at Drury Lane and I gave Elliston an ultimatum about our play. He would not budge in his refusal to produce it this year rather than next, so I brought the script home with me.

KEATS

Well, as he has not rejected it, I shall not venture to call him a fool, but as he wishes to put it off till next season, I cannot help thinking him little better than a knave.

(pause)

I must get some money, Brown.

BROWN

You know Bob Harris at Covent Garden, don't you? I will let him see the play.

KEATS

We may have a chance there. But I will get to work revising my poems for the spring volume. I can't delay any longer.

BROWN (deliberately)

I can tell you one reason why you have not been able to sustain your work in the past weeks.

KEATS

(turning away and pointedly
changing the subject)

I have been thinking of another subject for a play. The Earl of Leicester's history.

BROWN

(not to be deterred)

Keats, my maid has discovered something which I cannot ignore. I should think that one of your medical training would not need to be warned against such a habit.

(BROWN draws a small
vial from his pocket.)

Laudanum! Taking it secretly!

KEATS

(turning back toward BROWN)

I had to keep my spirits up some way. You know my disposition to melancholy. The laudanum is a friend who cheers me from my darkness.

I-5-

49

BROWN

But that you should be so reckless of your health, your very existence—I want you to promise me never to take another drop!

KEATS

(turning away again as
he begins to speak, not
quite convinced of his
own words)

Of course you are right. And now is the time for me to reclaim myself from my lethargy and begin to work in earnest. Dispose of that vial, Brown, and quickly, too.

(He sits down, away from
BROWN, and puts his head
in his hands.)

BROWN

What is wrong, my friend?

KEATS

(pause, finally lifting
his head)

You see, it has all led up to this. My father dying, my mother, my grandmother, leaving me the oldest of four orphans—a young boy. Then my dreary apprenticeship as apothecary and the fight to leave it. My first book followed by slander and attacks through unlucky friendships, and Tom dying and George leaving me. And all the time I was toiling, doing my best for everyone who came near me. My own means and comfort were the last things always, and always expended in vain. Any hope I ever had had been blighted.

(pause)

I must stoop my head and kiss Death's foot.

BROWN

But you have my friendship now—not an unlucky one. You will have a new book in the spring, with poems that will make your reputation, I have no doubt. And you have Fanny Brawne.

KEATS

Love is the greatest torturer of all.

BROWN

But you and Fanny are here together every day.

I-5-

50

KEATS

It is not enough. Surely you understand that. I need to have Fanny like you have. . .

(pause)

Well, I hear you at night, and I am impatient for my own love's consummation.

BROWN

Then you must marry!

KEATS (accusingly)

I have not enough money, as you well know!

BROWN (calmly)

There must be a solution.

KEATS

(now in a bit of a rant)

Do you think I haven't tried to find a solution, and tried desperately, too? And there you are, as happy as the day is long, full of one impractical scheme after another, encouraging me to write this and to write that, blind to my frustration, lighthearted, and friendly with Fanny Brawne to the point of flirtation!

BROWN (standing)

That's not true, Keats! And it's unfair!

(KEATS begins to cough very hard. When he doesn't stop, BROWN goes to him, taking out a white handkerchief which KEATS accepts, holding it to his face. Finally, the cough subsides.)

KEATS

(looking at the handkerchief)

That is blood from my mouth.

(He stands, a little unsteadily.)

I know the colour of that blood—it is arterial blood, like Tom's. I cannot be deceived in that colour—that drop of blood is my death warrant.

(pause)

I must die.

(KEATS and BROWN stare
silently at each other.)

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

ACT IScene 6

SETTING: The same.

AT RISE: The following spring. Late afternoon in April, 1820. KEATS, in dressing gown, is writing at the table. The sofa has been made up for his bed. BROWN enters UPSTAGE LEFT.

KEATS
Brown! What luck with Abbey?

BROWN
Your trustee says his hands are tied in the matter. He cannot promise any money.

KEATS
I suppose he means he will give me nothing until he is forced by danger of prosecution when I become a public charge.

BROWN
Oh, it's not so bad as that. Pluck up a spirit! I have been thinking of plans for this summer. What do you say to coming with me to Scotland again? We should be very careful this time.

KEATS
(with bitter calm)
When do you expect to let the house?

BROWN
The sooner the better, I think. We need a change, to kick up our heels away from doctors and women and all blights on freedom. I think it may be well to go a month earlier this year, early in May, I expect. Perhaps in three or four weeks' time.

KEATS

(alarmed, tight-lipped, tense)

I dare say you have been at a good deal of extra expense this winter, looking after me. You can make use of the rent of this house. I had hoped for money from Abbey to pay you what I owe.

I-6-

53

BROWN

This year is more difficult than I foresaw. . .with no returns from our play.

KEATS (standing)

I shall find another lodging as soon as possible.

BROWN

You'll not come to Scotland?

KEATS (incredulously)

Brown, you have been my nurse these past months. You know I cannot. I have only just begun to walk outside. Would you march me up Ben Nevis again?

BROWN (apologetically)

But I must let the house.

KEATS

I know.

(pause, then a little
selfishly)

And you must have your freedom from doctors and women. And your summer to trudge through Scotland.

BROWN (astonished)

Do you begrudge me my summer holiday?

KEATS (softening)

No, of course not. How could I? I would have died, had it not been for you.

BROWN

(sitting down)

We must thank the doctor and your courage for the continuing improvement in your health.

KEATS

I find it difficult to thank him for bleeding and starving me. And for prohibiting me from even reading poetry, let alone writing it. I'll have none of that in my new lodgings.

(He turns away from BROWN.
Pause.)

It will hurt my heart to leave this house.

I-6-

54

BROWN

Oh, surely not, Keats. Perhaps you can find a place nearby. And I will be back in September, without fail.

KEATS

I am thinking of a journey to Italy in the fall, to spend the winter in a warmer climate. In truth, the doctor considers it essential that I not remain in England next winter. I am not surprised, Brown. There lingers a weightiness on my chest that I can't seem to evict.

(trying to joke)

It appears to have signed a long lease.

BROWN

Italy! You would be a great distance from this house in Italy.

KEATS

I cannot stay here in England for the winter without destroying my health—and I cannot leave without destroying my heart.

BROWN

You must not look to next winter. It is spring now, and you have your returning health, your new book, and your friendship with Fanny and her family, all these to comfort and gladden you.

KEATS

And I am grateful. But I can't ignore the difficulties that unfailingly attach themselves to everything in my life, even to the blessings you have just named.

BROWN (standing)

Keats, I despair of you! You must not be so despondent!

KEATS

I believe your life has been somewhat easier than mine.

BROWN

Perhaps it has.

(pause, then forthrightly)

Nevertheless, I believe your dejection arises out of your great passion for life, and out of the remarkable intellect that allows you to approach, too closely for your own welfare, the multitudes of good and evil that encompass all of humanity.

I-6-

55

KEATS

Yet, I have striven to accept those multitudes and not to draw conclusions about the world, not to judge it. The only means of strengthening one's intellect is to make up one's mind about nothing—to let the mind be a thoroughfare for all thoughts.

BROWN

With a mind like yours, that thoroughfare will always be thronging with thoughts. It may strengthen your intellect to examine their meaning, but the strain involved in such a constant struggle must take its toll on your profound sensitivity.

KEATS

I cannot deny my sensitivity.

(He sits down.)

It makes me vulnerable. I know that.

BROWN

(on an upbeat)

Then you must shore up your defences! Protect yourself! The trick is not to dwell on your sorrow. Instruct your brain to take you to a happier place.

KEATS

(with a sigh)

I will try, since you say I must. But I think your advice is too easily given.

(FANNY knocks on the door
CENTRE STAGE)

BROWN
(letting her in)
Not so! Here is Miss Brawne! Your brain will need very
little help to make the transit this time.

FANNY
Are you going somewhere, John?

KEATS
Brown insists that I be happier. I am to travel in my brain
to a happier place.

I-6-

56

BROWN
(very upbeat)
But now that you have arrived, he has already attained that
destination.

FANNY
Are you so sure of that?

BROWN (proclaiming)
A room is always brighter when you enter it, Miss Brawne.

FANNY (demurely)
Surely not, Mr. Brown.

BROWN
We will ask the expert. What say you, Keats?

KEATS
(a little sullen)
Fanny knows what I think.

BROWN
(still very cheerful)
Miss Brawne knows many things, I am sure, not the least of
which is what our poet thinks.

FANNY

Is he our poet?

BROWN

Yours first. That is the prerogative of women.

FANNY

It is a good thing that women are allowed some prerogatives in this age!

BROWN

(proclaiming again)

Miss Brawne will be the new Mary Wollstonecraft and stump across England for women's rights.

(pause, awkward silence)

Will she not, Keats?

KEATS

(disheartened but edgy)

Who knows what Miss Brawne may do?

I-6-

57

FANNY

(sitting beside KEATS)

Right now she intends to have a lovely long visit with her friend, John.

BROWN

(still upbeat)

I must make some arrangements with my maid, so I will take my cue and exit. I will bow myself out, like a good lackey.

(He backs out STAGE LEFT with much bowing.)

FANNY

Your friend is so amusing. I don't mind him. Quite the man of the world.

KEATS

(still brooding)

You might think so.

FANNY

Come, you mustn't mind his speaking to me. Hasn't he left us alone?

(taking a note out of
her pocket)

Here. Here is your note from me to read when I am gone.

KEATS

(putting the note aside,
then grasping her hands)

Now I have you! You're mine!

FANNY

Of course I am.

KEATS

(looking at her for a moment,
then releasing her hands)

I can see my weakness in your eyes.

FANNY

You are not to talk of weakness.

KEATS

At least you do not deny it. Brown denies it—but then he is obliged to think that I am well.

I-6-

58

FANNY

Why do you say so?

KEATS (standing)

Because he must let his house early this year. His financial state requires it. So I am to leave you, in just a few weeks.

FANNY

(with slight alarm)

You must find rooms nearby! Oh, I wish you could live with us! If only Mother would consent.

KEATS

(his agitation growing)

Any other place than this will be too distant from you. Even now I can scarcely bear the parting before us. How

will it be then? When shall I see you? What hunger I have when I am away from you, just to see your face and form. I am greedy of you.

FANNY

(assuring him)

But you will find lodgings close by. I will see you very often. You must not be so distressed.

KEATS

Perhaps on your account I have imagined my illness more serious than it is. How horrid was the chance of slipping into the ground instead of into your arms. Oh, Fanny! Before death comes I fain would try what more pleasures than you have already given, so sweet a creature as you can give.

FANNY

(standing, taking his hands)

My love, we are already betrothed. The time will pass quickly, and we will be married.

KEATS

(becoming a little ill-tempered)

Time passes slowly in a sickbed. But it does not pass slowly for you. You make your visits, you attend to society, you take the coach to town—all the things you delight in. Sometimes you have the great good fortune of returning home with Brown in the same coach from London. Oh, time passes very well for you.

I-6-

59

FANNY

John! You are too unkind!

KEATS (impassioned)

I appeal to you by the blood of that Christ you believe in, tell me if you have done anything while I have been sick which it would have pained me to have seen. I cannot live without you, and not only you, but chaste you, virtuous you.

FANNY

You know I am virtuous! Don't you realize you give me pain when you talk so?

KEATS

(with extreme intensity)

But you should feel pain! It is not right that you should escape it. You must be mine to die upon the rack if I ask it!

FANNY

(at the height of
her distress)

You burn too hot! You are horribly cruel!

KEATS

(sitting, down, head in
hands; then after a moment,
slowly looking up)

Consider, Fanny, whether the person who just uttered those dreadful words to you can be able to endure much longer the agonies and uncertainties which you are so peculiarly made to create. My recovery of bodily health will be of no benefit to me if you are not mine when I am well. For God's sake save me—or tell me my passion is of too awful a nature for you.

(FANNY sits down, apart
from KEATS. She is unable
to speak. After a protracted
silence, he continues.)

Perhaps it would be better for you to break our engagement. What happiness can I bring you? You see how I am.

FANNY

(after some time)

I have no wish to break our engagement. . .I don't believe you want me to.

I-6-

60

KEATS

I think the world wants you to. It is determined to separate us.

FANNY

That is your illness speaking.

KEATS

It has a fearful voice, Fanny. It makes me say and write unspeakable things to you.

FANNY

You must not let the threat of your illness control you, John. It will taint all your happiness if you let it.

KEATS

I have not told you everything.

(pause)

Perhaps I could be happy this summer, even away from this house, as long as I am dwelling near to you. But the doctor has said that I must leave England—in September. He suggests Italy. He says I will find improvement in Italy, and probably return as well as ever. He will listen to no argument against the voyage, no demands of work or friends to delay my departure, no place in England as an acceptable alternative.

(pause)

It is a death sentence, Fanny, for all my hopes of our love. It will be a separation I cannot withstand.

(They stare at each other
as the scene ends.)

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 7

SETTING: The same.

AT RISE: Several months later, September
13,
1820. KEATS is sitting on the
bench
in the garden, reading a letter.
After a moment, FANNY, holding a
paper, enters on the path from
STAGE LEFT.

FANNY

(solemnly)

Mother says the cab will soon arrive. What are you reading,
dear?

KEATS

The letter that came from Mr. Shelley in Italy.

FANNY

It was kind of him to send you an invitation to visit them
at Pisa. Will you accept it?

KEATS

If I muster up enough courage. It would be like marching up
to a battery. He talks of my poetry, and gives me
directions how to proceed in that path.

FANNY

You need no direction for your writing. Mr. Hunt has just
come and left you this, the New Times review of your book.

(giving him the paper
which he reads immediately)

Mr. Hunt says that Mr. Charles Lamb wrote it and that it is
a gem. He says that it will be nettles and wormwood to your
former critics, who will now be completely disarmed. Oh,
John, I am sure your book will have a good reception. The
review is splendid!

KEATS

(with a broad smile)

I am gratified indeed. Good old Lamb. Let us hope the
public agrees with him and makes me a rich man!

(He puts the paper aside.)

Come and sit by me. I have something to give you.

KEATS (Cont.)

(FANNY sits close beside him.
He takes a book from the bench
and presents it to her.)

This is a specially bound copy of my new book, inscribed
for you and for no prying eyes.

FANNY

(opening the cover)

From J.K. to F.B. I will treasure this always, John.
Always. I have something for you, too.

(She takes a large oval
piece of marble from her
pocket and gives it to him.)

It is a white cornelian. I have used it each day to cool my
hands when I do my needlework. I will think of your holding
it from time to time.

KEATS

(fondling it in his hand)

My darling girl, I will be holding it all the time, or it
will be in my pocket, next to my heart.

(FANNY begins to cry,
putting her head into her
hands. KEATS puts his arm
about her. After a moment,
she regains enough of her
composure to speak.)

FANNY

(obviously upset)

We should have married! My mother put nothing in our way. I
would be leaving with you now, not staying behind without
you.

KEATS

It is enough that she has allowed me to live here for an
entire month. It is enough that she has agreed to our
marriage when I return in the spring, that we will all live
together then, and she will be my mother too.

(long pause)

I could not ask her to let you watch me die.

FANNY

You will not die in Italy. You will live!

I-7-

63

KEATS

I could not take the chance that you, my sweet girl, might come to know death as I knew it with Tom. No matter how I burned to marry you, I could not take that risk.

FANNY

Was it not my risk to take, my decision?

KEATS

Not in this case, Fanny. I could not bear to have your memory of me become such a mangled horror as my memory of Tom.

FANNY

(standing up, moving a
little around the garden)

I wish it were Mr. Brown going with you instead of Mr. Severn. Someone I trust to care for you.

KEATS

I have written twice to Brown and he has not replied. Apparently he is still on his tour in Scotland. I am fortunate that Severn is willing to go on such short notice. And as you know, he is a cheerful sort and will doubtless prove a fine companion.

FANNY

(trying to be gay)

You must write to me often and assure me that he has done so!

KEATS

(suddenly troubled)

I hardly know if I may write to you, if my heart will let me write to you without breaking apart.

FANNY

(stops moving, faces
KEATS directly)

I shall write to you! I shall sit in my room with your books of Dante and Spenser beside me, and your picture of Shakespeare above me on the wall. I shall hold this book you have given me and remember the joy of this month we have had together. And I shall write to you.

I-7-

64

KEATS

(returning her gaze
in full)

It has been the happiest month of my life. I have known your every movement, from morning to night. If I had a dark thought, I had only to call, or to walk into another room, and you were there. It was as if some insoluble and worrying problem had been taken from me and I was free to rest, as I had not rested since Brown and I quitted the house in May.

FANNY

I hear Mother calling me. I will come right back.

(She exits on the path
STAGE LEFT. While she is gone, KEATS gets up off the bench slowly, as a man physically diminished, and moves around the garden in a careful fashion. He studies the cornelian and puts it in his breast pocket. FANNY returns very soon, comes to him, and takes his hands in hers, fixing her gaze on his.)

The cab is here. Mr. Severn is loading your things. I have said you will be there in a moment or two.

KEATS

If I should die, I have left no immortal work behind me—nothing to make my friends proud of my memory.

FANNY

Your friends are privileged to be called your friends, and your poetry would make anyone proud to know you. By the time you return next spring, your new book will have proved that.

KEATS

Still, all I truly need is you, Fanny Brawne. From the moment you disappear from my eyes, I believe I will begin a posthumous life.

FANNY

(tears in her voice)

You must not speak so.

I-7-

65

KEATS

(taking her face in
his hands)

I must speak the truth. And I will kiss you this once, even if it causes my heart to burst.

(He kisses her passionately.)

Good-bye.

(He moves to leave.)

FANNY

(standing still, tears
streaming, voice strained
and shrill)

Always remember that I am loving you, John. . .Don't go.

KEATS

(turning back only
to speak)

Good-bye, Fanny.

(KEATS and FANNY remain
motionless. A voiceover
begins.)

VOICEOVER

John Keats died in Rome, Italy, five very difficult, and often heartbreaking, months later, on February 23rd, 1821, at the age of twenty-five, and was buried in the English Cemetery in that city. Although he did write one letter to Fanny Brawne's mother early in this period, with references to Fanny in the text, he did not write to Fanny. In a letter to Brown, Keats said that he was afraid to write to her or to receive a letter from her—to see her handwriting would break his heart. But Fanny did write to him, and in his last days Keats ordered Severn to put all Fanny's letters in his coffin, "inside his winding sheet on his heart."

He also directed that his epitaph should read: "Here lies one whose name was writ in water." If one interprets these words as Keats' final appraisal of his life and work, there is anguish enough. But the fact that renowned critics have observed that no other English poet would rank as a major poet if he had been cut off at that early age, makes of the epitaph a terrible irony. John Keats is numbered "among the English poets," as he greatly desired to be. Would that he had lived to know it!

I-7-

66

Raymond Knister also suffered an early death, in an accidental drowning at Stoney Point on Lake St. Clair, Ontario, on August 29, 1932, at the age of thirty-three. His biographical novel of John Keats, entitled *MY STAR PREDOMINANT*, had, in 1931, won the \$2500 first prize in the Canadian Novel Contest sponsored by Graphic Publishers of Ottawa. The book was published by the Ryerson Press in 1934, after the author's death. His novel, *WHITE NARCISSUS*, has been part of the New Canadian Library of McClelland and Stewart since 1962. Today Knister's work continues to be published by the Black Moss Press of Windsor, Ontario.

Among Knister's creative and critical writings, one finds a truly Canadian modernist, fighting to move Canadian literature into its proper and necessary place in Canadian society.

(BLACKOUT)

THE END

