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**TEXT INTERPRETATION THROUGH SHORT  
STORIES  
BY AND ABOUT WOMEN**

МИНОБРАЗОВАНИЯ РОССИИ

ГОСУДАРСТВЕННОЕ ОБРАЗОВАТЕЛЬНОЕ УЧРЕЖДЕНИЕ  
ВЫСШЕГО ПРОФЕССИОНАЛЬНОГО ОБРАЗОВАНИЯ  
«МОРДОВСКИЙ ГОСУДАРСТВЕННЫЙ УНИВЕРСИТЕТ  
им. Н.П.ОГАРЁВА»

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УЧЕБНОЕ ПОСОБИЕ

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Учебное пособие содержит 12 коротких рассказов, написанных англоязычными авторами-женщинами о женщинах, и состоит из трех разделов, каждый из которых знакомит студентов с определенным этапом жизни женщины – детством, юностью и зрелостью. После каждого рассказа соответствующего раздела предлагается комплекс конкретных вопросов для обсуждения и интерпретации и даются задания творческого характера для более глубокой проработки изучаемой тематики. В конце каждого раздела представлен обобщающий практический материал по интерпретации текста, который поможет оценить степень усвоения прочитанного, и предложен образец креативного эссе на тему данного раздела.

Пособие предназначено для студентов старших курсов, магистрантов институтов и факультетов иностранных языков отделения «Английская филология», а также широкого круга читателей, желающих совершенствовать навыки лингвистического анализа и интерпретации художественного текста.

## Preface

“Text Interpretation Through Short Stories By and About Women” aims to involve fifth-year students directly and immediately in the process of intellectual inquiry. Active, engaged reading will develop their resources and resourcefulness, stimulate and clarify their responses to texts. Reading and interpreting are both personal and social acts – personal because we bring our individual perceptions and experiences to bear on texts when reading and interpreting; and social because the meanings we create depend on a shared understanding of language and culture that is shaped in discussion with others.

Our goal is to teach students to think and speak critically about a variety of texts. We attempt to show students how they can participate in the construction of a text’s meaning by reading it thoughtfully and speaking about it in relation to their lives and thoughts. So the present manual provides an approach to the interpretation and evaluation of texts.

The manual contains 12 short stories. They are works from many time periods and cultures, with representative literature from women writing about alternative life styles. Included are stories about subjects of universal importance that span a wide range of disciplines, different viewpoints and values on topics that include relationships, education, work, power, nature, religion and science. Reading about this broad range of topics offers students ample opportunity to develop their powers of text analysis, evaluation and interpretation, as well as to see close connections among disciplines.

The interrelationships and diversities among the stories are discussed in the *Introduction* to each section.

Additional apparatus includes text interpretation questions at the end of each story, authors’ biographies, a list of resources and an index of authors and titles at the end of the manual. Each individual story is preceded by a brief comment to stimulate students’ interest and is followed by a series of tasks “*For Further Exploration*” (referring to at least one other work on a similar theme). The questions are intended to extend reading possibilities, suggesting further connections among the stories and can be used by the instructor for discussion or by the student for essay topics.

At the end of each section we have also provided concrete models of composition and essay writing within the topics discussed in the corresponding section to encourage comparative interpretation of short stories. These added pedagogical aids, we believe, will enhance the manual’s value for teacher and student alike.

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## Section I

### Introduction

- Initiation
- Exploring the personal universe
- Developing expectations
- Relating to the family
- Establishing rituals
- Moving from fantasy to reality

Stories of girls growing up are often regarded with pleasant surprise by readers who rediscover the naturalness of childhood depicted by the authors in Section 1.

It is refreshing to see females as vigorous and forthright children devoid of pretense or at least relatively unhampered by the restrictive codes that too often become a source of conflict later in life. While it is true that society's force is already a palpable presence in the stories, social codes are not yet blatantly internalized as in many accounts of later life stages.

Indeed, children shout, quarrel and question in these stories, demonstrating that they are truly alive and engaged in each new world they encounter – nature, family, school and friends. They seek knowledge and identity for themselves, rather than for or through others as many women begin to do in adolescence and beyond: they are selfish in the best sense of the term, neither docile nor domineering.

The “lessons” these young women begin to learn vary widely in the stories from meaningful experience to didactic guidelines as to how to become socially acceptable. In some cases, parents themselves present models of behavior that suggest lifetimes of sex-stereotyped behavior, with little opportunity for the individual expression these young women obviously seek. The final question raised by many of these stories is whether the girls can remain visible and real or will become near-invisible shadows of their former selves as children.

Female children in the stories of this section are described as confronting a wide world of natural and material objects, people and ideas. Common themes one might expect to see, such as dealing with parents and siblings, learning the often restrictive mores of society and expanding communication with others do indeed appear. In addition, several motifs emerge in childhood which might at first seem surprising, such as the notions of coming to terms with death, having an adult woman friend and enjoying a private place in nature.

Typical childhood topics having to do with living in a family group include learning to give and to share, developing a feeling of security, experiencing the exchange of love and the extreme domination of parents. However, much of the unconscious concern in childhood has to do with a child learning a sex role – the process of socialization that teaches girls to be more docile, less aggressive than boys. Female children develop a desire to please that stays with them much of their lives, culminating in the modern adult phenomenon of women trying to learn to express their anger, while men are trying to repress their aggression.

Young girls do not restrain potential aggression only because “boys are bigger”, but also because they learn to seek male approval in all areas. With less emphasis on competitive games and team sports for girls, women later find themselves more likely to compete with members of the same sex (for male attention in areas, such as jobs, husbands, recognition) than to see women as members of the same team. In addition, from infancy, codes of proper behavior – such as not being unruly, boisterous – are reinforced by the wearing of restrictive clothing meant to be kept neat, clean and pretty.

This pristine image of the “ideal” girl in life is evident in most of the stories about women's childhood stage presented in this section, and is subtly satirized by several of the authors.

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# Story 1

*Jessamyn West (1907-1984)*

*Minta, the young girl in this story, portrays what is perhaps the most important vision of childhood - the belief that one is special, destined for greatness, and different from the rest of the family. Can she preserve the joy and inspiration of her "child's day"?*

## A CHILD'S DAY

"I Minta," the child said, "in the October day, in the dying October day." She walked over to the fireplace and stood so that the slanting sunlight fell onto her bare shoulder with a red wine stain. The ashes, so light and dry, smelled raw, rain-wet. Or perhaps it's the water on the chrysanthemums, she thought, or perhaps the bitter, autumn-flavored chrysanthemums themselves.

She listened for her second heartbeat, the three-day tap of the loosened shingle. But it was dead, it beat no more. For three days the Santa Ana had buffeted the house, but now at evening it had died down, had blown itself out. It was blown out, but it left its signs: the piled sand by the east door sills, the tumble weeds caught in the angle of the corral the sign board by the electric tracks, face down; the eucalyptus upright, but with tom limb dangling.

"The Sabbath evening", said the girl, "the autumn Sabbath evening." And bright and warm against the day's sober death, the year's sad end, burned her own bright living.

She walked to her own room, across her fallen nightgown, past her unmade bed, and opened the casement window and leaned out toward the west. There the sun was near to setting, red in the dust, and the lights in the distant well riggings already blazed. She watched the sun drop until the black tracery of a derrick crossed its face.

"The day dies," murmured the girl; "its burnished wrack burns in yon western sky."

Then she was quiet so that no single word should fall to ripple the clear surface of her joy. The pepper tree rustled; there was a little stir in the leaves of the bougainvillea. From the ocean, twenty miles away, the sea air was beginning to move back across the land. "It is as good against the dry face as water." She pushed her crackling hair away from her cheeks. "I won't have a wind break as thin even as one hair against my face."

She arched her bony chest under the tightly wrapped lace scarf, so that she could project as much of herself as possible into the evening's beauty. "Now the sun is down and the day's long dream ended. Now I must make the air whistle about my ears."

She came out of the long black lace scarf like an ivory crucifix – with body no wider than her arms. Bloomers, slip, green rep dress on. And there she was – thirteen again, and the supper to get, and the house to clean. She had the supper in mind: a fitting meal for Sunday evening. Oyster soup. Oysters that actresses ate, floating in a golden sea of milk, and marble cup-cakes veined like old temples.

She had supper ready when the Duro turned into the driveway bringing her family home from their drive – the cakes out of the oven, the milk just on for the soup.

"Well," said her father when he entered the room, "this is pretty nice." He walked over and held his hands to the fire. "Wood box full, too."

Her mother ran her finger over the top of the bookcase while she unwound her veil. "Minta, you'll burn us out dusting with kerosene."

Clenmie said, sniffing the air, "Did you bake me a little cake, Mintie?"

Minta watched the scarlet accordion pleating in the opening of her mother's slit skirt fan out as she held her foot toward the fire.

Father took off Clenmie's coat. "You should have gone with us, Minta. The wind's done a lot of damage over in Riverside County. Lost count of the roofs off and trees down."

"Is supper ready?" Mother asked.

"Soon as the milk heats, and I put the oysters in."

"Oyster soup" exclaimed Father. "The perfect dish for a Sunday October evening. Did you get

your studying done?" he asked curiously.

Minta nodded. Studying. Well, it was studying. There were her books and papers.

*Father had said that morning before they left, "You're a bright girl, Minta. No need your spending a whole day studying. Do you more good to go for a ride with us. "*

*"No, Father, I'm way behind." She could hardly wait until they left.*

*Finally at ten they got into the car, Mother on the front seat close to Father, Clennie behind. Father backed out of the driveway and a dusty swirl of wind caught Mother's scarlet veil. They waved her a sad good-by.*

She had watched the red Duro out of sight, then turned and claimed the empty house for herself. She was as happy as a snail that expels the last grain of sand which has separated its sensitive fluid from its shell. Now she flowed back against the walls of her house in pure contentment. She stood stock still and shut her eyes and listened to the house sounds: first the dry, gusty breathing of the wind and the shingle's tap, then the lessening hiss of the tea kettle as the breakfast fire died, and the soft, animal pad of the rug as a slackening air current let it fall.

She opened her eyes. In the dining room the curtains lifted and fell with a summer movement in the autumn wind. She felt this to be perfect happiness: to stand in one room and watch in another the rise and fall of curtains. The egg-rimmed dishes still stood on the uncleared breakfast table. She regarded the disorder happily. "Oh," she whispered, "it's like being the only survivor on an abandoned ship."

Stealthily she ran to lower all the blinds so that the room was left in yellow, dusty twilight. When she made herself a fire of the petroleum soaked refuse from the oil fields that they used for wood. When the oil began to bubble and seethe, and the flames darted up, black and red, she started her work.

She cleaned the fumed-oak library table and ranged her books and papers precisely before her. Now her day began. Now she inhabited two worlds at once, and slid amphibian-like from one to the other, and had in each the best. She moved in Shelley's world of luminous mist, and emerged to hold her hand to the fife and to listen to the bone-dry sound of the wind in the palm trees.

She laid her hand across her open book feeling that the words there were so strong and beautiful that they would enter her veins through her palms and so flow to her heart. She listened to the wind and saw all the objects that bent before it: she saw the stately movement of dark tree tops, the long ripple of bleached, hair-like grass, the sprayed sea water, the blown manes of horses in open pasture, the lonely sway of electric signs along dusty main streets. "Far across the steppes," she said, "and the prairie lands, the high mesas and the grass-covered pampas." She watched the oil bubble stickily out of the wood and wondered how it seemed to feel again after these thousands of years the touch of the wind.

But this was dreaming, not doing her work. She opened her notebook to a half-filled page headed, "Beautiful, Lilted Phrases from Shelley." The list slid across her tongue like honey: "Rainbow locks, bright shadows driven waves, spangled sky, aery rocks, sanguine sunrise, upward sky, viewless gale." She felt the texture of the words on her fingers as she copied them. The shingle tapped, the wind blew grittily across the pane, the fire seethed.

She finished Shelley and started on her own word list. She was through with the o's, ready to begin on the p's. She opened her old red dictionary. What words would she find here? Beautiful, strange ones? She looked ahead: pamerio: a cold wind that sweeps over the pampas; parsalene: a mock moon; panada: bread crumbs boiled in milk; picaroon: a rogue, pilgarlic: a baldheaded man; plangent: resounding like a wave. Her eyes narrowed and her cheek bones ached regarding this rich store.

She rolled her black, ribbed, gartered stocking back and forth across her knee and copied words and definitions. When she finished the q's she put her word notebook away and took out one called "The Poems of Aminta Eilertsen, Volume III." Each Sunday she copied one poem from her week's output into her poem book. Her poems were nothing like Shelley's. Shelley was beautiful, but he was not a modern. Minta was a modern, and when she wrote poetry she scorned the pretty and euphonious. This week's poem was called "You Do Not Have to Wipe the Noses of Your Dreams," and Minta thought it as stark and brutal as anything she had ever done. Slowly she copied it:

I was lithe and had dreams;  
Now I am fat and have children.

Dreams are efflorescent, -  
Dreams fade.  
Children do not.  
But then you do not have to  
Wipe the noses of your dreams.

*"Yes", she said to her father, having remembered the poems, hers and Shelley's, the long list of words, "I finished my studying all right." "Did anyone come while we were gone?" Mother asked. "Mrs. Beal knocked, but she left before I got to the door. "*

She had scarcely moved from her table all morning. Now her back was stiff; she was cold and hungry. She put another petroleum-soaked timber on the fire and sat on the hassock warming her knees and eating her lunch: a mixture of cocoa, sugar, and condensed milk as thick and brown as mud. She spooned it from gravy bowl to mouth and watched the murky flames and listened to the block of wood which was burning as noisily as a martyr. The oil seethed and bubbled like blood. She crouched on the hearth and heard behind the drawn curtains the hiss of sand against the windows. A current of air like a cold finger touched her cheek.

"What do I do here," she wondered, "alone, abandoned, hiding?"

She pressed herself closely against the bricks and listened intently. She took a bite and let the sweet, brown paste slide down her throat so that no sound of swallowing should mask the approaching footfall, the heavy, guarded breathing. The room was filled with a noiseless activity. Well, she had known this would be her end. Soon or late they would come, search her out. In some such sordid, dirty, ill-lit hole as this she had been destined to make her end.

"In solitude and from this broken crockery, then, this last meal," she mused, and looked scornfully at the cracked bowl. "And those for whom the deed was done eat from crystal, on linen napery, and talk with light voices."

The wind had died down. But the curtains moved stealthily and the door into the hallway trembled a little in its frame. From somewhere in the house came the light click, click of metal on metal. Light, but continuous. She had not heard it before. She shifted her weight cautiously on the hassock so that she faced the room.

The wind came up again with a long, low, sick whistle; the shingle beat feverishly. She put down her bowl and started the search she knew must be made. She stepped out of her shoes and noiselessly opened the door into the hall. Cold, dark, and windowless it stretched the length of the house. Three bedroom doors opened off it, two to the west, one to the east. She searched the bedrooms carefully, though her heartbeat jarred her cheeks. She lunged against the long, hanging garments that might have concealed a hidden figure. She threw back the covers of the unmade beds. She watched the mirrors to see if from their silver depths a burning, red-rimmed eye might look into hers.

In Clennie's room she finished her search. The loose shingle tapped like the heart of a ghost. Then she heard it: the sound she had been born to hear, the footstep her ears had been made to echo. Furtive footsteps: now fast, now slow, now pausing altogether. She leaned against the side of Clennie's crib and waited for the steps to turn toward the house.

"But how could they know this was the house. What sign did I leave? What clew not destroy?"

The footsteps came on inexorably, turned out of the road onto the graveled walk, then proceeded quickly and resolutely to the front door. First there was a light, insistent knock, then the latched screen door was heavily shaken.

"He must have a force with him," Minta thought, "he is so bold," and, waited for the crash of splintering boards, and braced her body for the thrust of cold steel that would follow. She thought fleetingly of Clennie, and of her father and mother, and wondered if any sudden coldness about their hearts warned them of her plight.

The screen door shook again, and a woman's voice, old and quiet, called out, "Is there anyone there? I say, is there anyone home?" and ceased.

Slowly, cautiously Minta crept to the living room, lifted the side of the green blind. Old Mrs. Beal, her Sunday black billowing in the wind, was homeward bound from dinner with her daughter.

"I saw it was old Mrs. Beal on her way home from her daughter's " she told her father, giving him

as much truth as she thought he could handle.

'Minta you can get to the door fast enough when some of your friends are calling.'

"I was busy," replied Minta with dignity. Her father looked at her doubtfully, but said no more.

Her mother combed out Clennie's soft, white hair with her rhine-stone back comb. "Did you forget to feed Brownie?" she asked.

"Of course I fed Brownie. I'll never forget her. She's my dearest friend".

Against the warm reality of Mrs. Beal's broad, homeward-bound back, the world that had been cold and full of danger dissolved. The dear room; her books, her papers; Clennie's toys; Mother's tissue cream on top of the piano; the fire sending its lazy red tongue up the chimney's black throat.

She stood warming herself, happy and bemused, like a prisoner unexpectedly pardoned. Then she heard again the click, click she had not recognized. Brownie at the back door!

"O poor Brownie, I forgot you. Poor kitty, are you hungry?" Where was Brownie sitting on the back step, with fur blown and dusty, patiently waiting to be let in and fed. She was a young cat, who had never had a kit of her own, but she looked like a grandmother. She looked as if she should have a gingham apron tied around her waist, arid spectacles on her nose, and now out of her grandmother's eyes she gave Minta a look of tolerance. Minta snatched the cat up and held her close to her face, and rubbed her nose in the soft, cool fur. When she got out the can of condensed milk she put Brownie by the fire and poured the milk into the bowl from which she had eaten her own lunch. Brownie lapped the yellow arc as it fell from can to bowl.

Minta crouched on the hearth with her eyes almost on a level with Brownie's. It was blissful, almost mesmeric to watch the quick, deft dart of the red tongue into the yellow milk. Her own body seemed to participate in that darting rhythmic movement and was lulled and happy. "It is almost as if she rocked me, back and forth, back and forth, with her tongue." mused Minta.

When Brownie finished eating, Minta took her in her arms, felt the soft little body beneath the shaggy envelope of cinnamon fur. She lay on the floor close to the fire and cradled Brownie drowsily. Suddenly she kissed her. "My darling, my darling," she said, and caressed the cat the length of its long, soft body. Her hand tingled a little as it passed over the little pin-point nipples.

Some day her mother would tell her the secret phrase, the magic sentence – something the other girls already knew. Then the boys would notice her. Then he would come. Ellen and Margaret and Phyllis already had notes from boys, and candy hearts on Valentine's day, and a piece of mistletoe at Christmas time. The boys rode them on their handle bars and showed them wrestling holds, and treated them to sodas. "But *no* one," she mourned, "ever looks at me." She pressed her apricot-colored hair close to the caff cinnamon fur. "It's because mother hasn't told me yet. Something the other girls know. Sometime she'll tell me – some beautiful word I've been waiting a long time to hear. Then I'll be like a lamp lighted, a flower bloomed. Maybe she'll tell me tomorrow – and when I walk into school everyone will see the change, know I know. How will they know? My lips, my eyes, a walk, a gesture, the movement of my arms. But there's not a boy here I'd have, but someone far away, no boy. He will come and we will walk out along the streets hand in hand and everyone will see us and say, 'They were made for each other. His hair will be like fur, soft and sooty black, and on his thin brown cheek will be a long, cruel scar. He will say, 'Kiss it, Minta, and I will bless the man who did it.' Ah, we shall walk together like sword and flower. All eyes will follow us and the people will say, This is Minta. Why did we never see her before?' "

Fire and wind were dying. Brownie slept on her arm. "He will come, he will come." Minta lifted Brownie high overhead, then brought her down sharply and closely to her breast.

"He will come, he will come." She kissed Brownie fiercely and put her on the floor, and ran to her mother's room, undressing as she went. She stepped out of her serge skirt and threw her Norfolk jacket across the room and sent her bloomers in a flying arc. She knew what she wanted. She had used it before – mother's long, black lace fascinator. She wound it tightly about herself from armpits to thighs. She unbraided her hair and let it hang across her shoulders. Then she turned to the mirror. "I have a beautiful body," she breathed, "a beautiful, beautiful body."

And because she regarded herself, thinking of him, him who was yet to come, it was as if he too saw her. She loaned him her eyes so that he might see her, and to her flesh she gave this gift of his seeing. She raised her arms and slowly turned and her flesh was warm with his seeing. Somberly and

quietly she turned and swayed and gravely touched now thigh, now breast, now cheek, and looked and looked with the eyes she had given him.

She moved through the gray dust-filled room weaving an ivory pattern. Not any of the dust or disorder of her mother's room fazed her. Not its ugliness or funny smell. Hair bubbled out of the hair receiver, the stopper was out of the Hoyt's cologne bottle, the mirror was spattered with liquid powder. She made, in her mind, a heap of all that was ugly and disordered. She made a dunghill of them and from its top she crowed.

"The curtains, green as vomit, and hanging crooked, the gray neckband on the white flannel nightgown, the dust on the patent leather shoes, I hate them and dance them down. Nothing can touch me. I am Minta. Or I can dance with them," and she clasped the sour-smelling nightgown to her and leaped and bent. "This is evil, to be naked, to like the feel of gritty dust under my feet, the bad smell, the dim light."

She regarded her face more closely in the spattered mirror. "There is something wanton and evil there," she thought, "something not good. Perhaps I shall be faithless," and she trembled with pity for that dark one who loved her so dearly. She shook back her hair and pressed her cool hands to her burning cheeks and danced so that the dust motes in the slanting shaft of light shot meteor-like, up and down.

"I can dance the word," she whispered, "but I cannot say it." So she danced it, wrapped in the black fascinator, with the dust motes dancing about her. She danced it until she trembled and leaning on bent elbows looked deep into the mirror and said, "Where is nothing I will not touch. I am Minta. I will know everything."

All at once she was tired. She turned and walked slowly to the living room. Brownie lay by the dead fire. "I, Minta," she had said, "in the October day, in the dying October day," and turned to do the evening work.

"If the milk boils your soup will be spoiled" Mother said "We've been here long enough for it to heat."

"Yes. Sister, let's eat," said Father, "it's been a long day. "

"Yes. Let's eat," cried Minta. It's been a long, beautiful day, "and she ran to the kitchen to put the oyster in the milk.

[1940]

## 1.1 Questions for Text Interpretation

1. In what ways is Minta different from her family? Do they see her as different?
2. What are Minta's dreams for her future? What suggestions can you find: a) to support the idea that she will be special and perhaps famous?; b) to support the idea that she will repeat her mother's lifestyle?
3. Who does Minta think is at the door, and why is she afraid? Why is she later disappointed that it is just a neighbor?
4. List the range of emotions Minta expresses. Describe how and where each state of mind in the story shifts into the next.
5. Why is it so important for her to be alone? What role does privacy play in the story?
6. What symbols and images suggest Minta's emerging sexuality? What does she expect in a mate?
7. Does the scene with the cat have overtones of sexuality, maternalism or camaraderie?
8. What does Minta's poem "You Do Not Have to Wipe the Noses of Your Dreams" have to do with the story?
9. What is the tone of the end of the story? Is there the final expectation that Minta's dreams will come true, or that she will be disillusioned in later life?

## 1.2. Tasks for Further Exploration

1. Two Australian women have written semi-autobiographical novels about the lives of young girls growing up in the country and yearning to be educated for careers as writers. Read Miles Franklin's "My Brilliant Career" or Henry H. Richardson's "The Getting of Wisdom" (both filmed) and relate the account to Minta's dream and struggles in "A Child's Day".
2. Compare "A Child's Day" with Alice Munro's story "Boys and Girls", about sex stereotyping of children growing up in a rural community. What does the young woman in Munro's story have in common with Minta?

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### Story 2

*Colette (1873-1954)*

*In this variation on the dramatic monologue form, French author Colette conveys the joys and sorrows of childhood through a child's comments of her godmother. As in many stories of childhood, the presence of an adult who listens provides an outlet for expressing the mixed feelings of a young girl growing up.*

#### MY GODDAUGHTER

"Is it you who's calling *me*, Godmother? I'm here, under the stairs."

"...?"

"No, Godmother, I'm *not* sulking."

"...?"

"No, Godmother, I'm not crying anymore. I'm done *now*. But I'm very discouraged."

". . .?"

"Oh, it's always the same thing, for a change. I'm mad at Mama. And she's mad at *me*, too."

"...!"

Why 'naturally'? No, not 'naturally' at all! There are times when she's mad without *me* being mad back – it depends on if she's right."

"...!"

"Oh, please. Godmother, not today! You can tell this to me another day. There are plenty of days when I'm in a good mood and when you can make me lay back my ears. . .".

"..."

"No, not lay *down*, lay *back*! When you scold the dog, what does he do? He lays back his ears. Me too, I've laid my ears back since lunch. So, I'll start over; you can lay back my ears about my parents, and the fairness of parents, and how a child shouldn't judge his parents, and this and that... But it's no use today."

". . .?"

"What's the matter? The matter is that Mama discourages me. Come here, so I can tell you about it. You're still the one I tell the most, because you don't have any children. You understand better."

"...!"

Yes, it does make sense! You don't have any children, you still have a mama, you get scolded, you storm, you rage, and you have the reputation of being unreasonable: Mama shrugs her shoulders when she talks about you, like with me. . . That pleases me. That gives me confidence."

"..."

"There's no need to apologize, I don't do it on purpose... Come on, we'll go sit by the fire: I've had enough of sitting under these stairs, too! There, now. Mama discourages me. I can't seem to make her understand certain things."

"...?"

"Serious things, things about life. Can you believe she just bought me a hat to go to school in? . . . Oh, yes, it's true, you don't know, you're not from the country. . . In Montigny, the girls in the public school *never* wear hats, except in the summer for the sun, and I'm only telling you this under the ceiling of secrecy. . ."

"...!"

"The *ceiling*, I'm telling you! The proof is that you don't say it in another room. . . So, I'm telling you under the ceiling of secrecy that we go 'Bool' in the street at the students of the nuns, because they wear hats to school. No repeating?"

"...!"

"Good. So then Mama buys me a hat. And so I make a face at the hat! Naturally, Mama starts a two-hour lecture, which has nothing to do with the point: that I'm more than ten years old, and that I'm almost a young lady, and that I should set the example of an irreproachable appearance... She finally ended up upsetting me. I lost my patience, I told her that it didn't concern her, that my life at school was a special life which parents don't understand anything about, et cetera... 'Tell me, Mama,' I said to her, 'do you tell Papa what he should do at his office? It's the same thing with me at school. I have a very noticeable position at school, a very delicate position, because I have personality, as Mademoiselle says. To hear you, Mama, I should only concern myself with my family! You send me to school, I spend half my life there. Well, that counts, half of my life... School's like another world, you don't talk about it the same: what's appropriate here isn't at school, and if I tell you I shouldn't go to class in the winter with a hat, it's because I shouldn't wear a hat! You see, Mama, there are things you sense, there are nuances!' I spelled this all out to her very calmly, all at once, so that she didn't have the time to get a word in edgewise, because you know how mamas are, don't you? They fly off the handle, and besides, they don't have a sense of proportion."

"...?"

"I mean, they rant and rave over everything, as much for a broken glass as for something very, very bad. Mine especially. She's easily affected. Afterward, she was looking at me as if I fell from the moon, and she said in a soft voice, 'My God, this child ... this child ...' She looked so unhappy and so astonished, you would have thought I was the one who had scolded her. So much so that I put my arm around her like this and I rocked her up against me, saying, There ... there ... my little darling, there! ... 'It ended very happy."

"...?"

"Yes, we are! We *are* angry, but for a different reason. The story of the hat is from yesterday. Today ... here, look at my finger."

"...!"

"Yes, a cut, a big one, and the nail is split. It has hydrogen peroxide and I don't know what else on it. And here, on my cheek, you can see a red burn; it stings. And my hair, can't you see, on my forehead? Smell it: It must still smell a little like when they sing the pig in the square. These are all today's ordeals, which got Mama and me angry with each other.... I wanted curly bangs on my forehead; so, so I cut a few hairs – big deal I know you always go further than you want with scissors.. . And I burned my cheek trying to turn the curling iron, to cool it down, like the hairdresser, you know: it makes it so pretty ... "

"...?"

"The cut, that was the scissors. A little farther and I would have poked out my eye. ... So, here I am, right, with my hand covered with blood, my hair singed and cut like a staircase, my cheek burned.. . And naturally, right when Mama comes back! Boy, did I ever catch it!"

"...!"

"Yes, I was in the wrong, but she scolded me in a way that wasn't the way she usually does. I'm sure it wasn't a question of what's appropriate, or of dress, or of children who get into everything and are punished for it! It wasn't even a question of me – or barely!"

"...?"

"Wait, I'm about to remember... She was like a fury. She said that I had ruined *her* daughter for her! She said, 'What have you done with *my* beautiful hair which I tended so patiently? You had no right to touch it! And that cheek, who gave you permission to spoil it! And this little hand?. How? ... I've taken years, I've spent my days and my nights trembling over this masterpiece and all it takes is one of your exploits, you destructive little demon, to ruin the adorable result of so many pains! What you've done to it is cowardly, it's shameful! Your beauty is mine, you don't have the right to take away what I entrust to you!' What do you think of that, Godmother?"

"..."

"Me either, I couldn't think of anything to say. But it shook me up. I went under the stairs without saying a word. And I felt as sorry for myself as I could. I felt my hands, my legs, my head. 'Poor little things,' I said to myself, 'your hands, your legs, your head aren't even yours! You're like a slave, then! A lot of good it did for your mother to give you birth, since she's taken back all the rest! You wouldn't dare even lose a single baby tooth or break a nail, for fear that your mother will claim it back from you ...' Well, you know how you talk to yourself when you want to make yourself cry. . . Oh, I have a mother who torments me so much, Godmother!"

"..."

"You think I do the same to her! It's possible. So, if she's nice to me at dinner, I can forgive her, too?"

"..."

"I really want to. It's true, she did call me a destructive demon, but..."

"...?"

"But she also called me an 'adorable result,' and I like that."

[about 1922]

## 2.1 Questions for Text Interpretation

1. What is the godmother saying in the ellipses ("...?" etc)? What is the godmother's role in the interchange and why does Colette leave out her responses?
2. Describe the event which precipitated the goddaughter's tears – why is she "mad at Mama"?
3. The young girl creates her own lively language to describe feelings and situations. Find highly figurative phrases (such as "lay back my ears") and identify the significance of each phrase for the goddaughter and for youth in general.
4. What similarity does the goddaughter see between herself and her godmother? How do they differ from "Mama"?
5. How are the roles temporarily reversed between the daughter and the mother?
6. What does "Mama's" reaction to her child's "destructiveness" show about the type of mother she represents?
7. What is the daughter's argument about informal school codes? How many different worlds are described in the story and which are in conflict?
8. How strong is the concern with a young girl's appearance in this story? Who is concerned and why?
9. Why is the daughter so offended by her mother's comments and why is she also pleased? What paradoxes of the mother-daughter relationship are presented?

## 2.2 Tasks for Further Exploration

1. Read the Tillie Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing", a dramatic monologue from a mother's point of view. What feelings are expressed by the mother that we don't get a chance to hear in the child's monologue in "My Goddaughter"? Are any of the same concerns expressed?
2. Read a story about male children, such as Frank O'Connor's "First Confession" or "The Drunkard", or stories from James Joyce's "Dubliners" collection, such as "Eveline" or "Araby". How are portrayals of boys growing up similar or different from this story of a young girl?

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### Story 3

*Tom Cade Bambara (1939 – 1995)*

*The lessons of childhood are not learned just through the family, but through other adult teachers as well. In this story, a bright young girl is confronted with lesson to learn about society, and must eventually choose whether to accept a passive or active approach to life.*

#### THE LESSON

Back in the days when everyone was old and stupid or *young* and foolish and me and Sugar were the only ones *just* right, this lady moved on *our* block with happy hair and proper speech and *ho* *makeup*. And quite naturally we laughed at her, laughed the way we did at the junk man who went *about* his business like he was some big-time president and his sorry-ass horse his secretary. And we kinda hated her too, hated the way we did the winos who *cluttered up our* parks and pissed oh *our* handball walls and stank *up our* hallways and stairs so *you couldn't* halfway play hide-and-seek without a goddamn gas mask. Miss Moore was her name. The only woman on the block with no first name. And she was black as hell, except for her feet, which were fish-white and spooky.

And she was always planning these boring-ass things for *us* to do, *us* being my *cousin*, mostly, who lived on the block *cause* we all moved North the same time and to the same apartment then spread *out* gradual to breathe. And *our* parents would yank *our* heads into some kinda shape and crisp up *our* clothes so we'd be presentable for travel with Miss Moore, who always looked like she was going to church, though she never did. Which is just one of the things the grownups talked *about* when they talked behind her back like a dog. But when she came calling with some sachet she'd sewed up or some gingerbread she'd made or some book, why then they'd all be too embarrassed to turn her down and we'd get handed over all spruced up. She'd been to college and said it was only right that she should take responsibility for the young ones' education, and she not even related by marriage or blood. So they'd go for it. Specially *Aunt* Gretchen. She was the main gofer in the family. you got some ole *dumb* shit foolishness you want somebody to go for you send for Aunt Gretchen. She been screwed into the go-along for so long, it's a blood-deep natural thing with her. Which is how she got saddled with me and Sugar and Junior in the first place while *our* mothers were in a la-de-da apartment up the block having a good old time.

So this one day Miss Moore rounds *us* all up at the mailbox and it's puredee hot and she's knockin herself out about arithmetic. And school suppose to let up in summer I heard, but she don't never let up. And the starch in my pinafore scratching the shit *outta* me and I'm really hating this nappy-head bitch and her goddamn college degree. I'd much rather go to the pool or to the show where it's cool. So me and Sugar leaning on the mailbox being surly, which is a Miss Moore word. And Flyboy checking out what everybody brought for lunch. And Fat Butt already wasting his peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich like the pig he is. And Junebug punchin on Q.T.'s arm for potato chips. And Rosie Giraffe shifting from

one hip to the other waiting for somebody to step on her foot or ask her if she from Georgia so she can kick ass, preferably Mercedes'. And Miss Moore asking us do we know what money is, like we a bunch of retards. I mean real money, she say, like it's only poker chips or monopoly papers we lay on the grocer. So right away I'm tired of this and say so. And would much rather snatch Sugar and go to the sunset and terrorize the West Indian kids and take their hair ribbons and their money too. And Miss Moore files that remark away for next week's lesson on brotherhood, I can tell. And finally I say we oughta get to the subway cause it's cooler and besides we might meet some cute boys. Sugar done swiped her mama's lipstick, so we ready.

So we heading down the street and she's boring us silly about what things cost and what our parents make and how much goes for rent and how money ain't divided up right in this country. And then she gets to the part about we all poor and live in the slums, which I don't feature. And I'm ready to speak on that, but she steps out in the street and hails two cabs just like that. Then she hustles half the crew in with her and hands me a five-dollar bill and tells me to calculate the percent tip for the driver. And we're off. Me and sugar and Junebug and Flyboy hangin out the window and hollering to everybody, putting lipstick on each other cause Flyboy a faggot anyway, and making farts with our sweaty armpits. But I'm mostly trying to figure how to spend their "money".

But they all fascinated with the meter ticking and Junebug starts laying bets as to how much it'll read when Flyboy can't hold his breath no more. Then sugar lays bets as to how much it'll be when we get there. So I'm stuck. Don't nobody want to go for my plan, which is to jump out at the next light and run off to the first barbeque we can find. Then the driver tells us to get the hell out cause we there already. And the meter reads eighty-five cents. And I'm stalling to figure out the tip and Sugar say give him a dime. And I decide he don't need it bad as I do, so later for Blm. But then he tries to take off with Junebug foot still in the door so we talk about his mama something ferocious. Then we check out that we on Fifth Avenue and everybody dressed up in stockings. One lady in a fur coat, hot as it is. White folks crazy.

"This is the place," Miss Moore say, presenting it to us in the voice she uses at the museum. "Let's look in the windows before we go in."

"Can we steal?" Sugar asks very serious like she's getting the ground rules squared away before she plays. "I beg your pardon," say Miss Moore, and we fall out. So she leads us around the windows of the toy store and me and Sugar screamin, "This is mine, that's mine, I gotta have that, that was made for me, I was born for that," till Big Butt drowns us out.

"Hey, I'm goin to buy that there."

"What there? You don't even know what it is, stupid."

"I do so," he say punchin on Rosie Giraffe. "It's a microscope." "Whatcha gonna do with a microscope, fool?"

"Look at things."

"Like what, Ronald?" ask Miss Moore. And Big Butt ain't got the first notion. So here go Miss Moore gabbing about the thousands of bacteria in a drop of water and the something or other in a speck of blood and the million and one living things in the air around us is invisible to the naked eye. And what she say that for? Junebug go to town on that "naked" and we rolling. Then Miss Moore ask what it cost. So we all jam into the window smudgin it up and the price tag say \$300. So then she ask how long'd take for Big Butt and Junebug to save up their allowances. "Too long," I say. "Yeh," adds Sugar, "outgrown it by that time." And Miss Moore say no, you never outgrow learning instruments. "Why, even medical *students* and interns and," blah, blah, blah. And we ready to choke Big Butt for bringing it up in the first damn place.

"This here costs four hundred eighty dollars," say Rosie Giraffe. So we pile *up* all over her to see what she pointin *out*. My eyes tell me it's a chunk of glass cracked with something heavy, and different-color inks dripped into the splits, then the whole thing *put* into a oven or something. *But* for \$480 it don't make sense.

"That's a paperweight made of semi-precious stones fused together under *tremendous* pressure," she explains slowly, with her hands doing the mining and all the factory work.

"So what's a paperweight?" asks Rosie Giraffe.

"Mo weigh paper with; dumbbell," say Flyboy, the wise man from the East.

"Not exactly," say Miss Moore, which is what she say when you warm or way off too. "It's to weigh paper down so it won't scatter and make your desk untidy." So right away me and Sugar curtsy to each other and then to Mercedes who is more the tidy type.

"We don't keep paper on top of the desk in my class," say Junebug, figuring Miss Moore crazy or lyin one.

"At home, then," she say. "Don't you have a calendar and a pencil case and a blotter and a letter-opener on *your* desk at home where you do your homework?" And she knows damn well what our homes look like cause she noses around in them every chance she gets.

"I don't even have a desk," say Junebug. "Do we?"

"No. And I don't get no homework neither," says Big *Butt*.

"And I don't even have a home," say Flyboy like be do at school to keep the white folks off his back and sorry for him. Send this poor kid to camp posters, is his specialty.

"I do," says Mercedes. "I have a box of stationery on my desk and a picture of my cat. My godmother bought the stationery and the desk. There's a big rose on each sheet and the envelopes smell like roses."

"Who wants to know about your smelly-ass stationery," say Rosie Giraffe fore I can get my two cents in.

"It's important to have a work area all your own so that. . ."

"Will you look at this sailboat, please," say Flyboy, cuttin her off and pointin to the thing like it was his. So once again we tumble all over each other to gaze at this magnificent thing in the toy store which is just big enough to may be sail two kittens across the pond if you strap them to the posts tight. We all start reciting the price tag like we in assembly. "Handcrafted sailboat of fiberglass at one thousand one hundred ninety five dollars."

"Unbelievable," I hear myself say and am really stunned. I read it again for myself just in case the group recitation put me in a trance. Same thing. For some reason this pisses me off We look at Miss Moore and she lookin at *us*. Waiting for I dunno what.

"Who'd pay all that when you can buy a sailboat set for a quarter at Pop's, a *tube* of glue for a dime, and a ball of string for eight cents? It *must* have a motor and a whole lot else besides," I say. "My sailboat cost me about fifty cents."

"But will it take water?" say Mercedes with her smart ass.

"Took mine to Alley Pond Park once." say Flyboy. "String broke. Lost it. Pity."

"Sailed mine in Central Park and it keeled over and sank. Had to ask my father for another dollar."

"And you got the strap," laugh Big *Butt*. "The jerk didn't even have a string on it. My old man wailed on his behind."

Little Q.T. was staring hard at the sailboat and you could see he wanted it bad. But he too little and somebody'd just take it from him. So what the hell. "This boat for kids. Miss Moore?"

"Parents silly to buy something like that just to get all broke up," say Rosie Giraffe.

"That much money it should last forever," I figure.

"My father'd buy it for me if I wanted it."

"Your father, my ass," say Rosie Giraffe getting a chance to finally push Mercedes.

"Much be rich people shop here," say Q.T.

"You are a very bright boy," say Flyboy. "What was your first clue?" And he rap him on the head with the back of his knuckles, since Q.T. the only one he could get away with. Though Q.T. liable to core up behind you years later and get his licks in when you half expect it.

"What I want to know is," I says to Miss Moore though I never talk to her, I wouldn't give the bitch that satisfaction, "is how much a real boat costs? I figure a thousand'd get you a yacht any day."

"Why don't you check that out," she says, "and report back to the group?" Which really pains my ass. If you gonna mess up a perfectly good swim day least you could do is have some answers. "Let's go in," she say like she got something up her sleeve. Only she don't lead the way. So me and Sugar turn the corner to where the entrance is, but when we get there I kinda hang back. Not that I'm scared, what's there to be afraid of, just a toy store. But I feel funny, shame. But what I got to be shared about? Got as much right to go in as anybody. But somehow I can't seem to get hold of the door, so I step away for Sugar to lead. But she hangs back too. And I look at her and she looks at me and this is ridiculous. I

mean, damn, I have never ever been shy about doing nothing or going nowhere. But then Mercedes steps up and then Rosie Giraffe and Big Butt crowd in behind and shove, and next thing we all stuffed into the doorway with only Mercedes squeezing past us, smoothing out her jumper and walking right down the aisle. Then the rest of us tumble in like a glued-together jigsaw done all wrong. And people lookin at us. And it's like the time me and Sugar crashed into the Catholic church on a dare. But once we got in there and everything so hushed and holy and the candles and the bowin and the handkerchiefs on all the drooping heads, I just couldn't go through with the plan. Which was for me to run up to the altar and do a tap dance while Sugar played the nose flute and messed around in the holy water. And Sugar kept givin me the elbow. Then later teased me so bad I tied her up in the shower and turned it on and locked her in. And she'd be there till this day if Aunt Gretchen hadn't finally figured I was lyin about the boarder takin a shower.

Same thing in the store. We all walkin on tiptoe and hardly touchin the games and puzzles and things. And I watched Miss Moore who is steady watchin us like she waitin for a sign. Like Mama Drewery watches the sky and sniffs the air and takes note of just how much slant is in the bird formation. Then me and Sugar bump smack into each other, so busy gazing at the toys, specially the sailboat. But we don't laugh and go into our fat-lady bump-stomach routine. We just stare at that price tag. Then Sugar run a finger over the whole boat. And I'm jealous and want to hit her. Maybe not her, but I sure want to punch somebody in the mouth.

"Watcha bring us here for, Miss Moore?"

"You sound angry, Sylvia. Are you mad about something?" Givin me one of them grins like she tellin a grown-up joke that never turns out to be funny. And she's lookin very closely at me like maybe she plannin to do my portrait from memory. I'm mad, but I won't give her that satisfaction. So I slouch around the store bein very bored and say, "Let's go."

Me and Sugar at the back of the train watchin the tracks whizzin by large then small then gettin gobbled up in the dark. I'm thinkin about this tricky toy I saw in the store. A clown that somersaults on a bar then does chin-ups just cause you yank lightly at his leg. Cost \$35. I could see me askin my mother for a \$35 birthday clown. "You wanna who that costs what?" she'd say, cocking her head to the side to get a better view of the hole in my head. Thirty-five dollars could buy new bunk beds for Junior and Gretchen's Boy. Thirty-five dollars and the whole household could go visit Granddaddy Nelson in the country. Thirty-five dollars would pay for the rent and the piano bill too. Who are these people that spend that much for performing clowns and \$1000 for toy sailboats? What kinda work they do and how they live and how come we ain't in on it? Where we are is who we are. Miss Moore always pointin out. But it don't necessarily have to be that way, she always adds then waits for somebody to say that poor people have to wake up and demand their share of the pie and don't none of us know what kind of pie she talkin about in the first damn place. But she ain't so smart cause I still got her four dollars from the taxi and she sure ain't gettin it. Messin up my day with this shit. Sugar nudges me in my pocket and winks.

Miss Moore lines us up in front of the mailbox where we started from, seem like years ago, and I got a headache for thinkin so hard. And we lean all over each other so we can hold up under the draggy-ass lecture she always finishes us off with at the end before we thank her for borin us to tears. But she just looks at us like she readin tea leaves. Finally she say, "Well, what did you think of F. A. O. Schwarz?"

Rosie Giraffe mumbles, "White folks crazy."

"I'd like to go there again when I get my birthday moey," says Mercedes, and we shove her out the pack so she has to lean on the mailbox By herself.

"I'd like a shower. Tiring day," say Flyboy.

Then Sugar surprises me by sayin. "You know, Miss Moore, I don't think all of us here put together eat in a year what that sailboat costs." And Miss Moore lights up like somebody goosed her. "And?" she say, urging Sugar on. Only I'm standin on her foot so she don't continue.

"Imagine for a minute what kind of society it is in which some people can spend on a toy what it would cost to feed a family of six or seven. What do you think?"

"I think," say Sugar pushing me off her feet like she never done before, cause I whip her ass in a minute, "that this is not much of a democracy if you ask me. Equal chance to pursue happiness means

an equal crack at the dough, don't it?" Miss Moore is besides herself and I am disgusted with Sugar's treachery. So I stand on her foot one more time to see if she'll shove me. She shuts up, and Miss Moore looks at me, sorrowfully I'm thinkin. And something weird is goin on, I can feel it in my chest.

"Anybody else learn anything today?" lookin dead at me. I walk away and Sugar has to run to catch up and don't even seem to notice when I shrug her arm off my shoulder.

"Well, we got four dollars anyway," she says.

"Uh hunh."

"We could go to Hascombs and get half a-chocolate layer and then go to the Sunset and still have plenty money for potato chips and ice cream sodas."

"Uh hunh".

"Race you" to Hascombs," she say.

We start down the block and she gets ahead which is O.K. by me cause I'm going to the West End and then over to the Drive to think this day through. She can run if she want to and even run faster. But ain't nobody gonna beat me at nuthin.

[1972]

### 3.1. Questions for Text Interpretation

1. Why do the narrator and her cousin “kinda hate” Miss Moore? List characteristics they dislike and explain why they go along with Miss Moor anyway.
2. What are the messages of Miss Moore’s lessons? What is she looking for from the children?
3. On the trip to Fifth Avenue, what opposite lessons are implied by the discussions of the microscope and the paperweight? How do the children’s reactions reflect attitudes different types of people adopt later in life?
4. Describe the narrator’s tone throughout. What kinds of jokes does she make? How does her colorful language (such as “tumble in like a glued together jigsaw done all wrong”) fit each situation?
5. What are the young narrator’s concerns and interests in life? How do they fit with Miss Moore’s ideas and why does Miss Moore keep staring at Sylvia?
6. How is the Catholic Church incident repeated in the toy store, and what do the incidents show about the children’s states of mind?
7. Explain what is meant by “where we are is who we are.”
8. What emotional stages does the narrator go through? How are each of the narrator’s conflicting feelings mirrored by the final comment of other character?
9. What might the narrator’s headaches suggest in the story? Do Miss Moore’s lessons have any effect? Explain the irony of the last line.

### 3.2 Tasks for Further Exploration

1. Jean Stafford’s story “Bad characters’ shows the humor and creativity a supposedly “bad” child can exhibit. What is similar and different about the “misbehavior” and “unacceptable attitudes” of Bambara’s and Stafford’s characters?
2. The dividing lines between rich and poor, black and white are explored in other stories and novels, such as Toni Morrison’s “The Bluest Eye”. Read Morrison’s novel and examine the impact of wealth, race and social status on young girls growing up.

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## Story 4

*Helen Rose Hull (1888 – 1971)*

*In "The Fire," the relationship between a young girl and her older mentor is questioned by the girl's family, highlighting the differences between two lifestyles. Cynthia's divided loyalties become part of the process of growing up, and the image of fire serves as a beginning as well as an end.*

### THE FIRE

Cynthia blotted the entry in the old ledger and scowled across the empty office at the door. Mrs. Moriety had left it ajar when she departed with her receipt for the weekly fifty cents on her "lot." If you supplied the missing gilt letters, you could read the sign on the glass of the upper half: "H. P. Bates. Real Estate. Notary Public". Through the door at Cynthia's elbow came the rumbling voice of old Fleming, the lawyer down the hall; he had come in for his Saturday night game of chess with her father.

Cynthia pushed the ledger away from her, and with her elbows on the spotted, green felt of the desk, her fingers burrowing into her cheeks, waited for two minutes by the nickel clock; then, with a quick, awkward movement, she pushed back her chair and plunged to the doorway, her young face twisted in a sort of fluttering resolution.

"Father-"

Her father jerked his head toward her, his fingers poised over a pawn. Old Fleming did not look up.

"Father, I don't think anybody else will be in."

"Well, go on home, then." Her father bent again over the squares, the light shining strongly on the thin places about his temples.

"Father, please,"- Cynthia spoke hurriedly,-"you aren't going for a while? I want to go down to Miss Egert's for a minute."

"Eh? What's that?" He leaned back in his chair now, and Mr. Fleming lifted his severe, black beard to look at this intruder. "What for? You can't take any more painting lessons. Your mother doesn't want you going there any more."

"I just want to get some things I left there. I can get back to go home with you."

"But your mother said she didn't like your hanging around down there in an empty house with an old maid. What did she tell you about it?"

"Couldn't I just get my sketches. Father, and tell Miss Egert. I'm not coming any more? She would think it was awfully funny if I didn't. I won't stay. But she-she's been good to re-"

"What set your mother against her, then? What you been doing down there?"

Cynthia twisted her hands together, her eyes running from Fleming's amused stare to her father's indecision. Only an accumulated determination could have carried her on into speech.

"I've just gone down once a week for a lesson. I want to get my things. If I'm not going, I ought to tell her."

"Why didn't you tell her that last week?"

"I kept hoping I could go on."

"Um." Her father's glance wavered toward his game. "Isn't it too late?" "Just eight. Father."

She stepped near her father, color flooding her cheeks. "If you'll give me ten cents, I can take the car -"

"Well -" He dug into his pocket, nodding at Fleming's grunt, "The women always want cash, eh. Bates?"

Then Cynthia, the dime pressed into her palm, tiptoed across to the nail where her hat and sweater hung, seized them, and still on tiptoe, lest she disturb the game again, ran out to the head of the stairs.

She was trembling as she pulled on her sweater; as she ran down the dark steps to the street the tremble changed to a quiver of excitement. Suppose her father had known just what her mother *had*

said! That she could not see Miss Egert again; could never go hurrying down to the cluttered room they called the studio for more of those strange hours of eagerness and pain when she bent over the drawing-board, struggling with the mysteries of color. That last sketch-the little, purpling mint-leaves from the garden-Miss Egert had liked that. And they thought she could leave those sketches there! Leave Miss Egert, too, wondering why she never came again! She hurried to the corner, past the bright store-windows. In thought she could see Miss Egert setting out the jar of brushes, the dishes of water, pushing back the litter of magazines and books to make room for the drawing-board, waiting for her to come. Oh, she had to go once more, black as her disobedience was!

The half-past-eight car was just swinging round the curve. She settled herself behind two German housewives, shawls over their heads, market-baskets beside them. They lived out at the end of the street; one of them sometimes came to the office with payments on her son's lot. Cynthia pressed against the dirty window, fearful lest she miss the corner. There it was, the new street light shining on the sedate old house! She ran to the platform, pushing against the arm the conductor extended.

"Wait a minute, there!" He released her as the car stopped, and she fled across the street.

In front of the house she could not see a light, upstairs or down, except staring reflections in the windows from the white arc light. She walked past the dark line of box which led to the front door. At the side of the old square dwelling jutted a new, low wing; and there in two windows were soft slits of light along the curtain-edges. Cynthia walked along a little dirt path to a door at the side of the wing. Standing on the door-step, she felt in the shadow for the knocker. As she let it fall, from the garden behind her came a voice:

"I'm out here. Who is it?" There was a noise of feet hurrying through dead leaves, and as Cynthia turned to answer, out of the shadow moved a blur of face and white blouse.

"Cynthia! How nice!" The woman touched Cynthia's shoulder as she pushed open the door. "There, come in."

The candles on the table bent their flames in the draft; Cynthia followed Miss Egert into the room.

"You're busy?" Miss Egert had stood up by the door an old wooden-toothed rake. "I don't want to bother you." Cynthia's solemn, young eyes implored the woman and turned hastily away. The intensity of defiance which had brought her at such an hour left her confused.

"Bother? I was afraid I had to have my grand bonfire alone. Now we can have it a party. You'd like to?"

Miss Egert darted across to straighten one of the candles. The light caught in the folds of her crumpled blouse, in the soft, drab hair blown out around her face.

"I can't stay very long." Cynthia stared about the room, struggling to hide her turmoil under ordinary casualness. "You had the carpenter fix the bookshelves, didn't you?"

"Isn't it nice now? All white and gray and restful – just a spark of life in that mad rug. A good place to sit in and grow old."

Cynthia looked at the rug, a bit of scarlet Indian weaving. She wouldn't see it again! The thought poked a derisive finger into her heart.

"Shall we sit down just a minute and then go have the fire?"

Cynthia dropped into the wicker chair, wrenching her fingers through one another. "My brother came in to-night, his last attempt to make me see reason," said Miss Egert.

Cynthia lifted her eyes. Miss Egert wasn't wondering why she had come; she could stay without trying to explain.

Miss Egert wound her arms about her knees as she went on talking. Her slight body was wrenched a little out of symmetry, as though from straining always for something uncaptured; there was the same lack of symmetry in her face, in her eyebrows, in the line of her mobile lips. But her eyes had nothing fugitive, nothing pursuing in their soft, gray depth. Their warm, steady eagerness shone out in her voice, too, in its swift inflections.

"I tried to show him it wasn't a bit disgraceful for me to live here in a wing of my own instead of being a sort of nurse-maid adjunct in his house." She laughed, a soft, throaty sound. "It's my house. It's all I have left to keep me a person, you see. I won't get out and be respectable in his eyes."

"He didn't mind your staying here and taking care of – them!" cried Cynthia.

"It's respectable, dear, for an old maid to care for her father and mother; but when they die she

ought to be useful to some one else instead of renting her house and living on an edge of it."

"Oh," - Cynthia leaned forward, - "I should think you'd hate him! I think families are – terrible!"

"Hate him?" Miss Egert smiled. "He's nice. He just doesn't agree with me. As long as he lets the children come over – I told him I meant to have a beautiful time with them, with my real friends with you."

Cynthia shrank into her chair, her eyes tragic again.

"Come, let's have our bonfire!" Miss Egert, with a quick movement, stood in front of Cynthia, one hand extended.

Cynthia crouched away from the hand.

"Miss Egert," – her voice came out in a desperate little gasp, - "I can't come down any more. I can't take any more painting lessons." She stopped. Miss Egert waited, her head tipped to one side. "Mother doesn't think I better. I came down after my things."

"They're all in the workroom." Miss Egert spoke quietly. "Do you want them now?"

"Yes." Cynthia pressed her knuckles against her lips. Over her hand her eyes cried out. "Yes, I better get them," she said heavily.

Miss Egert, turning slowly, lifted a candle from the table.

"We'll have to take this. The wiring isn't done." She crossed the room, her thin fingers, not quite steady, bending around the flame.

Cynthia followed through a narrow passage. Miss Egert pushed open a door, and the musty odor of the store-room floated out into a queer chord with the fresh plaster of the hall.

"Be careful of that box!" Miss Egert set the candle on a pile of trunks. "I've had to move all the truck from the attic and studio in here. Your sketches are in the portfolio, and that's – some where!"

Cynthia stood in the doorway, watching Miss Egert bend over a pile of canvases, throwing up a grotesque, rounded shadow on the wall. Round the girl's throat closed a ring of iron.

"Here they are, piled up – "

Cynthia edged between the boxes. Miss Egert was dragging the black portfolio from beneath a pile of books.

"And here's the book I wanted you to see." The pile slipped crashing to the floor as Miss Egert pulled out a magazine. "Never mind those. See here." She dropped into the chair from which she had knocked the books, the portfolio under one arm, the free hand running through the pages of an old art magazine. The chair swung slightly; Cynthia, peering down between the boxes, gave a startled "Oh!"

"What is it?" Miss Egert followed Cynthia's finger. "The chair?" She was silent a moment. "Do you think I keep my mother prisoner here in a wheel-chair now that she is free?" She ran her hand along the worn arm. "I tried to give it to an old ladies' home, but it was too used up. They wanted more style."

"But doesn't it remind you –" Cynthia hesitated.

"It isn't fair to remember the years she had to sit here waiting to die. You didn't know her. I've been going back to the real years –" Miss Egert smiled at Cynthia's bewildered eyes. "Here, let's look at these." She turned another page. "See, Cynthia. Aren't they swift and glad? That's what I was trying to tell you the other day. See that arm, and the drapery there! Just a line –" The girl bent over the page, frowning at the details the quick finger pointed out. "Don't they catch you along with them?" She held the book out at arm's length, squinting at the figures. "Take it along. There are several more." She tucked the book into the portfolio and rose. "Come on; we'll have our fire."

"But, Miss Egert," – Cynthia's voice hardened as she was swept back into her own misery, - "I can't take it. I can't come any more."

"To return a book?" Miss Egert lowered her eyelids as if she were again sizing up a composition. "You needn't come just for lessons."

Cynthia shook her head.

"Mother thinks – " She fell into silence. She couldn't say what her mother thought-dreadful things. If she could only swallow the hot pressure in her throat!

"Oh. I hadn't understood." Miss Egert's fingers paused for a swift touch on Cynthia's arm, and then reached for the candle. "You can go on working by yourself."

"It isn't that -" Cynthia struggled an instant, and dropped into silence again. She couldn't say out loud any of the things she was feeling. There were too many walls between feeling and speech: loyalty

to her mother, embarrassment that feelings should come so near words, a fear of hurting Miss Egert.

"Don't mind so much, Cynthia." Miss Egert led the way back to the living room. "You can stay for the bonfire? That will be better than sitting here. Run into the kitchen and bring the matches and marshmallows – in a dish in the cupboard."

Cynthia, in the doorway, stared at Miss Egert. Didn't she care at all? Then the dumb ache in her throat stopped throbbing as Miss Egert's gray eyes held her steadily a moment. She did care! She did! She was just helping her. Cynthia took the candle and went back through the passageway to the kitchen, down at the very end.

She made a place on the table in the litter of dishes and milk bottles for the candle. The matches had been spilled on the shelf of the stove and into the sink. Cynthia gathered a handful of the driest. Shiftlessness was one of her mother's counts against Miss Egert. Cynthia flushed as she recalled her stumbling defense: Miss Egert had more important things to do; dishes were kept in their proper place; and her mother's: "Important! Mooning about!"

"Find them, Cynthia?" The clear, low voice came down the hall, and Cynthia hurried back.

Out in the garden it was quite black. As they came to the far end, the old stone wall made a dark bank against the sky, with a sharp star over its edge. Miss Egert knelt; almost with the scratch of the match the garden leaped into yellow, with fantastic moving shadows from the trees and in the corner of the wall. She raked leaves over the blaze, pulled the great mound into firmer shape, and then drew Cynthia back under the wall to watch. The light ran over her face; the delighted gestures of her hands were like quick shadows.

"See the old apple tree dance! He's too old to move fast."

Cynthia crouched by the wall, brushing away from her face the scratchy leaves of the dead hollyhocks. Excitement tingled through her; she felt the red and yellow flames seizing her, burning out the heavy rebellion, the choking weight. Miss Egert leaned back against the wall, her hands spread so that her thin fingers were fire edged.

"See the smoke curl up through those branches? Isn't it lovely, Cynthia?" She darted around the pile to push more leaves into the flames.

Cynthia strained forward, hugging her arms to her body. Never had there been such a fire! It burned through her awkwardness, her self-consciousness. It ate into the thick, murky veils which hung always between her and the things she struggled to find out. She took a long breath, and the crisp scent of smoke from the dead leaves tingled down through her body.

Miss Egert was at her side again. Cynthia looked up; the slight, asymmetrical figure was like the apple-tree, still, yet dancing!

"Why don't you paint it?" demanded Cynthia, abruptly, and then was frightened as Miss Egert's body stiffened, lost its suggestion of motion.

"I can't." The woman dropped to the ground beside Cynthia, crumpling a handful of leaves. "It's too late." She looked straight at the fire. "I must be content to see it." She blew the pieces of leaves from the palm of her hand and smiled at Cynthia. "Perhaps some day you'll paint it--or write it."

"I can't paint." Cynthia's voice quivered. "I want to do something. I can't even see things except what you point out. And now –"

Miss Egert laid one hand over Cynthia's clenched fingers. The girl trembled at the cold touch.

"You must go on looking." The glow, as the flames died lower, flushed her face. "Cynthia, you're just beginning. You mustn't stop just because you aren't to come here any more. I don't know whether you can say things with your brush; but you must find them out. You mustn't shut your eyes again."

"It's hard alone."

"That doesn't matter."

Cynthia's fingers unclasped, and one hand closed desperately around Miss Egert's. Her heart fluttered in her temples, her throat, her breast. She clung to the fingers, pulling herself slowly up from an inarticulate abyss.

"Miss Egert," – she stumbled into words – "I can't bear it, not coming here! Nobody else cares except about sensible things. You do, beautiful, wonderful things."

"You'd have to find them for yourself, Cynthia." Miss Egert's fingers moved under the girl's grasp. Then she bent toward Cynthia, and kissed her with soft, pale lips that trembled against the girl's mouth.

"Cynthia, don't let any one stop you! Keep searching!" She drew back, poised for a moment in the shadow before she rose. Through Cynthia ran the swift feet of white ecstasy. She was pledging herself to some tremendous mystery, which trembled all about her.

"Come, Cynthia, we're wasting our coals."

Miss Egert held out her hands. Cynthia, laying hers in them, was drawn to her feet. As she stood there, inarticulate, full of a strange, excited, shouting hope, behind them the path crunched. Miss Egert turned, and Cynthia shrank back.

Her mother stood in the path, making no response to Miss Egert's "Good evening, Mrs. Bates."

The fire had burned too low to lift the shadow from the mother's face. Cynthia could see the hem of her skirt swaying where it dipped up in front. Above that two rigid hands in gray cotton gloves; above that the suggestion of a white, strained face. Cynthia took a little step toward her.

"I came to get my sketches," she implored her. Her throat was dry. What if her mother began to say cruel things – the things she had already said at home.

"I hope I haven't kept Cynthia too late," Miss Egert said. "We were going to toast marshmallows. Won't you have one, Mrs. Bates?" She pushed the glowing leaf ashes together. The little spurt of flame showed Cynthia her mother's eyes, hard, angry, resting an instant on Miss Egert and then assailing her.

"Cynthia knows she should not be here. She is not permitted to run about the streets alone at night."

"Oh, I'm sorry." Miss Egert made a deprecating little gesture. "But no harm has come to her."

"She has disobeyed me."

At the tone of her mother's voice Cynthia felt something within her breast curl up like a leaf caught in flame.

"I'll get the things I came for." She started toward the house, running past her mother. She must hurry, before her mother said anything to hurt Miss Egert.

She stumbled on the door-step, and flung herself against the door. The portfolio was across the room, on the little, old piano. The candle beside it had guttered down over the cover. Cynthia pressed out the wobbly flame, and, hugging the portfolio, ran back across the room. On the threshold she turned for a last glimpse. The row of Botticelli details over the bookcases were blurred into gray in the light of the one remaining candle; the Indian rug had a wavering glow. Then she heard Miss Egert just outside .

"I'm sorry Cynthia isn't to come any more," she was saying.

Cynthia stepped forward. The two women stood in the dim light, her mother's thickened, settled body stiff and hostile. Miss Egert's slight figure swaying toward her gently.

"Cynthia has a good deal to do," her mother answered. "We can't afford to give her painting lessons, especially –" Cynthia moved down between the women – "especially," her mother continued, "as she doesn't seem to get much of anywhere. You'd think she'd have some pictures to show after so many lessons."

"Perhaps I'm not a good teacher. Of course she's just beginning."

"She'd better put her time on her studies."

"I'll miss her. We've had some pleasant times together."

Cynthia held out her hand toward Miss Egert, with a fearful little glance at her mother.

"Good-by, Miss Egert."

Miss Egert's cold fingers pressed it an instant.

"Good night, Cynthia," she said slowly.

Then Cynthia followed her mother's silent figure along the path; she turned her head as they reached the sidewalk. Back in the garden winked the red eye of the fire.

They waited under the arc light for the car, Cynthia stealing fleeting glances at her mother's averted face. On the car she drooped against the window edge, away from her mother's heavy silence. She was frightened now, a panicky child caught in disobedience. Once, as the car turned at the corner below her father's office, she spoke:

"Father will expect me –"

"He knows I went after you," was her mother's grim answer.

Cynthia followed her mother into the house. Her small brother was in the sitting-room, reading. He looked up from his book with wide, knowing eyes. Rebellious humiliation washed over Cynthia; setting

her lips against their quivering, she pulled off her sweater.

"Go on to bed, Robert," called her mother from the entry, where she was hanging her coat.

"You've sat up too late as it is."

He yawned, and dragged his feet with provoking slowness past Cynthia.

"Was she down there. Mara?" He stopped on the bottom step to grin at his sister.

"Go on, Robert. Start your bath. Mother'll be up in a minute."

"Aw, it's too late for a bath." He leaned over the rail.

"It's Saturday. I couldn't get back sooner."

Cynthia swung away from the round, grinning face. Her mother went past her into the dining-room. Robert shuffled upstairs; she heard the water splashing into the tub.

Her mother was very angry with her. Presently she would come back, would begin to speak. Cynthia shivered. The familiar room seemed full of hostile, accusing silence, like that of her mother. If only she had come straight home from the office, she would be sitting by the table in the old Morris chair, reading, with her mother across from her sewing, or glancing through the evening paper. She gazed about the room at the neat scrolls of the brown wallpaper, at a picture above the couch, cows by a stream. The dull, ordinary comfort of life there hung about her, a reproaching shadow, within which she felt the heavy, silent discomfort her transgression dragged after it. It would be much easier to go on just as she was expected to do. Easier. The girl straightened her drooping body. That things were hard didn't matter. Miss Egert had insisted upon that. She was forgetting the pledge she had given. The humiliation slipped away, and a cold exaltation trembled through her, a remote echo of the hope that had shouted within her back there in the garden. Here it was difficult to know what she had promised, to what she had pledged herself something that the familiar, comfortable room had no part in.

She glanced toward the dining-room," and her breath quickened. Between the faded green portieres stood her mother, watching her with hard, bright eyes. Cynthia's glance faltered; she looked desperately about the room as if hurrying her thoughts to some shelter. Beside her on the couch lay the portfolio. She took a little step toward it, stopping at her mother's voice.

"Well, Cynthia, have you anything to say?"

Cynthia lifted her eyes.

"Don't you think I have trouble enough with your brothers? You, a grown girl defying me I can't understand it."

"I went down for this." Cynthia touched the black case.

"Put that down! I don't want to see it!" The mother's voice rose, breaking down the terrifying silences. "You disobeyed me. I told you you weren't to go there again. And then I telephoned your father to ask you to do an errand and for me, and find you there with that woman!"

"I'm not going again." Cynthia twisted her hands together. "I had to go a last time. She was a friend. I could not tell her I wasn't coming –"

"A friend! A sentimental old maid, older than your mother! Is that a friend for a young girl? What were you doing when I found you? Holding hands? Is that the right thing for you? She's turned your head. You aren't the same Cynthia, running off to her, complaining of your mother."

"Oh, no!" Cynthia flung out her hand. "We were just talking." Her misery confused her.

"Talking? About what?"

"About – " The recollection rushed through Cynthia – "about beauty." She winced, a flush sweeping up to the edge of her fair hair, at her mother's laugh.

"Beauty! You disobey your mother, hurt her, to talk about beauty at night with an old maid!"

There was a hot beating in Cynthia's throat; she drew back against the couch.

"Pretending to be an artist," her mother drove on, "to get young girls who are foolish enough to listen to her sentimentalizing."

"She was an artist," pleaded Cynthia. "She gave it up to take care of her father and mother. I told you all about that –"

"Talking about beauty doesn't make artists."

Cynthia stared at her mother. She had stepped near the table, and the light through the green shade of the reading-lamp made queer pools of color about her eyes, in the waves of her dark hair. She didn't look real. Cynthia threw one hand up against her lips. She was sucked down and down in an eddy of

despair. Her mother's voice dragged her again to the surface.

"We let you go there because you wanted to paint, and you maunder and say things you'd be ashamed to have your mother hear. I've spent my life working for you, planning for you, and you go running off –" Her voice broke into a new note, a trembling, grieved tone. "I've always trusted you, depended on you: now I can't even trust you."

"I won't go there again. I had to explain."

"I can't believe you. You don't care how you make me feel."

Cynthia was whirled again down the sides of the eddy.

"I can't believe you care anything for me, your own mother." Cynthia plucked at the braid on her cuff.

"I didn't do it to make you sorry," she whispered. "I – it was –" The eddy closed about her, and with a little gasp she dropped down on the couch, burying her head in the sharp angle of her elbows.

The mother took another step toward the girl; her hand hovered above the bent head and then dropped.

"You know mother wants just what is best for you, don't you? I can't let you drift away from us, your head full of silly notions."

Cynthia's shoulders jerked. From the head of the stairs came Robert's shout: "Mama, tub's full"

"Yes; I'm coming."

Cynthia looked up. She was not crying. About her eyes and nostrils strained the white intensity of hunger.

"You don't think –" She stopped, struggling with her habit of inarticulateness. "There might be things – not silly – you might not see what –"

"Cynthia!" The softness snapped out of the mother's voice.

Cynthia stumbled up to her feet; she was as tall as her mother. For an instant they faced each other, and then the mother turned away, her eyes tear brightened. Cynthia put out an awkward hand.

"Mother," she said piteously, "I'd like to tell you – I'm sorry –"

"You'll have to show me you are by what you do." The woman started wearily up the stairs. "Go to bed. It's late."

Cynthia waited until the bath-room door closed upon Robert's splashings. She climbed the stairs slowly, and shut herself into her room. She laid the portfolio in the bottom drawer of her white bureau; then she stood by her window. Outside, the big elm tree, in fine, leafless dignity, showed dimly against the sky, a few stars caught in the arch of its branches.

A swift, tearing current of rebellion swept away her unhappiness, her confused misery; they were bits of refuse in this new flood. She saw, with a fierce, young finality that she was pledged to a conflict as well as to a search. As she knelt by the window and pressed her cheek on the cool glass, she felt the house about her, with its pressure of useful, homely things, as a very prison. No more journeyings down to Miss Egert's for glimpses of escape. She must find her own ways. Keep searching! At the phrase, excitement again glowed within her; she saw the last red wink of the fire in the garden.

[1917]

#### 4.1. Questions for Text Interpretation

1. What attitude towards the girl and towards Miss Egert do the father and Fleming exhibit at the beginning of the story?
2. What is different about Miss Egert, and why does Cynthia want to see her again?
3. Describe Miss Egert's interests and contrast them with Cynthia's family's topics of conversation. What worlds are in opposition here?
4. What does Miss Egert's brother's point of view represent in the story? Why does Cynthia think "families are – terrible?"

5. Why are Miss Egert's "real friends" children? Explain what she means by referring to "real years", "real friends". Why does she say that her mother is now "free"?
6. List the mother's complaints about Miss Egert, then list Cynthia's reasons for liking the older woman. Can we tell what the author's attitude is?
7. How do you interpret Miss Egert's kissing Cynthia?
8. What creates the epiphany (moment of insight and exhilaration) Cynthia experiences at the fire?
9. What principles are in opposition in the final scene, and what do they suggest about Cynthia's maturation process?

## 4.2. Tasks for Further Exploration

1. Gail Godwin's best-selling novel "The Finishing School" is extremely similar to this story about the relationship between an older woman and a young girl. After reading Godwin's novel, explain what the young girls gain by associating with an older woman not part of the family.
2. Discuss a number of possible interpretations to the title of the story, as it relates to the fire at the end and to the overall motifs. How does Hull build to the final scene, and why is fire appropriate as an image to connect the different levels of meaning of the story?

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## Story 5

*Grace Paley (1922 – 2007)*

*Shirley Abramowitz rises to the top of her world with grace and humor. Despite the attempted restrictions of a confining society, a few helpmates challenge the child with the loudest voice and the strongest heart to grow and to enlarge the worlds of others.*

### THE LOUDEST VOICE

There is a certain place where dumb waiters boom, doors slam, dishes crash: every window is a mother's mouth bidding the street shut up, go skate somewhere else, come home. My voice is the loudest.

There, my own mother is still as full of breathing as re and the grocer stands up to speak to her. "Mrs. Abramowitz," he says, "people should not be afraid of their children."

"Ah, Mr. Bialik," my mother replies, "if you say to her or her father "Ssh," they say, "In the grave it will be quiet."

"From Coney Island to the cemetery," says my papa. "It's the same subway; it's the same fare."

I am right next to the pickle barrel. My pinky is making tiny whirlpools in the brine. I stop a moment to announce: "Campbell's Tomato Soup. Campbell's Vegetable Beef Soup. Campbell's S-c-otch Broth..."

"Be quiet," the grocer says, "the labels are coming off."

"Please, Shirley, be a little quiet," my mother begs me. In that place the whole street groans: Be quiet! Be quiet! but steals from the happy chorus of my inside self not a little or a jot

There, too, but just around the corner, is a red brick building that has been old for many years. Every morning the children stand before it in double lines which must be straight. They are not insulted. They are waiting anyway.

I am usually among them. I am, in fact, the first, since I begin with "A."

One cold morning the monitor tapped me on the shoulder. "Go to Room 409, Shirley

Abramowitz," he said. I did as I was told. I went in a hurry up a down staircase to Room 409, which contained sixth-graders. I had to wait at the desk without wiggling until Mr. Hilton, their teacher, had time to speak.

After five minutes he said, "Shirley?"

"What?" I whispered.

He said, "My! My! Shirley Abramowitz! They told me you had a particularly loud, clear voice and read with lots of expression. Could that be true?"

"Oh yes," I whispered.

"In that case, don't be silly: I might very well be your teacher someday. Speak up, speak up."

"Yes," I shouted.

"More like it," he said. "Now, Shirley, can you put a ribbon in your hair or a bobby pin? It's too messy."

"Yes!" I bawled.

"Now, now, calm down." He turned to the class. "Children, not a sound. Open at page 39. Read till 52. When you finish, start again." He looked me over once more. "Now, Shirley, you know, I suppose, that Christmas is coming. We are preparing a beautiful play. Most of the parts have been given out. But I still need a child with a strong voice, lots of stamina. Do you know what stamina is? You do? Smart kid. You know, I heard you read 'The Lord is my shepherd' in Assembly yesterday. I was very impressed. Wonderful delivery. Mrs. Jordan, your teacher, speaks highly of you. Now listen to me, Shirley Abramowitz, if you want to take the part and be in the play repeat after me, 'I swear to work harder than I ever did before.' "

I looked to heaven and said at once, "Oh, I swear." I kissed my pinky and looked at God.

"That is an actor's life", my dear," he explained. "Like a soldier's, never tardy or disobedient to his general, the director. Everything," he said, "absolutely everything will depend on you."

That afternoon, all over the building, children scraped and scrubbed the turkeys and the sheaves of corn off the schoolroom windows. Goodbye Thanksgiving. The next morning a monitor brought red paper and green paper from the office. We made new shapes and hung them on the walls and glued them to the doors.

The teachers became happier and happier. Their heads were ringing like the bells of childhood. My best friend Evie was prone to evil, but she did not get a single demerit for whispering. We learned "Holy Night" without an error. "How wonderful!" said Miss Glace, the student teacher. "To think that some of you don't even speak the language!" We learned "Deck the halls" and "Hark! The Herald Angels"... They weren't ashamed and we weren't embarrassed.

Oh, but when my mother heard about it all, she said to my father: "Misha, you don't know what's going on there. Cramer is the head of the Tickets Committee."

"Who?" asked my father. "Cramer? Oh yes, an active woman."

"Active? Active has to have a reason. Listen," she said sadly, "I'm surprised to see my neighbors making tra-la-la for Christmas."

My father couldn't think of what to say to that. Then he decided: "You're in America! Clara, you wanted to come here. In Palestine the Arabs would be eating you alive. Europe you had pogroms. Argentina is full of Indians. Here you got Christmas... Some joke, ha?"

"Very funny, Misha. What is becoming of you? If we care to a new country a long time ago to run away from tyrants, and instead we fall into a creeping pogrom, that our children learn a lot of lies, so what's the joke? Ach, Misha, your idealism is going away."

"So is your sense of humor."

"That I never had, but idealism you had a lot of."

"I'm the same Misha Abramovitch, I didn't change an iota. Ask anyone."

"Only ask me," says my mama, may she rest in peace. "I got the answer." Meanwhile the neighbors had to think of what to say too.

Marty's father said: "You know, he has a very important part, my boy."

"Mine also," said Mr. Sauerfeld.

"Not my boy!" said Mrs. Klieg. "I said to him no. The answer is no. When I say no! I mean no!"

The rabbi's wife said, "It's disgusting!" But no one listened to her. Under the narrow sky of God's

great wisdom she wore a strawberry blond wig.

Every day was noisy and full of experience. I was Right hand Man. Mr. Hilton said: 'How could I get along without you, Shirley?'

He said: "Your mother and father ought to get down on their knees every night and thank God for giving them a child like you."

He also said: "You're absolutely a pleasure to work with, my dear, dear child."

Sometimes he said: "For God's sakes, what did I do with the script? Shirley! Shirley! Find it."

Then I answered quietly: "Here it is, Mr. Hilton."

Once in a while, when he was very tired, he would cry out: "Shirley, I'm just tired of screaming at those kids. Will you tell Ira Pushkov not to come in till Lester points to that star the second time?"

Then I roared: "Ira Pushkov, what's the matter with you? Dope! Mr. Hilton told you five times already, don't come in till Lester points to that star the second time."

"Ach, Clara," my father asked, "what does she do there till six o'clock she can't even put the plates on the table?"

"Christmas," said my mother coldly.

"Ho! Ho!" my father said. "Christmas. What's the harm? After all, history teaches everyone. We learn from reading this is a holiday from pagan times also, candles, lights, even Chanukah. So we learn it's not altogether Christian. So if they think it's a private holiday, they're only ignorant, not patriotic. What belongs to history, belongs to all men. You want to go back to the Middle Ages? Is it better to shave your head with a secondhand razor? Does it hurt Shirley to learn to speak up? It does not. So maybe someday she won't live between the kitchen and the shop. She's not a fool."

I thank you, Papa, for your kindness. It is true about me to this day. I am foolish but I am not a fool.

That night my father kissed me and said with great interest in my career, "Shirley, tomorrow's your big day. Congrats."

"Save it," my mother said. Then she shut all the windows in order to prevent tonsillitis.

In the morning it snowed. On the street corner a tree had been decorated for us by a kind city administration. In order to miss its chilly shadow our neighbors walked three blocks east to buy a loaf of bread. The butcher pulled down black window shades to keep the colored lights from shining on his chickens. Oh, not me. On the way to school, with both my hands I tossed it a kiss of tolerance. Poor thing, it was a stranger in Egypt.

I walked straight into the auditorium past the staring children. "Go ahead, Shirley!" said the monitors. Four boys, big for their age, had already started work as prop men and stagehands.

Mr. Hilton was very nervous. He was not even happy. Whatever he started to say ended in a sideward look of sadness. He sat slumped in the middle of the first row and asked me to help Miss Glace. I did this, although she thought my voice too resonant and said, "Showoff!."

Parents began to arrive long before we were ready. They wanted to make a good impression. From among the yards of drapes I peeked out at the audience. I saw my embarrassed mother.

Ira, Lester, and Meyer were pasted to their beards by Miss Glace. She almost forgot to thread the star on its wire, but I reminded her. I coughed a few times to clear my throat'. Miss Glace looked around and saw that everyone was in costume and on line waiting to play his part. She whispered. "All right . . ." Then: Jackie Sauerfeld, the prettiest boy in first grade, parted the curtains with his skinny elbow and in a high voice sang out:

"Parents dear

We are here

To make a Christmas play in time. It we give

In narrative

And illustrate with pantomime."

He disappeared.

My voice burst immediately from the wings to the great shock of Ira, Lester, and Meyer, who were waiting for it but were surprised all the same.

"I remember, I remember, the house where I was born ..."

Miss Glace yanked the curtain open and there it was, the house – an old hay loft, where Celia Kornbluh

lay in the straw with Cindy Lou, her favorite doll Ira, Lester, and Meyer moved slowly from the wings toward her, sometimes pointing to a moving star and sometimes ahead to Cindy Lou.

It was a long story and it was a sad story. I carefully pronounced all the words about my lonesome childhood, while little Eddie Braunstein wandered upstage and down with his shepherd's stick, looking for sheep. I brought up lonesomeness again, and not being understood at all except by some women everybody hated. Eddie was too small for that and Marty Groff took his place, wearing his father's prayer shawl. I announced twelve friends, and half the boys in the fourth grade gathered round Marty, who stood on an orange crate while my voice harangued. Sorrowful and loud, I declaimed about love and God and Man, but because of the terrible deceit of Abie Stock we came suddenly to a famous moment. Marty, whose remembering tongue I was, waited at the foot of the cross. He stared desperately at the audience. I groaned, "My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me?" The soldiers who were sheiks grabbed poor Marty to pin him up to die, but he wrenched free, turned again to the audience, and spread his arms aloft to show despair and the end. I murmured at the top of my voice, "The rest is silence, "but as everyone in this room, in this city – in this world – now knows, I shall have life eternal."

That night Mrs. Kornbluh visited our kitchen for a glass of tea.

"How's the virgin?" asked my father with a look of concern

"For a man with a daughter, you got a fresh mouth, Abramovitch."

"Here," said my father kindly, "have some lemon, it'll sweeten your disposition." They debated a little in Yiddish, then fell in a puddle of Russian and Polish. What! Understood next was my father, who said, "Still and all, it was certainly a beautiful affair, you have to admit, introducing us to the beliefs of a different culture"

"Well, yes" said Mrs. Kornbluh. "The only thing you know Charlie Turner – that cute boy in Celia's class – a couple others? They got very small parts or no part at all. In very bad taste, it seemed to me. After all, it's their religion."

"Ach," explained my mother, "what could Mr. Hilton do? They got very small voices: after all, why should they holler? The English language they know from the beginning by heart. They're blond like angels. You think it's so important they should get in the play? Christmas ... the whole piece of goods ... they own it." I listened and listened until I couldn't listen any more. Too sleepy, I climbed out of bed and kneeled. I made a little church of my hands and said. "Hear, O Israel ... Then I called out in Yiddish, "Please, good night, good night. Ssh." My father said, "Ssh yourself." and slammed the kitchen door. I was happy. I fell asleep at once. I had prayed for everybody: my talking family, cousins far away, passersby, and all the lonesome Christians. I expected to be heard. My voice was certainly the loudest.

[1956]

## 5.1. Questions for Text Interpretation

1. Reread the first two sentences personifying the "certain place" inhabited by the main character. What is this place, and how is the personification of place continued?
2. What does the grocer think of Shirley's voice? What is her mother's attitude? Her father's? Mr. Hilton, the teacher's?
3. Why do some people object to Shirley's loud voice, or to her part in the Christmas play? Explain the relationship between this story and larger issues in society.
4. What does Mr. Hilton want in an actor? What "lessons for success" does his advice contain?
5. What does Shirley do as "Right-hand Man?" How is she "foolish but not a fool"?
6. Explain the significance of the Christmas tree incident and Shirley's "kiss of tolerance"?
7. What role does Shirley have in the play, and what parts are played by Marty Groff and Abie Stock? How does the narrator's version of the "long ... sad story" give new meaning to the Christmas story, which Shirley's father says is "not altogether Christian" and "belongs to history, belongs to all men"?

8. Discuss the meaning of the adults' interchange Shirley overhears. How does the line "the whole piece of goods ... they own it" relate to this story and others about childhood?
9. Explain what Shirley's prayers and her goodnights show about her attitudes to the people who would have denied her part in the play. What does she as a person have in common with the part she played?
10. Discuss Shirley's possible future, given her attitude in the last two sentences.

## **5.2. Tasks for Further Exploration**

1. Read another story in which religion and growing up are intertwined as themes, such as "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" by Flannery O'Connor, or "The Conversion of the Jews", by Philip Roth. In what ways is the ironic interplay between religious lessons and coming to adulthood evident in these stories? Explore ways in which the lessons learned have an impact on the lives in O'Connor or Roth's story and the girl's life in Grace Paley's story, in an attempt to determine the effects that sex roles and religious teaching have on children.
2. Examine the author's use of language, style and tone. What makes this quite short story at once funny, sad and touching? What keeps the use of Jewish dialect from being offensively stereotyped, and how does the author create gentle humor, rather than bitter satire?

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## **6. Questions for Discussion or Writing about Section I**

1. How might the theme of "lessons" be applied to each of the stories in this section? What lessons are learned by children? By female children? Are there any lessons learned later, or are all of the major topics of life introduced in childhood?
2. Explore the language of childhood, finding creative uses of words and phrases by the various characters in the stories. How does language reflect each child's world view?
3. What roles do fine arts, such as painting and poetry play in the girls' lives? What form does self-expression take in each story?
4. Stories about childhood often combine humor and pathos. Find examples and explain how the two modes function together.
5. Explore the significance of girls' clothing in the stories. What do hats, veils or hair ribbons suggest as symbols for young girls?
6. Examine the roles of the parents depicted, determining the child's impressions of them in each case. Why are there so many absent parents in the stories and so many other adult women and relatives with an impact on the children's lives?
7. What creates the joys of childhood in each story? What creates the sadness or resentment? Are these provocations for smiles and tears the same as those in later life?
8. Imagine each of these girls in later life. Which stories end with the child's confidence in her future? What clues does each author give about the main character's likelihood of success?

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## 7. Model Composition and Essay Writing: Paradoxes of Childhood

Childhood in the stories of this section is depicted as a matter of “coming to terms” – with the family, peers, the emerging self and the realities of life and death. Throughout the childhood period, young girls struggle to create meaning out of the fragments of information and experience presented by daily life. This struggle is represented in the stories by a myriad of visual and auditory images. The young girls demonstrate a number of conflicting feelings towards the people and objects they encounter, but all display a sense of wonder as their personal universe expands.

The highly charged emotional states of childhood described in the stories (such as “A Child’s Day”) are accompanied by the physiological effects, such as tightening of the throat, a pain in the head from thinking and a pronounced heartbeat. The young girls cry, laugh, sigh and scream; yet these emotional expressions seem unfamiliar to the children, who are surprised by the suddenness of their own bodies’ responses to strong feelings. A mark of the age group is that the characters themselves often do not realize that they are growing and changing. Not only is there a notable lack of self-awareness that develops with age, but there is often a rejection of confusing feelings and responses.

Learning to cope with strong feelings is a dominant theme, with growing, expanding and opening up as recurrent images. The process of increasing awareness is depicted as both painful and exhilarating. But the overwhelming feeling so beautifully reproduced in these stories is childhood’s sense of waiting – waiting for “something wonderful” to happen, for some relief from the boredom of living without purpose, some “secret phrase” or “magic sentence” to clarify the meaning of life.

The waiting for a magic answer can be discomfiting as well, because of the powerlessness of children: parents seem either not to listen, or to be overly intrusive, or to answer in riddles. Children in the stories question, wait to be told and are generally at the mercy of adult whims. The process of growing up seems to be a gradual shift in the balance of power, with independence increasing until adulthood is reached, then diminishing when the individual self is again in danger of becoming relatively dependent in old age.

In response to the feeling of powerlessness, the children often select an adult as supporter or confidante. The young girls depicted here often form a bond with an older woman (usually not the mother), for connecting and affirming life outside of the family. In “My Goddaughter”, for example, a girl claims that her mother discourages her, while her godmother understands her. In other words, girls seem to be looking for external judgements on the seemingly repressive codes of the family.

While other adults provide an outlet for the children’s frustrations, parents often serve as societal “enforcers” in the stories. Images of repression and restriction are prevalent and are usually associated with maternal concern for the young girl’s personal appearance and social appearances. The mother or grandmother is often seen as the conveyer of society’s message of conformity; it is not until the stories of later life that women begin to look back on their relationships with their mothers through an enlightened perspective.

One might expect older female children to serve as mentors for young girls, but the main characters in these stories reject or are rejected by older children going through changes of their own. Also interesting to note is the paradoxical attitude of the girls to communication with others: they want to share feelings with others: they want to share feelings with a special friend, but at the same time they seek out and savor time alone. The children find hiding places under staircases, behind doors or outside in natural enclosures. The young girls find consolation in self-imposed solitude.

Another paradox of childhood is that while the girls in the stories are trying to be exactly like everyone else, they also want to be special and different. Although they have not yet developed a firm sense of personal identity (and are constantly readjusting their perceptions and actions to fit the views of others), the concept of “self” is so strong that they would be surprised to learn that others felt as unique as they are. The intrinsic “rightness” of self is asserted by characters, such as Shirley in “the Loudest Voice”, even when there are hard lessons to be learned.

Each girl tries to balance the enjoyment and pain of being alone or together, alike or different. Despite the conflicting desires of childhood, both the states of solitude and of camaraderie often culminate in epiphany in these stories, boldly represented by elemental images of flames, sky and water. Cynthia in “the Fire” stands by flames with her adult confidante, “inarticulate, full of a strange, excited,

shouting hope...”

Nowhere does the added exhilaration of nature seem so strong as in these stories of childhood; the world of animals, flowers, sunshine and rain inebriates the growing girls. Beautiful natural sites promote dreaming, and it begins to seem as if half of childhood is spent in the hypnotic state. The young girls seem lost at times in trancelike states, mesmerized by nature or by the voices of others.

Dreams contrast with the realities each child must face, including dilemmas about money, work, social status, race and class. Each story raises real questions of childhood, such as those in “The Lesson” in which a girl who has inadvertently fallen into a “trance” makes an effort to look clearly at reality. Why must everyone be concerned with petty details of chores to be done and bills to be paid? How much do things in the “real world” cost, and why can’t everyone have them? Why is there such a difference between rich and poor, black and white? Why doesn’t everyone get along? Why isn’t life as exciting as in books and dreams?

Many lessons of childhood, with the resulting conflicts and emotional highs and lows, are well described by the women writing these stories and poems. Childhood is presented as the period in which the self is bombarded with all of the complexity of life’s impressions and realities, despite the desire to dream alone or to commune with a special friend. Young girls strive to preserve their own uniqueness, while at the same time they begin to conform to the standards of society passed along by family and peers. The wonder and joy of discovering the natural world and the perplexity of making sense of many “lessons” of the real world contribute to the tone of bemusement often evident in these representations of childhood.

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## Section II

### Introduction

- The search for identity
- Extending the horizons
- Moving from innocence to experience
- Relating to peers
- Experiencing disillusionment
- Completing enculturation
- Moving on

Of course a girl does not wake up suddenly at thirteen as an adolescent. As a transition period between childhood and adulthood, adolescence is gradual and could be divided into many substages, according to each individual's development.

In almost every story about adolescence in this section, several common characteristics of the female adolescent emerge. In addition to the extreme passivity noted in some of the stories – the young woman waiting for some other person to give her an identity – there is an enormous preoccupation with physical appearance. Linked to the desire to please and attract young men, the desire for glamorous good looks is a predominant attribute to teenage girls. Often unfortunate victims scorn are those young women who either do not like men or have unconventional interest in intellectual pursuits or “non-female” hobbies.

Even in families expecting academic achievement for their female children, it is rare when it is not assumed that the young woman will also marry and have children. Further, in late childhood and early adolescence women begin to develop a dislike or fear of male-dominated areas, such as science and math, pursuing instead ‘female’ subjects that will eventually lead clerical work or teaching. The enculturation process teaches young women to be helpmates in the home or at work, or at best executive assistants or middle managers, but not top decision makers in life.

As some stories from this section show, ideally that period could be the start of a woman's best time of life. If young women could maintain the exuberance and questioning mentality of childhood, without succumbing to parental and societal pressures, they could perhaps achieve the personal autonomy most authors advocate.

Some of the teenagers in the stories presented here show real promise, leading readers to wonder what external and internal forces have in store for each young woman as adulthood approaches.

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## Story 1

*Kristin Hunter (1931 – 2008)*

*The young woman here is expected to fulfill the expectations of others. In this story, however, Judy seems to find a magic answer which gives her confidence and a sense of power over men and even over her family.*

### DEBUT

"Hold *still*, Judy," Mrs. Simmons said around the spray of pins that protruded dangerously from her mouth. She gave the thirtieth tug to the tight sash at the waist of the dress. "Now walk over there and turn around slowly."

The dress, Judy's first long one, was white organdy over taffeta, with spaghetti straps that bared her round brown shoulders and a floating skirt and a wide sash that cascaded in a butterfly effect behind. It was a dream, but Judy was sick and tired of the endless fittings she had endured so that she might wear it at the Debutantes' Ball. Her thoughts leaped ahead to the Ball itself . . .

"*Slowly*, I said!" Mrs. Simmons' dark, angular face was always grim, but now it was screwed into an expression resembling a prune. Judy, starting nervously, began to revolve by moving her feet an inch at a time.

Her mother watched her critically. "No, it's still not right. I'll just have to rip out that waistline seam again."

"Oh, Mother!" Judy's impatience slipped out at last. "Nobody's going to notice all those little details."

"They will too. They'll be watching you every minute, hoping to see something wrong. You've got to be the best. Can't you get that through your head?" Mrs. Simmons gave a sigh of despair. "You better start noticin' 'all those little details' yourself. I can't do it for you all your life. Now turn around and stand up straight."

"Oh, Mother," Judy said, close to tears from being made to turn and pose while her feet itched to be dancing, "I can't stand it any more!"

"You can't stand it, huh? How do you think I feel?" Mrs. Simmons said in her harshest tone.

Judy was immediately ashamed, remembering the weeks her mother had spent at the sewing machine, pricking her already tattered fingers with needles and pins, and the great weight of sacrifice that had been borne on Mrs. Simmons' shoulders for the past two years so that Judy might bare hers at the Ball.

"All right, take it off," her mother said. "I'm going to take it up the street to Mrs. Luby and let her help me. It's got to be right or I won't let you leave the house. "

"Can't we just leave it the way it is, Mother?" Judy pleaded without hope of success. "I think it's perfect."

"You would," Mrs. Simmons said tartly as she folded the dress and prepared to bear it out of the room. "Sometimes I think I'll never get it through your head. You got to look just right and act just right. That Rose Griffin and those other girls can afford to be careless, maybe, but you can't. You're gonna be the darkest, poorest one there."

Judy shivered in her new lace strapless bra and her old, childish knit snuggies. "You make it sound like a battle I'm going to instead of just a dance."

"It is a battle," her mother said firmly. "It starts tonight and it goes on for the rest of your life. The battle to hold your head up and get someplace and be somebody. We've done all we can for you, your father and I. Now you've got to start fighting some on your own." She gave Judy a slight smile; her voice softened a little. "You'll do all right, don't worry. Try and get some rest this afternoon. Just don't mess up your hair."

"All right. Mother," Judy said listlessly.

She did not really think her father had much to do with anything that happened to her. It was her

mother who had ingratiated her way into the Gay Charmers two years ago, taking all sorts of humiliation from the better-dressed, better-off, lighter-skinned women, humbly making and mending their dresses, fixing food for their meetings, addressing more mail and selling more tickets than anyone else. The club had put it off as long as they could, but finally they had to admit Mrs. Simmons to membership because she worked so hard. And that meant, of course, that Judy would be on the list for this year's Ball.

Her father, a quiet carpenter who had given up any other ambitions years ago, did not think much of Negro society or his wife's fierce determination to launch Judy into it. "Just keep clean and be decent," he would say. "That's all anybody has to do."

Her mother always answered, "If that's all I did we'd still be on relief," and he would shut up with shame over the years when he had been laid off repeatedly and her days' work and sewing had kept them going. Now he had steady work but she refused to quit, as if she expected it to end at any moment. The intense energy that burned in Mrs. Simmons' large dark eyes had scorched her features into permanent irony. She worked day and night and spent her spare time scheming and planning. Whatever her personal ambitions had been, Judy knew she blamed Mr. Simmons for their failure; now all her schemes revolved around their only child.

Judy went to her mother's window and watched her stride down the street with the dress until she was hidden by the high brick wall that went around two sides of their house. Then she returned to her own room. She did not get dressed because she was afraid of pulling a sweater over her hair – her mother would notice the difference even if it looked all right to Judy – and because she was afraid that doing anything, even getting dressed, might precipitate her into the battle. She drew a stool up to her window and looked out. She had no real view, but she liked her room. The wall hid the crowded tenement houses beyond the alley, and from its cracks and bumps and depressions she could construct any imaginary landscape she chose. It was how she had spent most of the free hours of her dreamy adolescence.

"Hey, can I go?"

It was the voice of an invisible boy in the alley. As another boy chuckled, Judy recognized the familiar ritual; if you said yes, they said, "Can I go with you?". It had been tried on her dozens of times. She always walked past, head in the air, as if she had not heard. Her mother said that was the only thing to do; if they knew she was a lady, they wouldn't dare bother her. But this time a girl's voice, cool and assured, answered.

"If you think you're big enough," it said.

It was Lucy Mae Watkins; Judy could picture her standing there in a tight dress with bright, brazen eyes.

"I'm big enough to give you a baby," the boy answered.

Judy would die if a boy ever spoke to her like that, but she knew Lucy Mae could handle it. Lucy Mae could handle all the boys, even if they ganged up on her, because she had been born knowing something other girls had to learn.

"Aw, you ain't big enough to give me a shoe shine," she told him.

"Come here and I'll show you how big I am," the boy said.

"Yeah, Lucy Mae, what's happenin'?" another boy said. "Come here and tell us."

Lucy Mae laughed. "What I'm puttin' down is too strong for little boys like you."

"Come here a minute, baby," the first boy said. "I got a cigarette for you."

"Aw, I ain't studyin' your cigarettes," Lucy Mae answered. But her voice was closer, directly below Judy. There were the sounds of a scuffle and Lucy Mae's muffled laughter. When she spoke her voice sounded raw and cross. "Come on now, boy. Cut it out and give me the damn cigarette." There was more scuffling, and the sharp crack of a slap, and then Lucy Mae said, "Cut it out, I said. Just for that I'm gonna take 'em all." The clack of high heels rang down the sidewalk with a boy's clumsy shoes in pursuit.

Judy realized that there were three of them down there. "Let her go, Buster," one said. "You can't catch her now."

"Aw, hell, man, she took the whole damn pack," the one called Buster complained.

"That'll learn you!" Lucy Mae's voice mocked from down the street. "Don't mess with nothin' you

can't handle."

"Hey, Lucy Mae. Hey, I heard Rudy Grant already gave you a baby," a second boy called out.

"Yeah. Is that true, Lucy Mae?" the youngest one yelled.

There was no answer. She must be a block away by now.

For a moment the hidden boys were silent; then one of them guffawed directly below Judy, and the other two joined in the secret male laughter that was oddly high-pitched and feminine.

"Aw man, I don't know what you all laughin' about," Buster finally grumbled. "That girl took all my cigarettes. You got some, Leroy?"

"Naw," the second boy said.

"Me neither," the third one said.

"What we gonna do? I ain't got but fifteen cent. Hell, man, I want more than a feel for a pack of cigarettes." There was an unpleasant whine in Buster's voice.

"Hell, for a pack of cigarettes I want a bitch to come across."

"She will next time, man," the boy called Leroy said.

"She better," Buster said. "You know she better. If she pass by here again, we gonna jump her, you hear?"

"Sure, man," Leroy said. "The three of us can grab her easy."

"Then we can all three of us have some fun. Oh, *yeah*, man," the youngest boy said. He sounded as if he might be about fourteen.

Leroy said, "We oughtta get Roland and J.T. too. For a whole pack of cigarettes she oughtta treat all five of us."

"Aw, man, why tell Roland and J.T.?" the youngest voice whined.

"They ain't in it. Them was our cigarettes."

"They was my cigarettes, you mean," Buster said with authority. "You guys better quit it before I decide to cut you out."

"Oh, man, don't do that. We with you, you know that."

"Sure, Buster, we your aces, man."

"All right, that's better." There was a minute of silence.

Then, "What we gonna do with the girl, Buster?" the youngest one wanted to know.

"When she *come* back we gonna jump the bitch, man. We gonna jump her and grab her. Then we gonna turn her every way but loose." He went on, spinning a crude fantasy that got wilder each time he retold it, until it became so secretive that their voices dropped to a low indistinct *murmur* punctuated by guffaws. Now and then Judy could distinguish the word "girl" or the other word they used for it; these words always produced the loudest guffaws of all. She shook *off* her fear with the thought that Lucy Mae was too smart to pass there again today. She had heard them at their dirty talk in the alley before and had always been successful in ignoring it; it had nothing to do with her, the wall protected her from their kind. All the ugliness was on their side of it, and this side was hers to fill with beauty.

She turned on her radio to *shut* them out completely and began to weave her tapestry to its music. More for practice than anything else, she started by picturing the maps of the places to which she intended to travel, then went on to the faces of her friends. Rose Griffin's sharp, Indian profile appeared on the wall. Her coloring was like an Indian's too and her hair was straight and black and glossy. Judy's hair, naturally none of these things, had been "done" *four* days ago so that tonight it would be "old" enough to have a gloss as natural-looking as Rose's. But Rose, despite her handsome looks, was silly; her voice broke constantly into high-pitched giggles and she became even sillier and more nervous around boys.

Judy was not sure that she knew how to act around boys either. The sisters kept boys and girls apart at the Catholic high school where her parents sent her to keep her away from low-class kids. But she felt that she knew a secret: tonight, in that dress, with her hair in a sophisticated upsweep, she would be transformed into a poised princess. Tonight all the college boys her mother described so eagerly would rush to dance with her, and then from somewhere the boy would appear. She did not know his name; she neither knew nor cared whether he went to college, but she imagined that he would be as dark as she was, and that there would be awe and diffidence in his manner as he bent to kiss her hand.

A waltz swelled from the radio; the wall, turning blue in deepening twilight, came alive with

whirling figures. Judy rose and began to go through the steps she had rehearsed for so many weeks. She swirled with a practiced smile on her face, holding an imaginary skirt at her side; turned, dipped, and flicked on her bedside lamp without missing a fraction of the beat. Faster and faster she danced with her imaginary partner, to an inner music that was better than the sounds on the radio. She was "coming out," and tonight the world would discover what it had been waiting for all these years.

"Aw git it, baby." She ignored it as she would ignore the crowds that lined the streets to watch her pass on her way to the Ball.

"Aw, do *your* number." She waltzed on, safe and secure on her side of the wall.

"Can I come up there and do it with you?"

At this she stopped, paralyzed. Somehow they had come over the wall or around it and into her room.

"Man, I sure like the view from here," the youngest boy said. "How come we never tried this view before?"

She came to life, ran quickly to the lamp and turned it off, but not before Buster said, "Yeah, and the back view is fine, too."

"Aw, she turned off the light," a voice complained.

"Put it on again, baby, we don't mean no harm."

"Let us see you dance some more. I bet you can really do it."

"Yeah, I bet she can shimmy on down."

"You know it, man."

"Come on down here, baby," Buster's voice urged softly, dangerously. "I got a cigarette for you."

"Yeah, and he got something else for you, too."

Judy, flattened against her closet door, gradually lost her urge to scream. She realized that she was shivering in her underwear. Taking a deep breath, she opened the closet door and found her robe. She thought of going to the window and yelling down, "You don't have anything I want. Do you understand?" But she had more important things to do.

Wrapping her hair in a protective plastic, she ran a full steaming tub and dumped in half a bottle of her mother's favorite cologne. At first she scrubbed herself furiously, irritating her skin. But finally she stopped, knowing she would never be able to get cleaner than this again. She could not wash away the thing they considered dirty, the thing that made them pronounce "girl" in the same way as the other four-letter words they wrote on the wall in the alley; it was part of her, just as it was part of her mother and Rose Griffin and Lucy Mae. She relaxed then because it was true that the boys in the alley did not have a thing she wanted. She had what they wanted, and the knowledge replaced her shame with a strange, calm feeling of power.

After her bath she splashed on more cologne and spent forty minutes on her makeup, erasing and retracing her eyebrows six times until she was satisfied. She went to her mother's room then and found the dress; finished and freshly pressed, on its hanger.

When Mrs. Simmons came upstairs to help her daughter she found her sitting on the bench before the vanity mirror as if it were a throne. She looked young and arrogant and beautiful and perfect and cold.

"Why, you're dressed already," Mrs. Simmons said in surprise. While she stared, Judy rose with perfect, icy grace and glided to the center of the room. She stood there motionless as a mannequin.

"I want you to fix the hem, Mother," she directed. "It's still uneven in back." Her mother went down obediently on her knees muttering, "It looks all right to me." She put in a couple of pins. "That better?"

"Yes," Judy said with a brief glance at the mirror. "You'll have to sew it on me, Mother, I can't take it off now. I'd ruin my hair."

Mrs. Simmons went to fetch her sewing things, returned and surveyed her daughter. "You sure did a good job on yourself, I must say," she admitted grudgingly. "Can't find a thing to complain about. You'll look as good as anybody there. "

"Of course, Mother," Judy said as Mrs. Simmons knelt and sewed. "I don't know what you were so worried about." Her secret feeling of confidence had returned, stronger than ever, but the evening ahead was no longer a vague girlish fantasy she had pictured on the wall; it had hard, clear outlines leading up to a definite goal. She would be the belle of the Ball because she knew more than Rose Griffin and her

silly friends; more than her mother, more, even than Lucy Mae, because she knew better than to settle for a mere pack of cigarettes.

"There," her mother said, breaking the thread. She got up. "I never expected to get you ready this early. Ernest Lee won't be here for another hour."

"That silly Ernest Lee," Judy said, with a new contempt in her young voice. Until tonight she had been pleased by the thought of going to the dance with Ernest Lee; he was nice, she felt comfortable with him, and he might even be the awe-struck boy of her dream. He was a dark, serious neighborhood boy who could not afford to go to college; Mrs. Simmons had reluctantly selected him to take Judy to the dance because all the Gay Charmers' sons were spoken for. Now, with an undertone of excitement, Judy said, "I'm going to ditch him after the first dance, Mother. You'll see. I'm going to come home with one of the college boys."

"It's very nice, Ernest Lee," she told him an hour later when he handed her the white orchid, "but it's rather small. I'm going to wear it on my wrist, if you don't mind." And then, dazzling him with a smile of sweetest cruelty, she stepped back and waited while he fumbled with the door.

"You know, Edward, I'm not worried about her any more," Mrs. Simmons said to her husband after the children were gone. Her voice became harsh and grating. "Put down that paper and listen to me! Aren't you interested in your child? – That's better," she said as he complied meekly. "I was saying, I do believe she's learned what I've been trying to teach her, after all."

[1968]

### **1.1. Questions for Text Interpretation**

1. What is Judy's original attitude towards the dress fittings? How do her feelings resemble those of girls in Section 1?
2. Describe Mrs. Simmons' attitude towards her daughter and the dance. Explain the significance of her comment that Judy will be the "darkest, poorest one there". What motifs are suggested by the comment that are repeated throughout the story?
3. Analyze the few references to the father in the story. What roles does he play that might resemble the role of future men in Judy's life?
4. What does the overheard incident between Lucy Mae and the boys outside have to do with Judy's situation? Discuss Hunter's use of character pairs and its effect on the theme of choices available for adolescent women.
5. What is the meaning of Judy's thought that the boys use "girl" as another four-letter word?
6. After Judy's initial shock at being watched by the boys, why does she discover a "calm feeling of power"?
7. How does Judy treat people after her discovery that she "knows more than" her mother and friends?
8. Has Judy learned what her mother was trying to teach her, after all? What lesson has Judy learned?
9. What does Judy want out of life and how does she intend to get it? What type of a person will she be and how will she be the same or different from her mother?

### **1.2. Tasks for Further Exploration**

1. Richard Wright's "Black Boy" tells a story of a young black male growing up in poverty and struggling for personal power. Compare Wright's narrative to this account of a young black female: which factors seem stronger in creating power or powerlessness for an adolescent – race, sex, age or other factors?

2. In Madonna Kolbenschlag's "Kiss Sleeping Beauty Goodbye", how can the following criticism of Marabel Morgan's "Total Woman" be applied to the lesson Judy learns in "Debut"?

The objective of much of the advice in "Total Woman" seems to be to stroke the male ego enough to reduce him to a slobbering, adoring fool. In effect, the goal is adulation and creating the craving for it – not on relationship and communication (as between two autonomous persons), but on manipulation and dissimulation.

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## Story 2

Joyce Carol Oates

1938

*Connie, the teenager in this story, leads two lives – one at home and one with her peers. But when she wants to return to the security of the home and family she has been trying to escape, she learns that "you can't go home again".*

### WHERE ARE YOU GOING, WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?

Her name was Connie. She was fifteen and she had a quick nervous giggling habit of craning her neck to glance into mirrors, or checking other people's faces to make sure her own was all right. Her mother, who noticed everything and knew everything and who hadn't much reason any longer to look at her own face, always scolded Connie about it. "Stop gawking at yourself, who are you? You think you're so pretty?" she would say. Connie would raise her eyebrows at these familiar complaints and look right through her mother, into a shadowy vision of herself as she was right at that moment: she knew she was pretty and that was everything. Her mother had been pretty once too, if you could believe those old snapshots in the album, but now her looks were gone and that was why she was always after Connie.

"Why don't you keep your room clean like your sister? How've you got your hair fixed-what the hell stinks? Hair spray? You don't see your sister using that junk."

Her sister June was twenty-four and still lived at home. She was a secretary in the high school Connie attended, and if that wasn't bad enough with her in the same building – she was so plain and chunky and steady that Connie had to hear her praised all the time by her mother and her mother's sisters. June did this, June did that, she saved money and helped clean the house and cooked and Connie couldn't do a thing, her mind was all filled with trashy daydreams. Their father was away at work most of the time and when he came home he wanted supper and he read the newspaper at supper and after supper he went to bed. He didn't bother talking much to them, but around his bent head Connie's mother kept picking at her until Connie wished her mother was dead and she herself was dead and it was all over. "She makes me want to throw up sometimes," she complained to her friends. She had a high, breathless, amused voice which made everything she said sound a little forced, whether it was sincere or not.

There was one good thing: June went places with girl friends of hers, girls who were just as plain and steady as she, and so when Connie wanted to do that her mother had no objections. The father of Connie's best girl friend drove the girls the three miles to town and left them off at a shopping plaza, so that they could walk through the stores or go to a movie, and when he came to pick them up again at eleven he never bothered to ask what they had done.

They must have been familiar sights, walking around that shopping plaza in their shorts and flat ballerina slippers that always scuffed the sidewalk, with charm bracelets jingling on their thin wrists; they would lean together to whisper and laugh secretly if someone passed by who amused or interested them. Connie had long dark blond hair that drew anyone's eye to it, and she wore part of it pulled up on

her head and puffed out and the rest of it she let fall down her back. She wore a pullover jersey blouse that looked one way when she was at home and another way when she was away from home. Everything about her had two sides to it, one for home and one for anywhere that was not home: her walk that could be childlike and bobbing, or languid enough to make anyone think she was hearing music in her head, her mouth which was pale and smirking most of the time, but bright and pink on these evenings out, her laugh which was cynical and drawling at home – "Ha, ha, very funny" – but high-pitched and nervous anywhere else, like the jingling of the charms on her bracelet.

Sometimes they did go shopping or to a movie, but sometimes they went across the highway, ducking fast across the busy road, to a drive-in restaurant where older kids hung out.

The restaurant was shaped like a big bottle, though squatter than a real bottle, and on its cap was a revolving figure of a grinning boy who held a hamburger aloft. One night in mid-summer they ran across, breathless with daring, and right away someone leaned out a car window and invited them over, but it was just a boy from high school they didn't like. It made them feel good to be able to ignore him. They went up through the maze of parked and cruising cars to the bright-lit, fly-infested restaurant, their faces pleased and expectant as if they were entering a sacred building that loomed out of the night to give them what haven and what blessing they yearned for. They sat at the counter and crossed their legs at the ankles, their thin shoulders rigid with excitement, and listened to the music that made everything so good: the music was always in the background like music at a church service, it was something to depend upon.

A boy named Eddie came in to talk with them. He sat backwards on his stool, turning himself jerkily around in semi-circles and then stopping and turning again, and after a while he asked Connie if she would like something to eat. She said she did and so she tapped her friend's arm on her way out – her friend pulled her face up into a brave droll look – and Connie said she would meet her at eleven, across the way. "I just hate to leave her like that," Connie said earnestly, but the boy said that she wouldn't be alone for long. So they went out to his car and on the way Connie couldn't help but let her eyes wander over the windshields and faces all around her, her face gleaming with a joy that had nothing to do with Eddie or even this place; it might have been the music. She drew her shoulders up and sucked in her breath with the pure pleasure of being alive, and just at that moment she happened to glance at a face just a few feet from hers. It was a boy with shaggy black hair, in a convertible jalopy painted gold. He stared at her and then his lips widened into a grin. Connie slit her eyes at him and turned away, but she couldn't help glancing back and there he was still watching her. He wagged a finger and laughed and said, "Gonna get you, baby," and Connie turned away again without Eddie noticing anything.

She spent three hours with him, at the restaurant where they ate hamburgers and drank Cokes in wax cups that were always sweating, and then down an alley a mile or so away, and when she left her off at five to eleven only the movie house was still open at the plaza. Her girl friend was there, talking with a boy. When Connie came up the two girls smiled at each other and Connie said, "How was the movie?" and the girl said, "You should know." They rode off with the girl's father, sleepy and pleased, and Connie couldn't help but look at the darkened shopping plaza with its big empty parking lot and its signs that were faded and ghostly now, and over at the drive-in restaurant where cars were still circling tirelessly. She couldn't hear the music at this distance.

Next morning June asked her how the movie was and Connie said, "So-so". She and that girl and occasionally another girl went out several times a week that way, and the rest of the time Connie spent around the house – it was summer vacation – getting in her mother's way and thinking, dreaming, about the boys she met. But all the boys fell back and dissolved into a single face that was not even a face, but an idea, a feeling, mixed up with the urgent insistent pounding of the music and the humid night air of July. Connie's mother kept dragging her back to the daylight by finding things for her to do or saying, suddenly, "What's this about the Pettinger girl?"

And Connie would say nervously, "Oh, her. That dope." She always drew thick clear lines between herself and such girls, and her mother was simple and kindly enough to believe her. Her mother was so simple, Connie thought, that it was maybe cruel to fool her so much. Her mother went scuffling around the house in old bedroom slippers and complained over the telephone to one sister about the other, then the other called up and the two of them complained about the third one. If June's name was mentioned

her mother's tone was approving, and if Connie's name was mentioned it was disapproving. This did not really mean she disliked Connie and actually Connie thought that her mother preferred her to June because she was prettier, but the two of them kept up a pretense of exasperation, a sense that they were tugging and struggling over something of little value to either of them. Sometimes, over coffee, they were almost friends, but something would come up – some vexation that was like a fly buzzing suddenly around their heads – and their faces went hard with contempt.

One Sunday Connie got up at eleven – none of them bothered with church – and washed her hair so that it could dry all day long, in the sun. Her parents and sister were going to a barbecue at an aunt's house and Connie said no, she wasn't interested, rolling her eyes to let mother know just what she thought of it. "Stay home alone then," her mother said sharply. Connie sat out back in a lawn chair and watched them drive away, her father quiet and bald, hunched around so that he could back the car out, her mother with a look that was still angry and not at all softened through the windshield, and in the back seat poor old June all dressed up as if she didn't know what a barbecue was, with all the running yelling kids and the flies. Connie sat with her eyes closed in the sun, dreaming and dazed with the warmth about her as if this were a kind of love, the caresses of love, and her mind slipped over onto thoughts of the boy she had been with the night before and how nice he had been, how sweet it always was, not the way someone like June would suppose but sweet, gentle, the way it was in movies and promised in songs; and when she opened her eyes she hardly knew where she was, the back yard ran off into weeds and a fence-line of trees and behind it the sky was perfectly blue and still. The asbestos "ranch house" that was now three years old startled her – it looked small. She shook her head as if to get awake.

It was too hot. She went inside the house and turned on the radio to drown out the quiet. She sat on the edge other bed, barefoot, and listened for an hour and a half to a program called XYZ Sunday Jamboree, record after record of hard, fast, shrieking songs she sang along with, interspersed by exclamations from "Bobby King": "An' look here you girls at Napoleon's – Son and Charley want you to pay real close attention to this song coming up!"

And Connie paid close attention herself, bathed in a glow of slow-pulsed joy that seemed to rise mysteriously out of the music itself and lay languidly about the airless little room, breathed in and breathed out with each gentle rise and fall of her chest.

After a while she heard a car coming up the drive. She sat up at once, startled, because it couldn't be her father so soon. The gravel kept crunching all the way in from the road –the driveway was long – and Connie ran to the window. It was a car she didn't know. It was an open jalopy, painted a bright gold that caught the sunlight opaquely. Her heart began to pound and her fingers snatched at her hair, checking it, and she whispered "Christ. Christ," wondering how bad she looked. The car came to a stop at the side door and the horn sounded four short taps as if this were a signal Connie knew.

She went into the kitchen and approached the door slowly, then hung out the screen door, her bare toes curling down off the step. There were two boys in the car and now she recognized the driver: he had shaggy, shabby black hair that looked crazy as a wig and he was grinning at her.

"I ain't late, am I?" he said.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" Connie said. "Toldja I'd be out, didn't I?" "I don't even know who you are."

She spoke sullenly, careful to show no interest or pleasure, and he spoke in a fast bright monotone. Connie looked past him to the other boy, taking her time. He had fair brown hair, with a lock that fell onto his forehead. His sideburns gave him a fierce, embarrassed look, but so far he hadn't even bothered to glance at her. Both boys wore sunglasses. The driver's glasses were metallic and mirrored everything in miniature.

"You wanta come for a ride?" he said.

Connie smirked and let her hair fall loose over one shoulder.

"Don'tcha like my car? New paint job," he said. "Hey."

"What?"

"You're cute."

She pretended to fidget, chasing flies away from the door.

"Don'tcha believe me, or what?" he said.

"Look, I don't even know who you are," Connie said in disgust.

"Hey, Ellie's got a radio, see. Mine's broke down." He lifted his friend's arm and showed her the little transistor the boy was holding, and now Connie began to hear the music. It was the same program that was playing inside the house. "Bobby King?" she said.

"I listen to him all the time. I think he's great."

"He's kind of great," Connie said reluctantly.

"Listen, that guy's *great*. He knows where the action is."

Connie blushed a little, because the glasses made it impossible for her to see just what this boy was looking at. She couldn't decide if she liked him or if he was just a jerk, and so she dawdled in the doorway and wouldn't come down or go back inside. She said, "What's all that stuff painted on your car?"

"Can'tcha read it?" He opened the door very carefully, as if he was afraid it might fall off. He slid out just as carefully, planting his feet firmly on the ground, the tiny metallic world in his glasses slowing down like gelatin hardening and in the midst of it Connie's bright green blouse. "This here is my name, to begin with," he said. ARNOLD FRIEND was written in tar-like black letters on the side, with a drawing of a round grinning face that reminded Connie of a pumpkin, except it wore sunglasses. "I wanta introduce myself, I'm Arnold Friend and that's my real name and I'm gonna be your friend, honey, and inside the car's Ellie Oscar, he's kinda shy." Ellie brought his transistor radio up to his shoulder and balanced it there. "Now these numbers are a secret code, honey," Arnold Friend explained. He read off the numbers 33, 19, 17 and raised his eyebrows at her to see what she thought of that, but she didn't think much of it. The left rear fender had been smashed and around it was written, on the gleaming gold background: DONE BY CRAZY WOMAN DRIVER. Connie had to laugh at that. Arnold Friend was pleased at her laughter and looked up at her. "Around the other side's a lot more – you wanta come and see them?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Why should I?"

"Don'tcha wanta see what's on the car? Don'tcha wanta go for a ride?" "I don't know."

"Why not?"

"I got things to do."

"Like what?"

"Things. "

He laughed as if she had said something funny. He slapped his thighs. He was standing in a strange way, leaning back against the car as if he were balancing himself. He wasn't tall, only an inch or so taller than she would be if she came down to him. Connie liked the way he was dressed, which was the way all of them dressed: tight faded jeans stuffed into black, scuffed boots, a belt that pulled his waist in and showed how lean he was, and a white pull-over shirt that was a little soiled and showed the hard small muscles of his arms and shoulders. He looked as if he probably did hard work, lifting and carrying things. Even his neck looked muscular. And his face was a familiar face, somehow: the jaw and chin and cheeks slightly darkened, because he hadn't shaved for a day or two, and the nose long and hawk-like, sniffing as if she were a treat he was going to gobble up and it was all a joke.

"Connie, you ain't telling the truth. This is your day set aside for a ride with me and you know it," he said, still laughing. The way he straightened and recovered from his fit of laughing showed that it had been all fake.

"How do you know what my name is?" she said suspiciously.

"It's Connie."

"Maybe and maybe not."

"I know my Connie," he said, wagging his finger. Now she remembered him even better, back at the restaurant, and her cheeks warmed at the thought of how she sucked in her breath just at the moment she passed him – how she must have looked to him. And he had remembered her. "Ellie and I come out here especially for you," he said. "Ellie can sit in back. How about it?"

"Where?"

"Where what?"

"Where're we going?"

He looked at her. He took off the sunglasses and she saw how pale the skin around his eyes was, like holes that were not in shadow but instead in light. His eyes were like chips of broken glass that catch the light in an amiable way. He smiled. It was as if the idea of going for a ride somewhere, to some place, was a new idea to him.

"Just for a ride, Connie sweetheart."

"I never said my name was Connie," she said.

"But I know what it is. I know your name and all about you, lots of things," Arnold Friend said. He had not moved yet but stood still leaning back against the side of his jalopy. "I took a special interest in you, such a pretty girl, and found out all about you like I know your parents and sister are gone somewhere and I know where and how long they're going to be gone, and I know who you were with last night, and your best girl friend's name is Betty. Right?"

He spoke in a simple lilting voice, exactly as if he were reciting the words to a song. His smile assured her that everything was fine. In the car Ellie turned up the volume on his radio and did not bother to look around at them.

"Ellie can sit in the back seat," Arnold Friend said. He indicated his friend with a casual jerk of his chin, as if Ellie did not count and she should not bother with him.

"How'd you find out all that stuff?" Connie said.

"Listen: Betty Schultz and Moby Fitch and Jimmy Pettinger and Nancy Pettinger," he said, in a chant. "Raymond Stanley and Bob Hutter –"

"Do you know all those kids?"

"I know everybody."

"Look, you're kidding. You're not from around here."

"Sure."

"But – how come we never saw you before?"

"Sure you saw me before," he said. He looked down at his boots, as if he were a little offended.

"You just don't remember."

"I guess I'd remember you," Connie said.

"Yeah?" He looked up at this, beaming. He was pleased. He began to mark time with the music from Ellie's radio, tapping his fists lightly together. Connie looked away from his smile to the car, which was painted so bright it almost hurt her eyes to look at it. She looked at that name, ARNOLD FRIEND. And up at the front fender was an expression that was familiar – MAN MHE FLYING SAUCERS. It was an expression kids had used the year before, but didn't use this year. She looked at it for a while as if the words meant something to her that she did not yet know.

"What're you thinking about? Huh?" Arnold Friend demanded. "Not worried about your hair blowing around in the car, are you?"

"No."

"Think I maybe can't drive good?"

"How do I know?"

"You're a hard girl to handle. How come?" he said. "Don't you know I'm your friend?"

Didn't you see me put my sign in the air when you walked by?"

"What sign?"

"My sign." And he drew an X in the air, leaning out toward her. They were maybe ten feet apart. After his hand fell back to his side the X was still in the air, almost visible. Connie let the screen door close and stood perfectly still inside it, listening to the music from her radio and the boy's blend together. She stared at Arnold Friend. He stood there so stiffly relaxed, pretending to be relaxed, with one hand idly on the door handle as if he were keeping himself up that way and had no intention of ever moving again. She recognized most things about him, the tight jeans that showed his thighs and buttocks and the greasy leather boots and the tight shirt, and even that slippery friendly smile of his, that sleepy dreamy smile that all the boys used to get across ideas they didn't want to put into words. She recognized all this and also the singsong way he talked, slightly mocking, kidding, but serious and a little melancholy, and she recognized the way he tapped one fist against the other in homage to the perpetual music behind him. But all these things did not come together.

She said suddenly, "Hey, how old are you?"

His smile faded. She could see then that he wasn't a kid, he was much older-thirty, maybe more. At this knowledge her heart began to pound faster. "That's a crazy thing to ask. Can'tcha see I'm your own age?"

"Like hell you are."

"Or maybe a coupla years older, I'm eighteen."

"Eighteen?" she said doubtfully.

He grinned to reassure her and lines appeared at the corners of his mouth.

His teeth were big and white. He grinned so broadly his eyes became slits and she saw how thick the lashes were, thick and black as if painted with a black tar-like material. Then he seemed to become embarrassed, abruptly, and looked over his shoulder at Ellie. "*Him*, he's crazy," he said. "Ain't he a riot, he's a nut, a real character." Ellie was still listening to the music. His sunglasses told nothing about what he was thinking. He wore a bright orange shirt unbuttoned halfway to show his chest, which was a pale, bluish chest and not muscular like Arnold Friend's. His shirt collar was turned up all around and the very tips of the collar pointed out past his chin as if they were protecting him. He was pressing the transistor radio up against his ear and sat there in a kind of daze, right in the sun.

"He's kinda strange," Connie said.

"Hey, she says you're kinda strange! Kinda strange!" Arnold Friend cried.

He pounded on the car to get Ellie's attention. Ellie turned for the first time and Connie saw with shock that he wasn't a kid either – he had a fair, hairless face, cheeks reddened slightly as if the veins grew too close to the surface of his skin, the face of a forty-year-old baby. Connie felt a wave of dizziness rise in her at this sight and she stared at him as if waiting for something to change the shock of the moment, make it all right again. Ellie's lips kept shaping words, mumbling along with the words blasting in his ear.

"Maybe you two better go away," Connie said faintly.

"What? How come?" Arnold Friend cried. "We come out here to take you for a ride. It's Sunday." He had the voice of the man on the radio now. It was the same voice, Connie thought.

"Don'tcha know it's Sunday all day and honey, no matter who you were with last night today you're with Arnold Friend and don't you forget it! – Maybe you better step out here," He said, and this last was in a different voice. It was a little flatter, as if the heat was finally getting to him.

"No. I got things to do."

"Hey."

"You two better leave."

"We ain't leaving until you come with us."

"Like hell I am –"

"Connie, don't fool around with me. I mean, I mean, don't fool *around*' be said, shaking his head. He laughed incredulously. He placed his sunglasses on top of his head, carefully, as if he were indeed wearing a wig, and brought the stems down behind his ears. Connie stared at him, another wave of dizziness and fear rising in her so that for a moment he wasn't even in focus but was just a blur, standing there against his gold car, and she had the idea that he had driven up the driveway all right but had come from nowhere before that and belonged nowhere and that everything about him and even about the music that was so familiar to her was only half real.

"If my father comes and sees you –"

"He ain't coming. He's at a barbecue."

"How do you know that?"

"Aunt Tune's. Right now they're – uh – they're drinking. Sitting around," he said vaguely, squinting as if he were staring all the way to town and over to Aunt Millie's back yard. Then the vision seemed to get clear and he nodded energetically. "Yeah. Sitting around. There's your sister in a blue dress, huh? And high heels, the poor sad bitch – nothing like you, sweetheart! And your mother's helping some fat woman with the corn they're cleaning the com-husking the corn –"

"What fat woman?" Connie cried.

"How do I know what fat woman. I don't know every goddam fat woman in the world!" Arnold Friend laughed.

"Oh, that's Mrs. Hornby ... Who invited her?" Connie said. She felt a little light-headed. Her breath was coming quickly.

"She's too fat. I don't like them fat. I like them the way you are, honey," he said, smiling sleepily at her. They stared at each other for a while, through the screen door. He said softly, "Now what you're going to do is this: you're going to come out that door. You're going to sit up front with me and Ellie's going to sit in the back, the hell with Ellie, right? This isn't Ellie's date. You're my date. I'm your lover, honey."

"What? You're crazy –"

"Yes, I'm your lover. You don't know what that is but you will," he said. "I know that too. I know all about you. But look: it's real nice and you couldn't ask for nobody better than me, or more polite. I always keep my word. I'll tell you how it is, I'm always nice at first, the first time. I'll hold you so tight you won't think you have to try to get away or pretend anything because you'll know you can't. And I'll come inside you where it's all secret and you'll give in to me and you'll love me –"

"Shut up! You're crazy!" Connie said. She backed away from the door. She put her hands against her ears as if she'd heard something terrible, something not meant for her. "People don't talk like that, you're crazy," she muttered. Her heart was almost too big now for her chest and its pumping made sweat break out all over her. She looked out to see Arnold Friend pause and then take a step toward the porch lurching. He almost fell. But, like a clever drunken man, he managed to catch his balance. He wobbled in his high boots and grabbed hold of one of the porch posts.

"Honey –?" he said. "You still listening?" "Get the hell out of here!"

"Be nice, honey. Listen."

"I'm going to call the police –"

He wobbled again and out of the side of his mouth came a fast spat curse, an aside not meant for her to hear. But even this "Christ!" sounded forced. Then he began to smile again. She watched this smile come, awkward as if he were smiling from inside a mask. His whole face was a mask, she thought wildly, tanned down onto his throat but then running out as if he had plastered make-up on his face but had forgotten about his throat.

"Honey – ? Listen, here's how it is. I always tell the truth and I promise you this: I ain't coming in that house after you."

"You better not! I'm going to call the police if you –if you don't –" "Honey," he said, talking right through her voice, "honey, I'm not coming in there but you are coming out here. You know why?"

She was panting. The kitchen looked like a place she had never seen before, some room she had run inside but which wasn't good enough, wasn't going to help her. The kitchen window had never had a curtain, after three years, and there were dishes in the sink for her to do – probably –and if you ran your hand across the table you'd probably feel something sticky there.

"You listening, honey? Hey?" "

– going to call the police –"

"Soon as you touch the phone I don't need to keep my promise and can come inside. You won't want that."

She rushed forward and tried to lock the door. Her fingers were shaking. "But why lock it," Arnold Friend said gently, talking right into her face. "It's just a screen door. It's just nothing." One of his boots was at a strange angle, as if his foot wasn't in it. It pointed out to the left, bent at the ankle. "I mean, anybody can break through a screen door and glass and wood and iron or anything else if he needs to, anybody at all and specially Arnold Friend. If the place got lit up with a fire honey you'd come running out into my arms, right into my arms and safe at home – like you knew I was your lover and 'd stopped fooling around. I don't mind a nice shy girl but I don't like no fooling around." Part of those words were spoken with a slight rhythmic lilt, and Connie somehow recognized them – the echo of a song from last year, about a girl rushing into her boy friend's arms and coming home again –

Connie stood barefoot on the linoleum floor, staring at him. "What do you want?" she whispered.

"I want you," he said.

"What?"

"Seen you that night and thought, that's the one, yes sir. I never needed to look any more."

"But my father's coming back. He's coming to get me. I had to wash my hair first –" She spoke in a

dry, rapid voice, hardly raising it for him to hear.

"No, your daddy is not coming and yes, you had to wash your hair and you washed it for me. It's nice and shining and all for me, I thank you, sweetheart," he said, with a mock bow, but again he almost lost his balance. He had to bend and adjust his boots. Evidently his feet did not go all the way down; the boots must have been stuffed with something so that he would seem taller. Connie stared out at him and behind him Ellie in the car, who seemed to be looking off toward Connie's right, into nothing. This Ellie said, pulling the words out of the air one after another as if he were just discovering them, "You want me to pull out the phone?"

"Shut your mouth and keep it shut," Arnold Friend said, his face red from bending over or maybe from embarrassment because Connie had seen his boots. "This ain't none of your business."

"What – what are you doing? What do you want?" Connie said. "If I call the police they'll get you, they'll arrest you –"

"Promise was not to come in unless you touch that phone, and I'll keep that promise," he said. He resumed his erect position and tried to force his shoulders back. He sounded like a hero in a movie, declaring something important. He spoke too loudly and it was as if he were speaking to someone behind Connie. "I ain't made plans for coming in that house where I don't belong but just for you to come out to me, the way you should. Don't you know who I am?"

"You're crazy," she whispered. She backed away from the door but did not want to go into another part of the house, as if this would give him permission to come through the door. "What do you ... You're crazy, you ..."

"Huh? What're you saying, honey?"

Her eyes darted everywhere in the kitchen. She could not remember what it was, this room.

"This is how it is, honey: you come out and we'll drive away, have a nice ride. But if you don't come out we're gonna wait till your people come home and then they're all going to get it."

"You want that telephone pulled out?" Ellie said. He held the radio away from his ear and grimaced, as if without the radio the air was too much for him.

"I toldja shut up, Ellie," Arnold Friend said, "you're deaf, get a hearing aid, right? Fix yourself up. This little girl's no trouble and's gonna be nice to me, so Ellie keep to yourself, this ain't your date – right? Don't hem in on me. Don't hog. Don't crush. Don't bird dog. Don't trail me," he said in a rapid meaningless voice, as if he were running through all the expressions he'd learned but was no longer sure which one of them was in style, then rushing on to new ones, making them up with his eyes closed, "Don't crawl under my fence, don't squeeze in my chipmunk hole, don't sniff my glue, suck my popsicle, keep your own greasy fingers on yourself!" He shaded his eyes and peered in at Connie, who was backed against the kitchen table.

"Don't mind him honey he's just a creep. He's a dope. Right? I'm the boy for you and like I said you come out here nice like a lady and give me your hand, and nobody else gets hurt, I mean, your nice old bald-headed daddy and your mummy and your sister in her high heels. Because listen: why bring them in this?"

"Leave me alone," Connie whispered.

"Hey, you know that old woman down the road, the one with the chickens and stuff – you know her?"

"She's dead!"

"Dead? What? You know her?" Arnold Friend said.

"She's dead –"

"Don't *you* like her?"

"She's dead – she's – she isn't here any more –"

"But don't you like her, I mean, you got something against her? Some grudge or something?" Then his voice dipped as if he were conscious of a rudeness. He touched the sunglasses perched on top of his head as if to make sure they were still there. "Now you be a good girl."

"What are you going to do?"

"Just two things, or maybe three," Arnold Friend said.. "But I promise it won't last long and you'll like me that way you get to like people you're close to. You will. It's all over for you here, so come on out. You don't want your people in any trouble, do you?"

She turned and bumped against a chair or something, hurting her leg, but she ran into the back room and picked up the telephone. Something roared in her ear, a tiny roaring, and she was so sick with fear that she could do nothing but listen to it – the telephone was clammy and very heavy and her fingers groped down to the dial but were too weak to touch it. She began to scream into the phone, into the roaring. She cried out, she cried for her mother, she felt her breath start jerking back and forth in her lungs as if it were something Arnold Friend were stabbing her with again and again with no tenderness. A noisy sorrowful wailing rose all about her and she was locked inside it the way she was locked inside this house.

After a while she could hear again. She was sitting on the floor with her wet back against the wall.

Arnold Friend was saying from the door, "That's a good girl. Put the phone back." She kicked the phone away from her.

"No, honey. Pick it up. Put it back right."

She picked it up and put it back. The dial tone stopped.

"That's a good girl. Now you come outside."

She was hollow with what had been fear, but what was now just an emptiness. All that screaming had blasted it out of her. She sat, one leg cramped under her, and deep inside her brain was something like a pinpoint of light that kept going and would not let her relax. She thought, I'm not going to see my mother again. She thought, I'm not going to sleep in my bed again. Her bright green blouse was all wet.

Arnold Friend said, in a gentle-loud voice that was like a stage voice, "The place where you came from ain't there any more, and where you had in mind to go is cancelled out. This place you are now – inside your daddy's house – is nothing but a cardboard box I can knock down any time. You know that and always did know it. You hear me?" She thought, I have got to think. I have to know what to do.

"We'll go out to a nice field, out in the country here where it smells so nice and it's sunny," Arnold Friend said. "I'll have my arms tight around you so you won't need to try to get away and I'll show you what love is like, what it does. The hell with this house! It looks solid all right," he said. He ran a fingernail down the screen and the noise did not make Connie shiver, as it would have the day before. "Now put your hand on your heart, honey. Feel that? That feels solid too but we know better, be nice to me, be sweet like you can because what else is there for a girl like you but to be sweet and pretty and give in? – and get away before her people come back?"

She felt her pounding heart. Her hand seemed to enclose it. She thought for the first time in her life that it was nothing that was hers, that belonged to her, but just a pounding, living thing inside this body that wasn't really hers either.

"You don't want them to get hurt," Arnold Friend went on. "Now get up, honey. Get up all by yourself."

She stood.

"Now turn this way. That's right. Come over here to me – Ellie, put that away, didn't I tell you? You dope. You miserable creepy dope," Arnold Friend said. His words were not angry but only part of an incantation. The incantation was kindly. "Now come out through the kitchen to me honey and let's see a smile, try it, you're a brave sweet little girl and now they're eating corn and hotdogs cooked to bursting over an outdoor fire, and they don't know one thing about you and never did and honey you're better than them because not a one of them would have done this for you."

Connie felt the linoleum under her feet; it was cool. She brushed her hair back out of her eyes. Arnold Friend let go of the post tentatively and opened his arms for her, his elbows pointing in toward each other and his wrists limp, to show that this was an embarrassed embrace and a little mocking, he didn't want to make her self-conscious.

She put out her hand against the screen. She watched herself push the door slowly open as if she were safe back somewhere in the other doorway, watching this body and this head of long hair moving out into the sunlight where Arnold Friend waited.

"My sweet little blue-eyed girl" he said, in a half-sung sigh that had nothing to do with her brown eyes but was taken up just the same by the vast sunlit reaches of the land behind him and on all sides of him, so much land that Connie had never seen before and did not recognize except to know that she was going to it.

[1965]

## 2.1 Questions for Text Interpretation

1. Contrast Connie's appearance and behavior with that of her sister June. What effect does this character contrast have on the story?
2. Describe Connie's two selves, "home" and "not-home".
3. Identify each time that music is mentioned in the story. What function does music play for Connie?
4. Describe Connie's "altered state" in the back yard. How do the references to mirrors throughout the story relate to Connie's state of mind?
5. Describe Connie's first meeting with the "boy with shaggy black hair, in a convertible jalopy". What might be suggested by these remarks Connie makes to him later: "Christ. Christ.... Who the hell do you think you are?" "Like hell you are. ... Like hell I am"?
6. Why does his hair look like a wig, and face like a mask? What else is "fake" about his appearance?
7. Why does Arnold Friend's face seem familiar? In what sense might he be An Old Friend (or an Old Fiend?) and what might the other names in the story signify?
8. How does Arnold know Connie's name, her friends' names and what her family is doing at the barbecue? How does he know a dead woman, and what might the X in the air suggest? What could explain the fact that his feet do "not go all the way down" and that his boots are stuffed?
9. What might the problems with the telephone symbolize in the story? Also, explain what the house suggests as a symbol and why Arnold won't go in, but expects Connie to come out.
10. What does Arnold mean by "I'm your lover"? Explain the line, "The place where you came from ain't there any more and where you had in mind to go is cancelled out". How does it relate to the last line of the story?

## 2.2.Tasks for Further Exploration

1. See "Smooth Talk", the film based on this story, and compare the two versions, especially the endings. In what sense is Oates's story a didactic warning to teenagers? What problems she suggests are associated with growing up in the modern world?
2. Two similar stories by Joyce Carol Oates are "The Girl" and "Boy and Girl". Find out the meaning of the "Faustian theme" in literature (start by looking up "Faust" in the dictionary) and determine which of Oates's stories associate the theme with adolescence.

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### Story 3

*Alice Adams*

(1926 - 1999)

*Approaching adulthood, young Dylan wants to be rescued from a mind-dulling teenage existence and dead-end job. Unwilling to seek the adult forms of escapism her mother uses to cope with men and the world, Dylan dreams of an ideal savior who will provide her escape.*

## BY THE SEA

Because she looked older than she was, eighteen, and was very pretty, her two slightly crooked front teeth more than offset by wheat-blond hair and green eyes, Dylan Ballentyne was allowed to be a waitress at the Cypress Lodge without having been a bus girl first. She hated the work – loathed, despised it – but it was literally the only job in town, town being a cluster of houses and a couple of stores on the northern California coast. Dylan also hated the town and the wild, dramatically desolate landscape of the area, to which she and her mother had moved at the beginning of the summer, coming down from San Francisco, where Dylan had been happy in the sunny Mission District, out of sight of the sea.

Now she moved drearily through days of trays and dishes, spilled coffee and gelatinous ash-strewn food, fat cross guests or hyper-friendly ones. She was sustained by her small paycheck and somewhat more generous tips, and by her own large fantasies of ultimate rescue, or escape.

The Lodge, an ornately Victorian structure with pinnacles and turrets, was on a high bluff two miles south of town, surrounded by sharply sloping meadows which were edged with dark-green cypresses and pines, overlooking the turbulent, shark-infested, almost inaccessible sea. (One more disappointment: talking up the move, Dylan's mother, self-named Flower, had invented long beach days and picnics; they would both learn to surf, she had said.)

Breakfast was served at the Lodge from eight till ten-thirty, lunch from eleven-thirty until two, in a long glassed-in porch, the dining room. Supposedly between those two meals the help got a break, half an hour for a sandwich or a cigarette, but more often than not it was about five minutes, what with lingering breakfasters and early, eager lunchers. Dinner was at six, set up at five-thirty, and thus there really was a free hour or sometimes two, in the mid to late afternoon. Dylan usually spent this time in the "library" of the Lodge, a dim, musty room, paneled in fake mahogany. Too tired for books, although her reading habits had delighted English teachers in high school, she leafed through old *House Beautifuls*, *Gourmets* or *Vogues*, avidly drinking in all those ads for the accoutrements of rich and leisurely exotic lives.

Curiously, what she saw and read made her almost happy, for that limited time, like a drug. She could nearly believe that she saw herself in *Vogue*, in a Rolls-Royce ad: a tall thin blond woman (she was thin, if not very tall) in silk and careless fur, one jeweled hand on the fender of a silver car, and in the background a handsome man, dark, wearing a tuxedo.

Then there was dinner. Drinks. Wines. Specifics as to the doneness of steaks or roasts. Complaints. I ordered *medium* rare. Is this crab really *fresh*? And heavy trays. The woman who managed the restaurant saw to it that waitresses and bus girls "shared" that labor, possibly out of some vaguely egalitarian sense that the trays were too heavy for any single group. By eight-thirty or so, Dylan and all the girls would be slow-witted with exhaustion, smiles stiffening on their very young faces, perspiration drying under their arms and down their backs. Then there would come the stentorian voice of the manageress: "*Dylan*, are you awake? You look a thousand miles away."

Actually, in her dreams, Dylan was less than two hundred miles away, in San Francisco.

One fantasy of rescue which Dylan recognized as childish, and unlikely, probably, was that a nice older couple (in their fifties, anyway: Flower was only thirty-eight) would adopt her. At the end of their stay at the Lodge, after several weeks, they would say, "Well, Dylan, we just don't see how we're going to get along without you. Do you think you could possibly .... ?" There had in fact been several couples who could have filled that bill – older people from San Francisco, or even L.A., San Diego, Scottsdale – who stayed for a few weeks at the Lodge, who liked Dylan and tipped her generously. But so far none of them had been unable to leave without her; they didn't even send her postcards.

Another fantasy, a little more plausible, more grown up involved a man who would come to the Lodge alone and would fall in love with Dylan and take her away. The man was as indistinct as the one in the Rolls-Royce ads, as vaguely handsome, dark and rich.

In the meantime, the local boys who came around to see the other waitresses tried to talk to Dylan; their hair was too long and their faces splotchily sunburned from cycling and surfing, which were the only two things they did, besides drinking beer. Dylan ignored them, and went on dreaming.

The usual group of guests at the Lodge didn't offer much material for fantasy: youngish, well-off couples who arrived in big new station wagons with several children, new summer clothes and new sports equipment. Apart from these stylish parents, there were always two or three very young couples, perhaps just married or perhaps not, all with the look of not quite being able to afford where they were.

And always some very old people.

There was, actually, one unmarried man (almost divorced) among the guests, and although he was very nice, intelligent, about twenty-eight, he did not look rich, or, for that matter, handsome and dark. Whitney Iverson was a stocky red-blond man with a strawberry birthmark on one side of his neck. Deep-set blue eyes were his best feature. Probably he was not the one to fall in love and rescue Dylan, although he seemed to like her very much. Mr. Iverson, too, spent his late afternoons in the Lodge's library.

Exactly what Mr. Iverson did for a living was not clear; he mentioned the Peace Corps and VISTA, and then he said that he was writing; not novels-articles. His wife was divorcing him and she was making a lot of trouble about money, he said: a blow, he hadn't thought she was like that. (But how could he have enough money for anyone to make trouble about, Dylan wondered.) He had brought down a carload of books. When he wasn't reading in his room, or working on whatever he was writing, he took long, long walks, every day, miles over the meadows, back and forth to what there was of a town. Glimpsing him through a window as she set up tables, Dylan noted his stride, his strong shoulders. Sometimes he climbed down the steep perilous banks to the edge of the sea, to the narrow strip of coarse gray sand that passed for a beach. Perfectly safe, he said, if you checked the tides. Unlike Dylan, he was crazy about this landscape; he found the sea and the stretching hills of grass and rock, the acres of sky, all marvelous; even the billowing fog that threatened all summer he saw as lovely, something amazing.

Sometimes Dylan tried to see the local scenery with Whitney Iverson's eyes, and sometimes, remarkably, this worked. She was able to imagine herself a sojourner in this area, as he was, and then she could succumb to the sharp blue beauty of that wild Pacific, the dark-green, wind-bent feathery cypresses, and the sheer cliffs going down to the water, with their crevices of moss and tiny brilliant wild flowers.

But usually she just looked around in a dull, hating way. Usually she was miserably bored and hopelessly despondent.

They had moved down here to the seaside, to this tiny nothing town, Dylan and Flower, so that Flower could concentrate on making jewelry, which was her profession. Actually, the move was the idea of Zachery, Flower's boyfriend. Flower would make the jewelry and Zach would take it up to sell; someday he might even try L.A. and Zach would bring back new materials for Flower to use – gold and silver and pearls. Flower, who was several months behind in her rent, had agreed to this plan. Also, as Dylan saw it. Flower was totally dominated by Zach, who was big and dark and roughly handsome, and sometimes mean. Dylan further suspected *that* Zach wanted them out of town, wanted to see less of Flower, and the summer had borne out her theory: instead of his living with them and making occasional forays to the city, as Flower had imagined, it was just the other way around. Zach made occasional visits to them, and the rest of time when she wasn't working or trying to work on some earrings or a necklace, Flower sat sipping the harsh, local red wine and reading the used paperbacks that Zach brought down in big cartons along with the jewelry materials – "to keep you out of mischief," he had said.

Flower wore her graying blond hair long, in the non-style of her whole adult life, and she was putting on weight. When she wanted to work she took an upper, another commodity supplied by Zach, but this did do much to keep her weight down, just kept her "wired," as she sometimes said. Dylan alternated between impatience and the most tender sympathy for her mother, who was in some ways more like a friend; it was often clear to Dylan that actually she had to be the stronger person, the one in charge. But Flower was so nice, really, a wonderful cook and generous to her friends, and she could be funny. Some of the jewelry she made was beautiful – recently, a necklace of silver and stones that Zach said were real opals. Flower had talent, originality. If she could just dump Zach for good, Dylan thought, and then not replace him with someone worse, as she usually did. Always some mean jerk. If she could just not drink, not take speed.

From the start Flower had been genuinely sympathetic about Dylan's awful job. "Honey, I can hardly stand to think about it," she would say, and her eyes would fill. She had been a waitress several times herself. "You and those heavy trays, and the mess. Look, why don't you just quit? Honestly, we'll get by like we always have. I'll just tell Zach he's got to bring more stuff down, and sell more, too. And you can help me."

This seemed a dangerous plan to Dylan, possibly because it relied on Zach, who Dylan was sure would end up in jail, or worse. She stubbornly stuck with her job, and on her two days off (Mondays and Tuesdays, of all useless days) she stayed in bed a lot, and read, and allowed her mother to "spoil" her, with breakfast trays ("Well, after all, who deserves her own tray more than you do, baby?") and her favorite salads for lunch, with every available fresh vegetable and sometimes shrimp.

When she wasn't talking to her mother or helping out with household chores, Dylan was reading a book that Mr. Iverson had lent her – *The Eustace Diamonds*, by Trollope. This had come about because one afternoon, meeting him in the library, Dylan had explained the old *Vogues*, the *House Beautifuls* scattered near her lap, saying that she was too tired just then to read, and that she missed television. The winter before, she had loved *The Pallisers*, she said, and, before that, *Upstairs, Downstairs*. Mr. Iverson had recommended *The Eustace Diamonds*, "It's really my favorite of the Palliser novels," he said, and he went to get it for her – running all the way up to his room and back, apparently; he was out of breath as he handed her the book.

But why was he so eager to please her? She knew that she was pretty, but she wasn't all that pretty, in her own estimation; she was highly conscious of the two crooked front teeth, although she had perfected a radiant, slightly false smile that almost hid them.

"I wonder if he could be one of *the* Iversons," Flower mused, informed by Dylan one Monday of the source of her book.

"The Iversons?" In Flower's voice it had sounded like the Pallisers.

"One of the really terrific, old San Francisco families. You know Hantingtons, Floods Crockers, Iversons. What does he look like your Mr. Iverson?"

Dylan found this hard to answer, although usually with Flower she spoke very easily, they were so used to each other. "Well." She hesitated. "He's sort of blond, with nice blue eyes and a small nose. He has this birthmark on his neck, but it's not really noticeable."

Flower laughed. "In that case, he's not a real Iverson. They've all got dark hair and the most aristocratic beaky noses. And none of them could possibly have a birthmark – they'd drown it at birth."

Dylan laughed, too, although she felt an obscure disloyalty to Mr. Iverson.

And, looking at Flower, Dylan thought, as she had before, that Flower *could* change her life, take charge of herself. She was basically strong. But in the next moment Dylan decided, as she also had before, more frequently, that probably Flower wouldn't change; in her brief experience people didn't, or not much. Zach would go to jail and Flower would find somebody worse, and get grayer and fatter. And she, Dylan, had better forget about anything as childish as being adopted by rich old people; she must concentrate on marrying someone who really had *money*.

Resolution made her feel suddenly adult. "Honey," asked Flower, "are you sure you won't have a glass of wine?"

"My mother wonders if you're a real Iverson." Dylan had not quite meant to say this; the sentence spoke itself, leaving her slightly embarrassed, as she sat with Whitney Iverson on a small sofa in the library. It was her afternoon break; she was tired, and she told herself that she didn't know what she was saying.

Mr. Iverson, whose intense blue eyes had been staring into hers, now turned away, so that Dylan was more aware of the mark on his neck than she had been before. Or could it have deepened to a darker mulberry stain?

He said, "Well, I am and I'm not, actually. I think of them as my parents and I grew up with them, in the Atherton house, but actually I'm adopted."

"Really?" Two girls Dylan knew at Mission High had got pregnant and had given up their babies to be adopted. His real mother, then, could have been an ordinary high school girl? The idea made her uncomfortable, as though he had suddenly moved closer to her.

"I believe they were very aware of it, try not being really theirs," Whitney Iverson said, again

looking away from her. "Especially when I messed up in some way, like choosing Reed, instead of Stanford. Then graduate school ..."

As he talked on, seeming to search for new words for the feelings engendered in him by his adoptive parents, Dylan felt herself involuntarily retreat. No one had ever talked to her in quite that way, and she was uneasy. She looked through the long leaded windows to the wavering sunlight beyond; she stared at the dust-moted shafts of light in the dingy room where they were.

In fact, for Dylan, Whitney's very niceness was somehow against him; his kindness, his willingness to talk, ran against the rather austere grain of her fantasies.

Apparently sensing what she felt, or some of it, Whitney stopped short, and he laughed in a self-conscious way. "Well, there you have the poor-adopted-kid self-pity trip of the month," he said. "'Poor,' Christ, they've drowned me in money."

Feeling that this last was not really addressed to her (and thinking of Flower's phrase about the birthmark, "drowned at birth"), Dylan said nothing. She stared at his hands, which were strong and brown, long-fingered, and she suddenly, sharply, wished that he would touch her. Touch, instead of all this awkward talk.

Later, considering that conversation, Dylan found herself moved, in spite of herself. How terrible to feel not only that you did not really belong with your parents but that they were disappointed in you. Whitney Iverson hadn't said anything about it, of course, but they must have minded about the birthmark, along with college and graduate school.

She and Flower were so clearly mother and daughter – obviously, irrevocably so: her green eyes were Flower's, even her crooked front teeth. Also, Flower had always thought she was wonderful. "My daughter Dylan," she would say, in her strongest, proudest voice.

But what had he possibly meant about "drowned in money"? Was he really rich, or had that been a joke? His car was an old VW convertible, and his button-down shirts were frayed, his baggy jackets shabby. Would a rich person drive a car like that, or wear those clothes? Probably not, thought Dylan; on the other hand, he did not seem a man to say that he was rich if he was not.

In any case, Dylan decided that she was giving him too much thought, since she had no real reason to think that he cared about her. Maybe he was an Iverson, and a snob, and did not want anything to do with a waitress. If he had wanted to see her, he could have suggested dinner, a movie or driving down to Santa Cruz on one of her days off. Probably she would have said yes, and on the way home, maybe on a bluff overlooking the sea, he could have parked the car, have turned to her. So far, Dylan had had little experience of ambiguity; its emerging presence made her both impatient and confused. She did not know what to do or how to think about the contradictions in Whitney Iverson.

Although over the summer Dylan and Whitney had met almost every day in the library, this was never a stated arrangement, and if either of them missed a day, as they each sometimes did, nothing was said. This calculated diffidence seemed to suit them; they were like children who could not quite admit to seeking each other out.

One day, when Dylan had already decided that he would not come, and not caring really—she was too tired to care, what with extra guests and heavier trays after she had been in the library for almost half an hour, she heard running steps, his, and then Whitney Iverson burst in, quite out of breath. "Oh .... I'm glad you're still here," he got out, and he sat down heavily beside her. "I had some terrific news." But then on the verge of telling her, he stopped, and laughed, and said, "But I'm afraid it won't sound all that terrific to you."

Unhelpfully she looked at him.

"The *Yale Review*," he said. "They've taken an article I sent them. I'm really pleased. "

He had been right, in that the *Yale Review* was meaningless to Dylan, but his sense of triumph was real and visible to her. She *felt* his success, and she thought just then that he looked wonderful.

September, once Labor Day was past, was much clearer and warmer, the sea a more brilliant blue, than during the summer. Under a light, fleece-clouded sky the water shimmered, all diamonds and gold, and the rocky cliffs in full sunlight were as pale as ivory. Even Dylan admitted to herself that it was beautiful; sometimes she felt herself penetrated by that scenery, her consciousness filled with it.

Whitney Iverson was leaving on the fifteenth; he had told Dylan so, naming the day as they sat together in the library. And then he said, "Would it be okay if I called you at home, sometime?"

The truth was, they didn't have a phone. Flower had been in so much trouble with the phone company that she didn't want to get into all that again. And so now Dylan blushed, and lied. "Well, maybe not. My mother's really strict."

He blushed, too, the birthmark darkening. "Well, I'll have to come back to see you," he said. "But will you still be here?"

How could she know, especially since he didn't even name a time when he would come? With a careless lack of tact she answered, "I hope not," and then she laughed.

Very seriously he asked, "Well, could we at least go for a walk or something before I go? I could show you the beach." He gave a small laugh, indicating that the beach was really nothing much to see, and then he said, "Dylan, I've wanted so much to see you, I *care* so much for you –but here, there would have been ... implications ... you know ..."

She didn't know; she refused to understand what he meant, unless he was confirming her old suspicion of snobbery: his not wanting to be seen with a waitress. She frowned slightly, and said, "Of course," and thought that she would not, after all, see him again. So much for Whitney Iverson.

But the next afternoon, during her break, in the brilliant September weather the library looked to her unbearably dingy, and all those magazines were so old. She stepped outside through the door at the end of the porch, and there was Mr. Iverson, just coming out through another door.

He smiled widely, said, "Perfect! We can just make it before the tide."

Wanting to say that she hadn't meant to go for a walk with him – she was just getting some air, and her shoes were wrong, canvas sandals – Dylan said neither of those things, but followed along, across the yellowing grass, toward the bluff.

He led her to a place that she hadn't known was there, a dip in the headland, from which the beach was only a few yards down, by a not steep, narrow path. Whitney went ahead, first turning back to reach for her hand, which she gave him. Making her way just behind, Dylan was more aware of his touch, of their firmly joined warm hands, than of anything else in the day: the sunlight, the sea, her poorly shod feet.

But as they reached the narrow strip of land, instead of turning to embrace her, although he still held her hand, Whitney cried out, "See? Isn't it fantastic?"

A small wave hit Dylan's left foot, soaking the fabric of her sandal. Unkissed, she stared at the back of his shirt collar, which was more frayed even than his usual shirts, below his slightly too long red-blond hair.

Then he turned to her; he picked up her other hand from her side, gazing intently down into her face. But it was somehow too late. Something within her had turned against him, whether from her wet foot or his worn-out collar, or sheer faulty timing, so that when he said, "You're so lovely, you make me shy," instead of being moved, as she might have been, Dylan thought he sounded silly (a grown man, shy?) and she stepped back a little, away from him.

He could still have kissed her, easily (she later thought), but he did not. Instead, he reached into one of the pockets of his jeans, fishing about, as he said, "... for something I wanted you to have."

Had he brought her a present, some small valuable keepsake? Prepared to relent, Dylan then saw that he had not; what he was handing her was a cardboard square, a card, on which were printed his name and telephone number. He said, "I just got these. My mother sent them. She's big on engraving." He grimaced as Dylan thought, Oh, your mother really is an Iverson. "The number's my new bachelor pad," he told her. "It's unlisted. Look, I really wish you'd call me. Any time. Collect. I'll be there." He looked away from her, for a moment out to sea, then down to the sand, where for the first time he seemed to notice her wet foot. "Oh Lord!" he exclaimed. "Will you have to change? I could run you home. ..."

Not liking the fuss, and not at all liking the attention paid to those particular shoes (cheap, flimsy), somewhat coldly Dylan said no; the guests had thinned out and she was going home anyway as soon as the tables had been set up.

"Then I won't see you?"

She gave him her widest, most falsely shining smile, and turned and started up the path ahead of him. At the top she smiled again, and was about to turn away when Whitney grasped her wrist and said,

with a startling, unfamiliar scowl, "*Call me, you hear? I don't want to lose you.*"

What Dylan had said about being able to leave after setting up the tables was true; she had been told that she could then go home, which she did. The only problem, of course, was that she would earn less money; it could be a very lean, cold winter. Thinking about money, and, less clearly, about Whitney Iverson, Dylan was not quite ready for the wild-eyed Flower, who greeted her at the door: "We're celebrating. Congratulate me! I've dumped Zach."

But Dylan had heard this before, and she knew the shape of the evening that her mother's announcement presaged: strong triumphant statements along with a festive dinner, more and more wine, then tears. Sinking she listened as her mother described that afternoon's visit from Zach, how terrible he was and how firm she, Flower, had been, how final. "And we're celebrating with a really great fish soup," finished Flower, leading Dylan into the kitchen.

The evening did go more or less as Dylan had feared and imagined that it would. Ladling out the rich fish soup, Flower told Dylan how just plain fed up she was with men, and she repeated a line that she had recently heard and liked: "A woman without a man is like a mushroom without a bicycle."

Dylan did not find this as terrifically funny as Flower did, but she dutifully laughed.

A little later, sopping French bread into the liquid, Flower said, "But maybe it's just the guys I pick? I really seem to have some kind of instinct."

Flower had said that before, and Dylan always, if silently, agreed with her: it was too obvious to repeat. And then, maybe there really weren't any nice men around anymore, at her mother's age? Maybe they all got mean and terrible, the way a lot of women got fat? Dylan thought then of Whitney Iverson, who was only about ten years younger than Flower was; would he, too, eventually become impossible, cruel and unfaithful?

In a way that would have seemed alarmingly telepathic if Dylan had not been used to having her thoughts read by her mother, Flower asked, "What ever happened to your new friend, Mr. Iverson? Was he really one of them?"

"I don't know. I guess so," Dylan muttered, wishing that she had never mentioned Whitney to her mother.

Over salad, Flower announced that she was going on a diet. "Tomorrow. First thing. Don't worry, I'll still have the stuff you like around for you, but from now on no more carbohydrates for me."

At least, this time, she didn't cry.

At some hour in the middle of the night, or early morning, Dylan woke up – a thing she rarely did. Her ears and her mind were full of the distant sound of the sea, and she could see it as it had been in the afternoon, vastly glittering, when she had been preoccupied with her wet shoe, with Whitney's not kissing her. And she felt a sudden closeness to him; suddenly she understood what he had not quite said. By "implications" he had meant that the time and place were wrong for them. He was shy and just then not especially happy, what with his divorce and all, but he truly cared about her. If he had felt less he probably would have kissed her, in the careless, meaningless way of a man on vacation kissing a pretty waitress and then going back to his own real life. Whitney was that rarity her mother despaired of finding: a truly nice man. On her way back to sleep Dylan imagined calling him. She could go up to see him on the bus, or he could come down, and they could go out together, nothing to do with the Lodge. Could talk, be alone.

However, Dylan woke up the next morning in quite another mood. She felt wonderful, her own person, needing no one, certainly not a man who had not bothered, really, to claim her. Looking in the mirror, she saw herself as more than pretty, as almost beautiful; it was one of her very good days.

Flower, too, at breakfast seemed cheerful, not hung over. Maybe there was something in the air? Passing buttered English muffins to Dylan, Flower took none, although she loved them. "Tomato juice and eggs and black coffee, from here on in," she said. She did not take any pills.

Later, walking toward the Lodge, Dylan felt lighthearted, energetic. And how beautiful everything was! (Whitney Iverson had been right.) The sloping meadows, the pale clear sky, the chalky cliffs, the diamond-shining sea were all marvelous. She had a strong presentiment of luck; some good fortune would come to her at last.

At the sound of a car behind her she moved out of the way, turning then to look. She had had for a moment the crazy thought that it could be Whitney coming back for her, but of course it was not. It was

a new gray Porsche, going slowly, looking for something. Walking a little faster, Dylan began to adjust her smile.

[1976]

### 3.1 Questions for Text Interpretations

1. Explain the relationship of the opening line to the themes of growing up in the other stories in this section.
2. Describe Dylan's fantasies of rescue from her situation. What forms of escape does she use at the lodge?
3. Characterize Whitney Iverson. Why is his view of the landscape so different from Dylan's? Why doesn't he fit her fantasy picture?
4. Describe Flower's work and her forms of escape. What parallels are there between Dylan and Whitney, and what is different about them?
5. Why is Dylan uncomfortable with Whitney's life story talk? Compare and contrast Dylan and Whitney's family situations.
6. How would you describe the types of men represented by Zach versus Whitney?
7. Analyze each character's work in the story and his/her attitude towards it.
8. Explain the ending: what is Dylan looking for in life?
9. What are the ironies of the story in terms of Dylan's dreams, her mother's dreams and the realities and opportunities available to them?

### 3.2. Tasks for Further Exploration

1. "Roses, Rhododendron", also by Alice Adams, contrasts the lives of two young girls and their families. How do the girls' dreams suggest the same themes evident in this story? Determine what constitutes "success" for Adam's characters in terms of family, love and work.
2. Read another story or novel about the internal and external pressures on teenagers, such as "Louisa, Please Come Home", by Shirley Jackson; "Paul's Case", by Willa Cather; or "A Slipping Down Life" by Anne Tyler. Which pressures and conflicts are related to each character's gender?

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## 4. Question for Discussion or Writing About Section II

1. Which of these young women make the transition well between childhood and adulthood, and which don't? What makes the difference – internal or external factors?
2. Divide female role models for these teenagers into categories according to the types of future they suggest for the young women.
3. Find incidents in which young women *act* rather than sleep, wait or dream. Explore the consequences of their actions – happy, sad, violent, etc.
4. What are the fathers' and other men's roles in these stories of adolescents growing up?
5. Analyse the images of leaving, staying or coming back; connect these images with the theme of the divided self (for example, Connie's "home" versus "not-home" selves).
6. Explore the themes of temptation, giving in and resisting. Identify several types of behavior the

authors warn against. What decisions do each of the women make about moral dilemmas?

7. Examine the houses as symbols in the stories. What different definitions of “home” are presented?
8. Find instances in which the adolescents compare themselves or their performances with others’ – is this practice seen as healthy or stifling?
9. So many of the stories include dancing or the dance as the first sign of transition to adulthood. If these symbols are uniquely female, what do they mean?
10. Examine the hypnagogic or “waking dream” states in these stories. If those young women are between two worlds, what are they?

## **5. Model Composition and Essay Writing: Adolescence**

Adolescence does not happen abruptly; nor is it a surprise to see many of the same motifs of childhood repeated in these stories. But the strength with which society’s force engages young women in traditional sex-related patterns is astonishing when one looks at a group of stories about adolescence. The primary characteristic of adolescent females in life stage research and in literature is the act of waiting for another person to give meaning and direction to their lives.

Childhood’s hint of the existence of a mysterious secret to life is strengthened to a full-fledged belief that the answer lies in the arrival of another person – the prince of one’s dreams. And so these adolescent female dream on, “being” rather than “doing”, becoming increasingly passive and dependent. Even the teenagers portrayed in these stories and poems as struggling to develop a talent or to be independent find themselves wondering about their own capabilities and hoping for some kind of deliverance from the responsibilities of their dreams. At the same time, in some stories the young women’s struggles are contrasted sharply with the experiences of male characters of the same age.

Out of this morass of dependency, several of the adolescents described here find the answer in a semblance of power, the “secret” of the female sex to gain ascendancy by passivity or dominance through the pretense of giving in. The hidden weapon is sex itself, made more powerful by physical beauty, which is then cultivated according to prevailing social norms. The literary image for this passage of the “secret” – that women can control men by having men desire them – is the dress, the prom gown or party dress often selected by an older member of the family and initially uncomfortable to the adolescent herself. Judy in the story “Debut” is a good example of an adolescent who must wear the dress and learn the secret. Whether or not the young woman reconciles herself to the dress is often a clue to her later success in using “the secret”.

The role of parents in this enculturation process is strong, and many more stories of adolescence have visible parents than do the stories of childhood. A young woman’s mother (or substitute mother) in the stories is often seen as “what she should become” if all goes well and shows the values of the families, including what constitutes success for women later in life. Mind-dulling, ordinary jobs for teenage girls reinforce the image of escape through another person, rather than success through individual advancement.

Moral dilemmas abound in these stories – not simply in terms of sexual coming of age, but also in terms of what kind of person to be. In many cases, decisions about how to deal with the consequences of male interest (to resist, to succumb or to take advantage) reflect what the young woman’s personal character will be in the future. To show alternative value systems and ways of life, the authors use character pairs (the young women and their sisters or other adolescents) again and again. These adolescents continually compare their appearances and performances with others’, just as in the

childhood stories the girls compare their parents' reality with the experiences of other adults they encounter.

Related to choices of how to "be" with others and how to "act" within and outside of the home is the question of whether to stay the same (childish, dependent, secure and loved) or whether to change (which often entails a physical removal from the home itself). While the movement "out" or "away" on one level is presented as a natural and healthy change, it is also depicted as menacing if precipitated by the wrong impulses. Whether the impetus is from adults or from the adolescent herself, there are potential dangers in forcing growth too fast; several authors warn not to prod a child to become an adult too soon (or to become a star musician or debutante).

The "public" versus "private" selves of these young women become more polarized than in childhood, and the ability to be loved and accepted in both inner and outer circles becomes increasingly difficult. The young woman of fiction may be literally going out and coming back in, walking along a road (as is the young woman at the end of "By the Sea"), or pausing on a threshold as she decides to stay or to leave (a decision often depicted as a "lady or the tiger" choice in which the doors to stagnation or to growth are unmarked). The fact that several of the stories end with the adolescent going out of a door (usually reluctantly, but drawn by other influences) reinforces the sleeping beauty image of self-induced paralysis.

The trancelike atmosphere surrounding the women in these stories differs from the emotional ups and downs of childhood: life is a walking dream, an altered state so profound that few except the "deliverer" (who may or may not arrive) can penetrate. For teenagers, such as Connie in "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?", the prince who arrives may not be exactly as welcome as he was in her dreams.

Music and reading, escape mechanisms for many women in these stories and in life reinforce the passivity of the female characters rather than challenging it. Adolescent females in the stories change their reading habits from literature to popular magazines and advertisements, further indicating that they avoid serious issues and questions unrelated to the self. Gone are the crisp pages of dictionary definitions and poems of "A Child's Day", in favor of words and phrases as placebos; the magazines one teenager reads make her "almost happy for that limited time, like a drug".

Meanwhile, these authors make readers fear that the teenagers will remain shallow and superficial forever, and make us wonder what will become of some of them. No real "answers" are given about proper values or codes of behavior, and not one viable philosophy is available to emulate.

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## Section III

### Introduction

- Searching for satisfying work
- Work within and outside the home
- Dealing with competition
- Male and female peers
- Success and failure
- Struggling for equity

The constantly engaging quality of stories of women is that they remind us of the great potential of women to relate to many different kinds of worlds – domestic, business, artistic and so forth. When women forge any strong bond with the outside world, they begin to gain a sense of status which unfortunately is often lacking in the unpaid nurturing and caretaking activities at home.

Each story in this section demonstrates the identity of a woman as related to her home work or outside job, and each vivifies the qualities women bring to the workplace which may have been ignored elsewhere.

For women, paid work outside of the home adds social status as well as the ability to develop a sense of camaraderie with other women and men. Ideally, relationships formed through the common bond of employment should transcend gender, whereas in many of these stories the reverse is true. Themes of competition emerge in several stories, and few of the women characters seem to get along on personal qualifications alone; other factors are often evident, such as the willingness to accommodate men as often as deemed necessary. An interesting quality about the work depicted here, however, is that it appears to have been selected more by choice and the desire for individual achievement than by pure necessity – even though in real life paid work has become necessary for many women. Perhaps the most accurate description of the subject of these stories is work for both monetary and personal rewards produced; every woman working in these stories likes her work and resents the efforts of men or other women in society to deny her the privilege of earning her own living. Whether work is appreciated or unappreciated, in the home or outside, women portrayed here enjoy participating in meaningful employment.

The collection of stories presented in this section supports the notion that hard work – at home and/or an outside place of employment – is the lot of women. As typists, waitresses or business managers, women in the stories do not find an easy road to success.

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# Story 1

Zora Neale Hurston

(1903-1960)

*The tenacity of one woman making a living at what has traditionally been considered "women's work" is demonstrated dramatically in this story. In the face of powerful physical and psychological opposition, Delia maintains her home, work, faith, and sense of personal identity.*

## SWEAT

It was eleven o'clock of a Spring night in Florida. It was Sunday. Any other night, Delia Jones would have been in bed for two hours by this time. But she was a washwoman, and Monday morning meant a great deal to her. So she collected the soiled clothes on Saturday when she returned the clean things. Sunday night after church, she sorted them and put the white things to soak. It saved her almost a half day's start. A great hamper in the bedroom held the clothes that she brought home. It was so much neater than a number of bundles lying around.

She squatted in the kitchen floor beside the great pile of clothes, sorting them into small heaps according to color, and humming a song in a mournful key, but wondering through it all where Sykes, her husband, had gone with her horse and buckboard.

Just then something long, round, limp and black fell upon her shoulders and slithered to the floor beside her. A great terror took hold of her. It softened her knees and dried her mouth so that it was a full minute before she could cry out or move. Then she saw that it was the big bull whip her husband liked to carry when he drove.

She lifted her eyes to the door and saw him standing there bent over with laughter at her fright. She screamed at him.

"Sykes, what you throw dat whip on re like dat? You know it would skeer me – looks just like a snake, an' you knows how skeered Ah is of snakes."

"Course Ah knowed it! That's how come Ah done it." He slapped his leg with his hand and almost rolled on the ground in his mirth. "If you such a big fool dat you got to have a fit over a earth worm or a string, Ah don't keer how bad Ah skeer you."

"You ain't got no business doing it. Gawd knows it's a sin. Some day Ah'm goin tuh drop dead from some of yo' foolishness. 'Nother thing, where you been wid mah rig? Ah feeds dat pony. He ain't fuh you to be drivin' wid no bull whip."

"You sho is one aggravatin' nigger woman!" he declared and stepped into the room. She resumed her work and did not answer him at once. "Ah done tole you time and again to keep them white folks' clothes outa dis house."

He picked up the whip and glared down at her. Delia went on with her work. She went out into the yard and returned with a galvanized tub and set it on the washbench. She saw that Sykes had kicked all of the clothes together again, and now stood in her way truculently, his whole manner hoping, *praying*, for an argument. But she walked calmly around him and commenced to re-sort the things.

"Next time, Ah'm gointer kick 'em outdoors," he threatened as he struck a match along the leg of his corduroy breeches.

Delia never looked up from her work, and her thin, stooped shoulders sagged further.

"Ah ain't for no fuss t'night, Sykes. Ah just coe from taking sacrament at the church house."

He snorted scornfully. "Yeah, you just come from de church house on a Sunday night, but heah you is gone to work on them clothes. You ain't nothing but a hypocrite. One of them amen-comer Christians – sing, whoop, and shout, then come home and wash white folks' clothes on the Sabbath."

He stepped roughly upon the whitest pile of things, kicking them helter-skelter as he crossed the room. His wife gave a little scream of dismay, and quickly gathered them together again.

"Sykes, you quit grindin' dirt into these clothes! How can Ah git through by Sat'day if Ah don't start on Sunday?"

"Ah don't keer if you never git through. Anyhow, Ah done promised Gawd and a couple of other

men, Ah ain't gointer have it in mah house. Don't gimme no lip neither, else Ah'll throw 'em out and put mah fist up side yo' head to boot."

Delia's habitual meekness seemed to slip from her shoulders like a blown scarf. She was on her feet; her poor little body, her bare knuckly hands bravely defying the strapping hulk before her.

"Looka heah, Sykes, you done gone too fur. Ah been married to you fur fifteen years, and Ah been takin' in washin' fur fifteen years. Sweat, sweat, sweat! Work and sweat, cry and sweat, pray and sweat!"

"What's that got to do with me?" he asked brutally.

"What's it got to do with you, Sykes? Mah tub of suds is filled yo' belly with vittles more times than yo' hands is filled it. Mah sweat is done paid for this house and Ah reckon Ah kin keep on sweatin' in it."

She seized the iron skillet from the stove and struck a defensive pose, which act surprised him greatly, coming from her. It cowed him and he did not strike her as he usually did.

"Naw you won't," she panted, "that ole snaggle-toothed black woman you runnin' with ain't comin' heah to pile up on mah sweat and blood. You ain't paid for nothin' on this place, and Ah'm gointer stay right heah till Ah'm toted out foot foremost. "

"Well, you better quit gittin' me riled up, else they'll be totin' you out sooner than you expect. Ah'm so tired of you Ah don't know whut to do. Gawd! How Ah hates skinny wimmen!"

A little awed by this new Delia, he sidled out of the door and slammed the back gate after him. He did not say where he had gone, but she knew too well. She knew very well that he would not return until nearly daybreak also. Her work over, she went on to bed but not to sleep at once. Things had come to a pretty pass!

She lay awake, gazing upon the debris that cluttered their matrimonial trail. Not an image left standing along the way. Anything like flowers had long ago been drowned in the salty stream that had been pressed from her heart. Her tears, her sweat, her blood. She had brought love to the union and he had brought a longing after the flesh. Two months after the wedding, he had given her the first brutal beating. She had the memory of his numerous trips to Orlando with all of his wages when he had returned to her penniless, even before the first year had passed. She was young and soft then, but now she thought of her knotty, muscled limbs, her harsh knuckly hands, and drew herself up into an unhappy little ball in the middle of the big feather bed. Too late now to hope for love, even if it were not Bertha it would be someone else. This case differed from the others only in that she was bolder than the others. Too late for everything except her little home. She had built it for her old days, and planted one by one the trees and flowers there. It was lovely to her, lovely.

Somehow, before sleep came, she found herself saying aloud: "Oh well, whatever goes over the Devil's back, is got to come under his belly. Sometime or ruther, Sykes, like everybody else, is gointer reap his sowing." After that she was able to build a spiritual earthworks against her husband. His shells could no longer reach her. Amen. She went to sleep and slept until he announced his presence in bed by kicking her feet and rudely snatching the covers away.

"Gimme some kivah heah, an' git ya' damn foots over on yo' own side! Ah oughter mash you in ya' mouf fuh drawing dat skillet on me."

Delia went clear to the rail without answering him. A triumphant indifference to all that he was or did.

The week was as full of work for Delia as all other weeks, and Saturday found her behind her little pony, collecting and delivering clothes.

It was a hot, hot day near the end of July. The village men on Joe Clarke's porch even chewed cane listlessly. They did not hurl the cane knots as usual. They let them dribble over the edge of the porch. Even conversation had collapsed under the heat.

"Heah come Delia Jones," Jim Merchant said, as the shaggy pony came 'round the bend of the road toward them. The rusty buckboard was heaped with baskets of crisp, clean laundry.

"Yep," Joe Lindsay agreed. "Hot or col', rain or shine, jes ez reg'lar ez de weeks roll 'roun' Delia carries 'em an' fetches 'em on Sat'day."

"She better if she wanter eat," said Moss. "Syke Jones ain't wuth de shot an' powder hit would tek tuh kill 'em. Not to huh he aint."

"He sho' aint," Walter Thomas chimed in. "It's too bad, too, cause she wuz a right pritty lil trick when he got huh. Ah'd uh mah'ied huh mahseff if he hadnter beat me to it."

Delia nodded briefly at the men as she drove past.

"Too much knockin' will ruin any 'oman. He done beat huh 'nough tuh kill three women, let 'lone change they looks," said Elijah Moseley. "How Syke kin stommuck dat big black greasy Mogul he's layin' roun' wid, gits me. Ah swear dat eight-rock couldn't kiss a sardine can Ah done thowed out de back do' 'way las' yeah."

"Aw, she's fat, thass how come. He's alius been crazy 'bout fat women," put in Merchant. "He'd a' been tied up wid one long time ago if he could a' found one tuh have him. Did Ah tell yuh 'bout him come sidlin' roun' mah wife – bringin' her a basket uh peecans outa his yard fuh a present? Yes-sir, mah wife! She tol' him tuh take em right straight back home, cause Delia works so hard ovah dat wash tub she reckon everything on de place taste lak sweat an' soapsuds. Ah jus' wisht Ah'd a caught 'im 'roun' dere! Ah'd a' made his hips ketch on fiah down dat shell road."

"Ah know he done it, too. Ah sees 'im grinnin' at every 'oman dat passes," Walter Thomas said. "But even so, he useter eat some mighty big hunks uh humble pie tuh git dat lil' oman he got. She wuz ez pritty ez a speckled pup! Dat wuz fifteen yeahs ago. He useter be so skeered uh losin' huh, she could make him do some parts of a husband's duty. Dey never wuz de same in de mind."

"There oughter be a law about him," said Lindsay. "He aint fit tuh carry guts tuh a bear."

Clarke spoke for the first time. "Taint no law on earth dat kin make a man be decent if it aint in 'im. There's plenty men dat takes a wife lak dey do a joint uh sugar-cane. It's round, juicy an' sweet when dey gits it. But dey squeeze an' grind, squeeze an' grind an' wring tell dey wring every drop uh pleasure dat's in 'em out. When dey's satisfied dat dey is wrung dry, dey treats 'em jes lak dey do a cane-chew. Dey throws 'em away. Dey knows whut dey is doin' while dey is at it, an' hates theirselves fuh it but they keeps on hangin' after huh tell she's empty. Den dey hates huh fuh bein' a cane-chew an' in de way."

"We oughter take Syke an' dat stray 'oman uh his'n down in Lake Howell swamp an' lay on de rawhide till they cain't say Lawd a' mussy.' He alius wuz uh ovahbearin' niggah, but since dat white 'oman from up north done teached 'im how to run a automobile, he done got too biggety to live- an' we oughter kill'im," Old Man Anderson advised.

A grunt of approval went around the porch. But the heat was melting their civic virtue and Elijah Moseley began to bait Joe Clarke.

"Come on, Joe, git a melon outa dere an' slice it up for yo' customers. We'se all sufferin' wid de heat. De bear's done got *me!*"

Thass right, Joe, a watermelon is jes' whut Ah needs tuh cure de eppizudicks"\* , Walter Thomas joined forces with Moseley. "Come on dere, Joe. We all is steady customers an' you aint set us up in a long time. Ah chooses dat long, bowlegged Floiidy favorite."

"A god, an' be dough. You all gimme twenty cents and slice way," Clarke retorted. "Ah needs a col' slice m'self. Heah, everybody chip in. Ah'll lend y'll man meat knife."

The money was quickly subscribed and the huge melon brought forth. At that moment, Sykes and Bertha arrived. A determined silence fell on the porch and the melon was put away again.

Merchant snapped down the blade of his jackknife and moved toward the store door.

"Come on in, Joe, an' gimme a slab uh sow belly an' uh pound uh coffee almost fuh got 'twas Sat'day. Got to git on home." Most of the men left also.

Just then Delia drove past on her way home, as Sykes was ordering magnificently for Bertha. It pleased him for Delia to see.

"Git whutsoever yo' heart desires, Honey. Wait a minute, Joe. Give huh two bottles uh strawberry soda-water, uh quart uh parched ground-peas, an' a block uh chewin' gum."

With all this they left the store, with Sykes reminding Bertha that this was his town and she could have it if she wanted it.

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\* Epizootic, or disease attacking many animals at the same time.

The men returned soon after they left, and held their watermelon feast. "Where did Syke Jones git da 'oman from nohow?" Lindsay asked.

"Ovah Apopka. Guess dey musta been cleanin' out de town when she lef. She don't look lak a thing but a hunk uh liver wid hair on it."

"Well, she sho' kin sqa," Dave Carter contributed. "When she gits ready tuh laff, she jes' opens huh mouf an' latches it back tun de las' notch. No ole grandpa alligator down in Lake Bell ain't got nothin' on huh."

Bertha had been in town three months now. Sykes was still paying her room rent at Delia Lewis' – the only house in town that would have taken her in. Sykes took her frequently to Winter Park to "stomps." He still assured her that he was the swellest man in the state.

"Sho' you kin have dat' ole house soon's Ah kin git dat 'oman outa dere. Everything b'longs tuh me an' you sho' kin have it. Ah sho' 'bominates uh skinny 'oman. Lawdy, you sho' is got one portly shape on you! You kin git anything you wants. Dis is mah town an' you sho' kin have it."

Delia's work-worn knees crawled over the earth in Gethsemane and up the rocks of Calvary many, many times during these months. She avoided the villagers and meeting places in her efforts to be blind and deaf. But Bertha nullified this to a degree, by coming to Delia's house to call Sykes out to her at the gate.

Delia and Sykes fought all the time now with no peaceful interludes. They slept and ate in silence. Two or three times Delia had attempted a timid friendliness, but she was repulsed each time. It was plain that the breaches must remain agape.

The sun had burned July to August. The heat streamed down like a million hot arrows, smiting all things living upon the earth. Grass withered, leaves browned, snakes went blind in shedding and men and dogs went mad. Dog days!

Delia came home one day and found Sykes there before her. She wondered, but started to go on into the house without speaking, even though he was standing in the kitchen door and she must either stoop under his arm or ask him to move. He made no room for her. She noticed a soap box beside the steps, but paid no particular attention to it, knowing that he must have brought it there. As she was stooping to pass under his outstretched arm, he suddenly pushed her backward, laughingly.

"Look in de box dere Delia, Ah done brung yuh somethin'!"

She nearly fell upon the box in her stumbling, and when she saw what it held, she all but fainted outright.

"Syke! Syke, mah Gawd! You take dat rattlesnake 'way from heah! You gattuh. Oh, Jesus, have mussy!"

"Ah aint gut tuh do nuthin' uh de kin' – fact is Ah aint got tuh do nothin' but die. Taint no use uh you puttin' on airs makin' out lak you skeered uh dat snake - he's gointer stay right heah tell he die. He wouldn't bite me cause Ah knows how tuh handle 'im. Nohow he wouldn't risk breakin' out his fangs 'gin ya' skinny laigs."

"Naw, now Syke, don't keep dat thing 'round' heah tuh skeer me tuh death. You knows Ah'm even feared uh earth worms. Thass de biggest snake Ah evah did see. Kill 'im Syke, please."

"Doan ast me tuh do nothin' fuh yuh. Goin' 'roun' tryin' tuh be so damn asterperious. Naw, Ah aint gonna kill it. Ah think uh damn sight mo' uh him dan you! Dat's a nice snake an' anybody doan lak 'im kin jes' hit de grit."

The village soon heard that Sykes had the snake, and came to see and ask questions.

"How de hen-fire did you ketch dat six-foot rattler, Syke?" Thomas asked.

"He's full uh frogs so he caint hardly move, thass how Ah eased up on 'im. But AH'm a snake charmer an' knows how tuh handle 'em Shux, dat aint nothin'. Ah could ketch one eve'y day if Ah so wanted tuh."

"Whut he needs is a heavy hick'ry club leaned real heavy on his head. Dat's de bes' way tuh charm a rattlesnake."

"Naw, Walt, y'll jes' don't understand dese diamon' backs lak Ah do," said Sykes in a superior tone of voice.

The village agreed with Walter, but the snake stayed on. His box remained by the kitchen door with its screen wire covering. Two or three days later it had digested its meal of frogs and literally came

to life. It rattled at every movement in the kitchen or the yard. One day as Delia came down the kitchen steps she saw his chalky-white fangs curved like scimitars hung in the wire meshes. This time she did not run away with averted eyes as usual. She stood for a long time in the doorway in a red fury that grew bloodier for every second that she regarded the creature that was her torment.

That night she broached the subject as soon as Sykes sat down to the table.

"Syke, Ah wants you tuh take dat snake 'way from heah. You done starved me an' Ah put up widcher, you done beat me an Ah took dat, but you done kilt all mah insides bringin' dat varmint heah."

Sykes poured out a saucer full of coffee and drank it deliberately before he answered her.

"A whole lot Ah keer 'bout how you feels inside uh out. Dat snake aint goin' no damn wheah till Ah gits ready fuh 'im tuh go. So fur as beatin' is concerned, yuh aint took near all dat you gointer take ef yuh stay 'roun' me."

Delia pushed back her plate and got up from the table. "Ah hates you, Sykes," she said calmly. "Ah hates you tuh de same degree dat Ah useter love yuh. Ah done took an' took till mah belly is full up tuh mah neck. Dat's de reason Ah got mah letter fum de church an' moved mah membership tuh Woodbridge-so Ah don't haftuh take no sacrament wid yuh. Ah don't wan-tuh see yuh 'roun' me atall. Lay 'roun' wid dat 'oman all yuh wants tuh, but gwan 'way fum me an' mah house. Ah hates yuh lak uh suck-egg dog."

Sykes almost let the huge wad of corn bread and collard greens he was chewing fall out of his mouth in amazement. He had a hard time whipping himself up to the proper fury to try to answer Delia.

"Well, Ah'm glad you does hate me. Ah'm sho' tiahed uh you hangin' ontuh re. Ah don't want yuh. Look at yuh stringey ole neck! Yo' rawbony laigs an' arms is enough tuh cut uh man tuh death. You looks jes' lak de devvul's doll-baby tuh *me*. You cain't hate me no worse dan Ah hates you. Ah been hatin' *you* fuh years."

"Yo' ole black hide don't look lak nothin' tuh me, but uh passle uh wrinkled up rubber, wid yo' big ole yeahs flappin' on each side lak uh paih uh buzzard wings. Don't think Ah'm gointuh be run 'way fum mah house neither. Ah'm goin' tuh de white folks bout *you*, mah young man, de very nex' time you lay yo' han's on me. Mah cup is done run ovah."

Delia said this with no signs of fear and Sykes departed from the house, threatening her, but made not the slightest mve to carry out any of them.

That night he did not return at all, and the next day being Sunday, Delia was glad she did not have to quarrel before she hitched up her pony and drove the four miles to Woodbridge. She stayed to the night service – "love feast" – which was very warm and full of spirit. In the emotional winds her domestic trials were borne far and wide so that she sang as she drove homeward,

"Jurden water, black an' col'

Chills de body, not de soul

An' Ah wantah cross Jurden in uh calm time."

She came from the barn to the kitchen door and stopped.

"Whut's de mattah, ol' satan, you aint kickin' up yo' racket?" She addressed the snake's box. Complete silence. She went on into the house with a new hope in its birth struggles. Perhaps her threat to go to the white folks had frightened Sykes! Perhaps he was sorry! Fifteen years of misery and suppression had brought Delia to the place where she would hope anything that looked towards a way over or through her wall of inhibitions.

She felt in the match safe behind the stove at once for a match. There was only one there.

"Dat niggah wouldn't fetch nothin' heah tuh save his rotten neck, but he kin run thew whut Ah brings quick enough. Now he done toted off nigh on tuh haff uh box uh matches. He done had dat 'oman heah in mah house too."

Nobody but a woman could tell how she knew this even before she struck the match. But she did and it put her into a new fury.

Presently she brought in the tubs to put the white things to soak. This time she decided she need not bring the hamper out of the bedroom: she would go in there and do the sorting. She picked up the pot-bellied lamp and went in. The room was small and the hamper stood hard by the foot of the white iron bed. She could sit and reach through the bedposts-resting as she worked.

"Ah wantah cross Jurden in uh calm time." She was singing again. The mood of the "love feast"

had returned. She threw back the lid of the basket almost gaily. Then, moved by both horror and terror, she sprang back toward the door. *There lay the snake in the basket!* He moved sluggishly at first, but even as she turned round and round, jumped up and down in an insanity of fear, he began to stir vigorously. She saw him pouring his awful beauty from the basket upon the bed, then she seized the lamp and ran as fast as she could to the kitchen. The wind from the open door blew out the light and the darkness added to her terror. She sped to the darkness of the yard, slamming the door after her before she thought to set down the lamp. She did not feel safe even on the ground, so she climbed up in the hay barn.

There for an hour or more she lay sprawled upon the hay a gibbering wreck. Finally she grew quiet, and after that, coherent thought. With this, stalked through her a cold, bloody rage. Hours of this. A period of introspection, a space of retrospection, then a mixture of both. Out of this an awful calm.

"Well, Ah done de bes' Ah could. If things aint right, Gawd knows taint mah fault. "

She went to sleep – a twitch sleep – and woke up to a faint gray sky. There was a loud hollow sound below. She peered out. Sykes was at the wood-pile, demolishing a wire-covered box.

He hurried to the kitchen door, but hung outside there some minutes before he entered, and stood some minutes more inside before he closed it after him.

The gray in the sky was spreading. Delia descended without fear now, and crouched beneath the low bedroom window. The drawn shade shut out the dawn, shut in the night. But the thin walls held back no sound.

"Dat ol' scratch is woke up now!" She mused at the tremendous whirr inside, which every woodsman knows, is one of the sound illusions. The rattler is a ventriloquist. His whirr sounds to the right, to the left, straight ahead, behind, close under foot – everywhere but where it is. Woe to him who guesses wrong unless he is prepared to hold up his end of the argument! Sometimes he strikes without rattling at all.

Inside, Sykes heard nothing until he knocked a pot lid off the stove while trying to reach the match safe in the dark. He had emptied his pockets at Bertha's.

The snake seemed to wake up under the stove and Sykes made a quick leap into the bedroom. In spite of the gin he had had, his head was clearing now.

"Mah Gawd!" he chattered, "ef Ah could on'y strack uh light!"

The rattling ceased for a moment as he stood paralyzed. He waited. It seemed that the snake waited also.

"Oh, fuh de light! Ah thought he'd be too sick"- Sykes was muttering to himself when the whirr began again, closer, right underfoot this time. Long before this, Sykes' ability to think had been flattened down to primitive instinct and he leaped – onto the bed.

Outside Delia heard a cry that might have come from a maddened chimpanzee, a stricken gorilla. All the terror, all the horror, all the rage that man possibly could express, without a recognizable human sound.

A tremendous stir inside there, another series of animal screams, the intermittent whirr of the reptile. The shade torn violently down from the window, letting in the red dawn, a huge brown hand seizing the window stick, great dull blows up on the wooden floor punctuating the gibberish of sound long after the rattle of the snake had abruptly subsided. All this Delia could see and hear from her place beneath the window, and it made her ill. She crept over to the four - o'clocks<sup>\*</sup> and stretched herself on the cool earth to recover.

She lay there. "Delia, Delia!" She could hear Sykes calling in a most despairing tone as one who expected no answer. The sun crept on up, and he called. Delia could not move – her legs were gone flabby. She never moved, he called, and the sun kept rising.

"Mah Gawd!" She heard him moan, "Mah Gawd fum Heben!" She heard him stumbling about and got up from her flower-bed. The sun was growing warm. As she approached the door she heard him call out hopefully, "Delia, is dat you Ah heah?"

She saw him on his hands and knees as soon as she reached the door. He crept an inch or two

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\* Flowering plant

toward her – all that he was able, and she saw his horribly swollen neck and his one open eye shining with hope. A surge of pity too strong to support bore her away from that eye that must, could not, fail to see the tubs. He would see the lamp. Orlando with its doctors was too far. She could scarcely reach the Chinaberry tree, where she waited in the growing heat while inside she knew the cold river was creeping up and up to extinguish that eye which must know by now that she knew.

[1926]

## 1.1 Questions for Text Interpretation

1. Compare the symbols of whip and snake associated with Sykes with the “tears, sweat and blood” associated with Delia.
2. Why does Sykes claim that he doesn’t want Delia to wash clothes for a living, and what might be some underlying reasons?
3. When Delia changes from meekness to aggression, what is she protecting? Explain.
4. Consider the function of the “other woman” in the story and the role of the other men in the town. What does the men’s conversation about Bertha, Sykes and Delia reveal about the major forces in conflict in the story?
5. What is meant by the comment about Delia that “After that she was able to build a spiritual earthworks against her husband”? How is this attitude carried through to the end of the story?
6. What evidence is there to support the claim that religion helps to keep oppressed people in their places? In contrast, how would you argue the benefits of religion for Delia? The term “meek” is used several times; do the meek inherit the earth in this story?
7. Explain the final scenes – how the snake got out of the box, and what Sykes and Delia each did or did not do.
8. How does the author foreshadow the ending of the story? Look for telling lines and hints leading to the end.
9. Do you interpret the final scene as triumph or tragedy?

## 1.2 Tasks for Further Exploration

1. Alice Walker, author of “The Color Purple” (novel made into a film) and many other works, acknowledges the strong influence of Zora Neale Hurston’s writing. Reading either “The Color Purple” or Walker’s story “Everyday Use” compare the types of women depicted. Or, compare Walker’s depiction of husbands in “The Color Purple” with Zora Neale Hurston’s depiction of Sykes in this story.
2. Explore the nature of “women’s work” and “women working” in this story, examining each character’s attitude; for example, why does Delia work, and why does she do the kind of work she does? Why doesn’t Bertha work, and why does Delia indirectly support her?

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## Story 2

*Sarah Orne Jewett*

(1849 – 1909)

*In this nineteenth century story, Jewett describes a marriage in which the expected roles of husband and wife are reversed – a situation not so unusual now, but still subject to the potential problems Jewett describes. Unlike the story "Sweat," this story takes place in the most conducive of atmospheres, a loving home in which each partner knows her or his skills and interests.*

### TOM'S HUSBAND

I shall not dwell long upon the circumstances that led to the marriage of my hero and heroine; though their courtship was to them, the only one that has ever noticeably approached the ideal, it had many aspects in which it was entirely commonplace in other people's eyes. While the world in general smiles at lovers with kindly approval and sympathy, it refuses to be aware of the unprecedented delight which is amazing to the lovers themselves.

But, as has been true in many other cases, when they were at last married, the most ideal of situations was found to have been changed to the most practical. Instead of having shared their original duties, and, as schoolboys would say, going halves, they discovered that the cares of life had been doubled. This led to some distressing moments for both our friends; they understood suddenly that instead of dwelling in heaven they were still upon earth, and had made themselves slaves to new laws and limitations. Instead of being freer and happier than ever before, they had assumed new responsibilities; they had established a new household, and must fulfill in some way or another obligations of it. They looked back with affection to their engagement; they had been longing to have each other to themselves, apart from the world, but it seemed that they never felt so keenly that they were still units in modern society. Since Adam and Eve were in Paradise, before the devil joined them, nobody has had a chance to imitate that unlucky couple. In some respects they told the truth when, twenty times a day, they said that life had never been so pleasant before; but there were mental reservations on either side which might have subjected them to the accusation of lying. Somehow, there was a little feeling of disappointment, and they caught themselves wondering – though they would have died sooner than confess it – whether they were quite so happy as they had expected. The truth was, they were much happier than people usually are, for they had an uncommon capacity for enjoyment. For a little while they were like a sail-boat that is beating and has to drift a few minutes before it can catch the wind and start off on the other tack. And they had the same feeling, too, that any one is likely to have who has been long pursuing some object of his ambition or desire. Whether it is a coin, or a picture, or a stray volume of some old edition of Shakespeare, or whether it is an office under government or a lover, when fairly in one's grasp there is a loss of the eagerness that was felt in pursuit. Satisfaction, even after one has dined well, is not so interesting and eager a feeling as hunger.

My hero and heroine were reasonably well established to begin with: they each had some money, though Mr. Wilson had most. His father had at one time been a rich man, but with the decline, a few years before, of manufacturing interests, he had become, mostly through the fault of others, somewhat involved; and at the time of his death his affairs were in such a condition that it was still a question whether a very large sum or a moderately large one would represent his estate. Mrs. Wilson, Tom's step-mother, was somewhat of an invalid; she suffered severely at times with asthma, but she was almost entirely relieved by living in another part of the country. While her husband lived, she had accepted her illness as inevitable, and rarely left home; but during the last few years she had lived in Philadelphia with her own people, making short and wheezing visits only from time to time, and had not undergone a voluntary period of suffering since the occasion of Tom's marriage, which she had entirely approved. She had a sufficient property of her own, and she and Tom were independent of each other in

that way. Her only other step-child was a daughter, who had married a navy officer, and had at this time gone out to spend three years (or less) with her husband, who had been ordered to Japan.

It is not unfrequently noticed that in many marriages one of the persons who choose each other as partners for life is said to have thrown himself or herself away, and the relatives and friends look on with dismal forebodings and ill-concealed submission. In this case it was the wife who might have done so much better, according to public opinion. She did not think so herself, luckily, either before marriage or afterward, and I do not think it occurred to her to picture to herself the sort of career which would have been her alternative. She had been an only child, and had usually taken her own way. Some one once said that it was a great pity that she had not been obliged to work for her living, for she had inherited a most uncommon business talent, and, without being disreputably keen at a bargain, her insight into the practical working of affairs was very clear and far-reaching. Her father, who had also been a manufacturer, like Tom's, had often said it had been a mistake that she was a girl instead of a boy. Such executive ability as hers is often wasted in the more contracted sphere of women, and is apt to be more a disadvantage than a help. She was too independent and self-reliant for a wife; it would seem at first thought that she needed a wife herself more than she did a husband. Most men like best the women whose natures cling and appeal to theirs for protection. But Tom Wilson, while he did not wish to be protected himself, liked these very qualities in his wife which would have displeased some other men; to tell the truth, he was very much in love with his wife just as she was. He was a successful collector of almost everything but money, and during a great part of his life he had been an invalid, and he had grown, as he laughingly confessed, very old-womanish. He had been badly lamed, when a boy, by being caught in some machinery in his father's mill, near which he was idling one afternoon, and though he had almost entirely outgrown the effect of his injury, it had not been until after many years. He had been in college, but his eyes had given out there, and he had been obliged to leave in the middle of his junior year, though he had kept up a pleasant intercourse with the members of his class, with whom he had been a great favorite. He was a good deal of an idler in the world. I do not think his ambition, except in the case of securing Mary Dunn for his wife, had ever been distinct; he seemed to make the most he could of each day as it came, without making all his days' works tend toward some grand result, and go toward the upbuilding of some grand plan and purpose. He consequently gave no promise of being either distinguished or great. When his eyes would allow, he was an indefatigable reader; and although he would have said that he read only for amusement, yet he amused himself with books that were well worth the time he spent over them.

The house where he lived nominally belonged to his step-mother, but she had taken for granted that Tom would bring his wife home to it, and assured him that it should be to all intents and purposes his. Tom was deeply attached to the old place, which was altogether the pleasantest in town. He had kept bachelor's hall there most of the time since his father's death, and he had taken great pleasure, before his marriage, in refitting it to some extent, though it was already comfortable and furnished in remarkably good taste. People said of him that if it had not been for his illnesses, and if he had been a poor boy, he probably would have made something of himself. As it was, he was not very well known by the townspeople, being somewhat reserved, and not taking much interest in their everyday subjects of conversation. Nobody liked him so well as they liked his wife, yet there was no reason why he should be disliked enough to have much said about him.

After our friends had been married for some time, and had outlived the first strangeness of the new order of things, and had done their duty to their neighbors with so much apparent willingness and generosity that even Tom himself was liked a great deal better than he ever had been before, they were sitting together one stormy evening in the library, before the fire. Mrs. Wilson had been reading Tom the letters which had come to him by the night's mail. There was a long one from his sister in Nagasaki, which had been written with a good deal of ill-disguised reproach. She complained of the smallness of the income of her share in her father's estate, and said that she had been assured by American friends that the smaller mills were starting up everywhere, and beginning to do well again. Since so much of their money was invested in the factory, she had been surprised and sorry to find by Tom's last letters that he had seemed to have no idea of putting in a proper person as superintendent, and going to work again. Four per cent on her other property, which she had been told she must soon expect instead of eight, would make a great difference to her. A navy captain in a foreign port was obliged to entertain a

great deal, and Tom must know that it cost them much more to live than it did him, and ought to think of their interests. She hoped he would talk over what was best to be done with their mother (who had been made executor, with Tom, of his father's will).

Tom laughed a little, but looked disturbed. His wife had said something to the same effect, and his mother had spoken once or twice in her letters of the prospect of starting the mill again. He was not a bit of a business man, and he did not feel certain, with the theories which he had arrived at of the state of the country, that it was safe yet to spend the money which would have to be spent in putting the mill in order. "They think that the minute it is going again we shall be making money hand over hand, just as father did when we were children," he said. "It is going to cost us no end of money before we can make anything. Before father died he meant to put in a good deal of new machinery, I remember. I don't know anything about the business myself, and I would have sold out long ago if I had had an offer that came anywhere near the value. The larger mills are the only ones that are good for anything now, and we should have to bring a crowd of French Canadians here; the day is past for the people who live in this part of the country to go into the factory again. Even the Irish all go West when they come into the country, and don't come to places like this any more."

"But there are a good many of the old work-people down in the village," said Mrs. Wilson. "Jack Towne asked me the other day if you weren't going to start up in the spring."

Tom moved uneasily in his chair, "I'll put you in for superintendent, if you like," he said, half angrily, whereupon Mary threw the newspaper at him; but by the time he had thrown it back he was in good humor again.

"Do you know, Tom," she said, with amazing seriousness, "that I believe I should like nothing in the world so much as to be the head of a large business? I hate keeping house, - I always did; and I never did so much of it in all my life put together as I have since I have been married. I suppose it isn't womanly to say so, but if I could escape from the whole thing I believe I should be perfectly happy. If you get rich when the mill is going again, I shall beg for a housekeeper, and shirk everything. I give you fair warning. I don't believe I keep this house half so well as you did before I came here."

Tom's eyes twinkled. "I am going to have that glory, - I don't think you do, Polly; but you can't say that I have not been forbearing. I certainly have not told you more than twice how we used to have things cooked. I'm not going to be your kitchen-colonel."

"Of course it seemed the proper thing to do," said his wife, meditatively; "but I think we should have been even happier than we have if I had been spared it. I have had some days of wretchedness that I shudder to think of. I never know what to have for breakfast; and I ought not to say it, but I don't mind the sight of dust. I look upon housekeeping as my life's great discipline"; and at this pathetic confession they both laughed heartily.

"I've a great mind to take it off your hands," said Tom. "I always rather liked it, to tell the truth, and I ought to be a better housekeeper, - I have been at it for five years; though housekeeping for one is different from what it is for two, and one of them a woman. You see you have brought a different element into my family. Luckily, the servants are pretty well drilled. I do think you upset them a good deal at first!" Mary Wilson smiled as if she only half heard what he was saying. She drummed with her foot on the floor and looked intently at the fire, and presently gave it a vigorous poking. "Well?" said Tom, after he had waited patiently as long as he could.

"Tom! I'm going to propose something to you. I wish you would really do as you said, and take all the home affairs under your care, and let me start the mill. I am certain I could manage it. Of course I should get people who understood the thing to teach me. I believe I was made for it; I should like it above all things. And this is what I will do; I will bear the cost of starting it, myself, - I think I have money enough, or can get it; and if I have not put affairs in the right trim at the end of a year I will stop, and you may make some other arrangement. If I have, you and your mother and sister can pay me back."

"So I am going to be the wife, and you the husband," said Tom, a little indignantly; "at least, that is what people will say. It's a regular Darby and Joan affair, and you think you can do more work in a day than I can do in three. Do you know that you must go to town to buy cotton? And do you know there are a thousand things about it that you don't know?"

"And never will?" said Mary, with perfect good humor. "Why, Tom, I can learn as well as you, and a good deal better, for I like business, and you don't. You forget that I was always father's right-hand man after I was a dozen years old, and that you have let me invest my money and some of your own, and I haven't made a blunder yet."

Tom thought that his wife had never looked so handsome or so happy. "I don't care, I should rather like the fun of knowing what people will say. It is a new departure, at any rate. Women think they can do everything better than men in these days, but I'm the first man, apparently, who has wished he were a woman."

"Of course people will laugh," said Mary, "but they will say that it's just like me, and think I am fortunate to have married a man who will let me do as I choose. I don't see why it isn't sensible: you will be living exactly as you were before you married, as to home affairs; and since it was a good thing for you to know something about housekeeping then, I can't imagine why you shouldn't go on with it now, since it makes me miserable, and I am wasting a fine business talent while I do it. What do we care for people's talking about it?"

"It seems to me that it is something like women's smoking: it isn't wicked, but it isn't the custom of the country. And I don't like the idea of your going among business men. Of course I should be above going with you, and having people think I must be an idiot; they would say that you married a manufacturing interest, and I was thrown in. I can foresee that my pride is going to be humbled to the dust in every way," Tom declared in mournful tones, and began to shake with laughter. "It is one of your lovely castles in the air, dear Polly, but an old brick mill needs a better foundation than the clouds. No, I'll look around, and get an honest, experienced man for agent. I suppose it's the best thing we can do, for the machinery ought not to lie still any longer; but I mean to sell the factory as soon as I can. I devoutly wish it would take fire, for the insurance would be the best price we are likely to get. That is a famous letter from Alice! I am afraid the captain has been growling over his pay, or they have been giving too many little dinners on board ship. If we were rid of the mill, you and I might go out there this winter. It would be capital fun."

Mary smiled again in an absent-minded way. Tom had an uneasy feeling that he had not heard the end of it yet, but nothing more was said for a day or two. When Mrs. Tom Wilson announced, with no apparent thought of being contradicted, that she had entirely made up her mind, and she meant to see those men who had been overseers of the different departments, who still lived in the village, and have the mill put in order at once, Tom looked disturbed, but made no opposition; and soon after breakfast his wife formally presented him with a handful of keys, and told him there was some lamb in the house for dinner; and presently he heard the wheels of her little phaeton rattling off down the road. I should be untruthful if I tried to persuade any one that he was not provoked; he thought she would at least have waited for his formal permission, and at first he meant to take another horse, and chase her, and bring her back in disgrace, and put a stop to the whole thing. But something assured him that she knew what she was about, and he determined to let her have her own way. If she failed, it might do no harm, and this was the only ungallant thought he gave her. He was sure that she would do nothing unladylike, or be unmindful of his dignity; and he believed it would be looked upon as one of her odd, independent freaks, which always had won respect in the end, however much they had been laughed at in the beginning. "Susan," said he, as that estimable person went by the door with the dustpan, "you may tell Catherine to come to me for orders about the house, and you may do so yourself. I am going to take charge again, as I did before I was married. It is no trouble to me, and Mrs. Wilson dislikes it. Besides, she is going into business, and will have a great deal else to think of."

"Yes, sir; very well, sir," said Susan, who was suddenly moved to ask so many questions that she was utterly silent. But her master looked very happy; there was evidently no disapproval of his wife; and she went on up the stairs, and began to sweep them down, knocking the dust-brush about excitedly, as if she were trying to kill a descending colony of insects.

Tom went out to the stable and mounted his horse, which had been waiting for him to take his customary after-breakfast ride to the post-office, and he galloped down the road in quest of the phaeton. He saw Mary talking with Jack Towne, who had been an overseer and a valued workman of his father's. He was looking much surprised and pleased.

"I wasn't caring so much about getting work, myself," he explained; "I've got what will carry me and my wife through; but it'll be better for the young folks about here to work near home. My nephews are wanting something to do; they were going to Lynn next week. I don't say but I should like to be to work in the old place again. I've sort of missed it, since we shut down."

"I'm sorry I was so long in overtaking you," said Tom, politely, to his wife. "Well, Jack, did Mrs. Wilson tell you she's going to start the mill? You must give her all the help you can."

"'Deed I will," said Mr. Towne, gallantly, without a bit of astonishment.

"I don't know much about the business yet," said Mrs. Wilson, who had been a little overcome at Jack Towne's lingo of the different rooms and machinery, and who felt an overpowering sense of having a great deal before her in the next few weeks. "By the time the mill is ready, I will be ready, too," she said, taking heart a little; and Tom, who was quick to understand her moods, could not help laughing, as he rode alongside. "We want a new barrel of flour, Tom, dear," she said, by way of punishment for his untimely mirth.

If she lost courage in the long delay, or was disheartened at the steady call for funds, she made no sign; and after a while the mill started up, and her cares were lightened, so that she told Tom that before next pay day she would like to go to Boston for a few days, and go to the theatre, and have a frolic and a rest. She really looked pale and thin, and she said she never worked so hard in all her life; but nobody knew how happy she was, and she was so glad she had married Tom, for some men would have laughed at it.

"I laughed at it," said Tom, meekly. "All is, if I don't cry by and by, because I am a beggar, I shall be lucky." But Mary looked fearlessly serene, and said that there was no danger at present.

It would have been ridiculous to expect a dividend the first year, though the Nagasaki people were pacified with difficulty. All the business letters came to Tom's address, and everybody who was not directly concerned thought that he was the motive power of the reawakened enterprise. Sometimes business people came to the mill, and were amazed at having to confer with Mrs. Wilson, but they soon had to respect her talents and her success. She was helped by the old clerk, who had been promptly recalled and reinstated, and she certainly did capitally well. She was laughed at, as she had expected to be, and people said they should think Tom would be ashamed of himself; but it soon appeared that he was not to blame, and what reproach was offered was on the score of his wife's oddity. There was nothing about the mill that she did not understand before very long, and at the end of the second year she declared a small dividend with great pride and triumph. And she was congratulated on her success, and every one thought of her project in a different way from the way they had thought of it in the beginning. She had singularly good fortune: at the end of the third year she was making money for herself and her friends faster than most people were, and approving letters began to come from Nagasaki. The Ashtons had been ordered to stay in that region, and it was evident that they were continually being obliged to entertain more instead of less. Their children were growing fast, too, and constantly becoming more expensive. The captain and his wife had already begun to congratulate themselves secretly that their two sons would in all probability come into possession, one day, of their uncle Tom's handsome property.

For a good while Tom enjoyed life, and went on his quiet way serenely. He was anxious at first, for he thought that Mary was going to make ducks and drakes of his money and her own. And then he did not exactly like the looks of the thing, either; he feared that his wife was growing successful as a business person at the risk of losing her womanliness. But as time went on, and he found there was no fear of that, he accepted the situation philosophically. He gave up his collection of engravings, having become more interested in one of coins and medals, which took up most of his leisure time. He often went to the city in pursuit of such treasures, and gained much renown in certain quarters as a numismatologist of great skill and experience. But at last his house (which had almost kept itself, and had given him little to do beside ordering the dinners, while faithful old Catherine and her niece Susan were his aids) suddenly became a great care to him. Catherine, who had been the main-stay of the family for many years, died after a short illness, and Susan must needs choose that time, of all others, for being married to one of the second hands in the mill. There followed a long and dismal season of experimenting, and for a time there was a procession of incapable creatures going in at one kitchen door and out of the other. His wife would not have liked to say so, but it seemed to her that Tom was

growing fussy about the house affairs, and took more notice of those minor details than he used. She wished more than once, when she was tired, that he would not talk so much about the housekeeping; he seemed sometimes to have no other thought.

In the early days of Mrs. Wilson's business life, she had made it a rule to consult her husband on every subject of importance; but it had speedily proved to be a formality. Tom tried manfully to show a deep interest which he did not feel, and his wife gave up, little by little, telling him much about her affairs. She said that she liked to drop business when she came home in the evening; and at last she fell into the habit of taking a nap on the library sofa, while Tom, who could not use his eyes much by lamp-light, sat smoking or in utter idleness before the fire. When they were first married his wife had made it a rule that she should always read him the evening papers, and afterward they had always gone on with some book of history or philosophy, in which they were both interested. These evenings of their early married life had been charming to both of them, and from time to time one would say to the other that they ought to take up again the habit of reading together. Mary was so unaffectedly tired in the evening that Tom never liked to propose a walk; for, though he was not a man of peculiarly social nature, he had always been accustomed to pay an occasional evening visit to his neighbors in the village. And though he had little interest in the business world, and still less knowledge of it, after a while he wished that his wife would have more to say about what she was planning and doing, or how things were getting on. He thought that her chief aid, old Mr. Jackson, was far more in her thoughts than he. She was forever quoting Jackson's opinions. He did not like to find that she took it for granted that he was not interested in the welfare of his own property; it made him feel like a sort of pensioner and dependent, though, when they had guests at the house, which was by no means seldom, there was nothing in her manner that would imply that she thought herself in any way the head of the family. It was hard work to find fault with his wife in any way, though, to give him his due, he rarely tried.

But, this being a wholly unnatural state of things, the reader must expect to hear of its change at last, and the first blow from the enemy was dealt by an old woman, who lived nearby, and who called to Tom one morning, as he was driving down to the village in a great hurry (to post a letter, which ordered his agent to secure a long-wished-for ancient copper coin, at any price), to ask him if they had made yeast that week, and if she could borrow a cupful, as her own had met with some misfortune. Tom was instantly in a rage, and he mentally condemned her to some undeserved fate, but told her aloud to go and see the cook. This slight delay, besides being killing to his dignity, caused him to lose the mail, and in the end his much-desired copper coin. It was a hard day for him, altogether; it was Wednesday, and the first days of the week having been stormy the washing was very late. And Mary came home to dinner provokingly good-natured. She had met an old schoolmate and her husband driving home from the mountains, and had first taken them over her factory, to their great amusement and delight, and then had brought them home to dinner. Tom greeted them cordially, and manifested his usual graceful hospitality; but the minute he saw his wife alone he said in a plaintive tone of rebuke, "I should think you might have remembered that the servants are unusually busy to-day. I do wish you would take a little interest in things at home. The women have been washing, and I'm sure I don't know what sort of a dinner we can give your friends. I wish you had thought to bring home some steak. I have been busy myself, and couldn't go down to the village. I thought we would only have a lunch."

Mary was hungry, but she said nothing, except that it would be all right, - she didn't mind; and perhaps they could have some canned soup.

She often went to town to buy or look at cotton, or to see some improvement in machinery, and she brought home beautiful bits of furniture and new pictures for the house, and showed a touching thoughtfulness in remembering Tom's fancies; but somehow he had an uneasy suspicion that she could get along pretty well without him when it came to the deeper wishes and hopes of her life, and that her most important concerns were all matters in which he had no share. He seemed to himself to have merged his life in his wife's; he lost his interest in things outside the house and grounds; he felt himself fast growing rusty and behind the times, and to have somehow missed a good deal in life; he had a suspicion that he was a failure. One day the thought rushed over him that his had been almost exactly the experience of most women, and he wondered if it really was any more disappointing and ignominious to him than it was to women themselves. "Some of them may be contented with it," he said

to himself, soberly. "People think women are designed for such careers by nature, but I don't know why I ever made such a fool of myself."

Having once seen his situation in life from such a standpoint, he felt it day by day to be more degrading, and he wondered what he should do about it; and once, drawn by a new, strange sympathy, he went to the little family burying-ground. It was one of the mild, dim days that come sometimes in early November, when the pale sunlight is like the pathetic smile of a sad face, and he sat for a long time on the limp, frost-bitten grass beside his mother's grave.

But when he went home in the twilight his step-mother, who just then was making them a little visit, mentioned that she had been looking through some boxes of hers that had been packed long before and stowed away in the garret. "Everything looks very nice up there," she said, in her wheezing voice (which, worse than usual that day, always made him nervous), and added, without any intentional slight to his feelings, "I do think you have always been a most excellent housekeeper."

"I'm tired of such nonsense!" he exclaimed, with surprising indignation. "Mary, I wish you to arrange your affairs so that you can leave them for six months at least. I am going to spend this winter in Europe."

"Why, Tom, dear!" said his wife, appealingly. "I couldn't leave my business any way in the" –

But she caught sight of a look on his usually placid countenance that was something more than decision, and refrained from saying anything more. And three weeks from that day they sailed.

[1884]

## 2.1 Questions for Text Interpretation

1. What effect does the use of the observer-narrator point of view have on the tone and substance of the story? At what points does the narrator intrude on the story to make comments?
2. Near the beginning, the narrator comments on the difference between the romantic and practical sides of marriage. Give examples of how this theme of ideal vs. real is carried throughout the rest of the story.
3. Listing the characteristics of Tom and of Mary described by the author, explain how the issue of sex stereotypes is handled, and what tone is adopted about stereotyping.
4. Why does Tom decide to hire a male manager?
5. What do we know about how Mary and Tom's unconventional arrangement is accepted in their community?
6. Identify each state in the gradual reversal of traditional roles of husband and wife. At what points are power struggles evident?
7. Why does Tom become less acquiescent towards the end of the story, and how is Jewett using his dissatisfaction to comment on "women's work"?
8. What does the final scene suggest about Mary and Tom's present and future relationship?

## 2.2 Tasks for Further Exploration

1. Read another story about a woman working instead of the husband, such as Helen Reimensnyder Martin's "A Poet Though Married" or Eugene O'Neill's one-act play "Before Breakfast". What different attitudes are exhibited about these reversals of traditional roles?
2. In the recent study, "The Female Hero", Pearson and Pope argue that there are many examples in literature to belie the usual image of women staying at home while male heroes explore the world outside. Examine the list of examples in the "The Female Hero", or create your own list from stories, novels or plays to support or deny Pearson and Pope's thesis.

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## Story 3

### *Doris Lessing*

1919

*The many possible attitudes men can take towards successful working women are evident in this story, calling to our attention the multiple levels on which battles between the sexes can be waged. The overtly sexual battle here reveals the hidden threat of women's success and self-esteem.*

#### ONE OFF THE SHORT LIST

When he had first seen Barbara Coles, some years before, he only noticed her because someone said: "That's Johnson's new girl." He certainly had not used of her the private erotic formula: *Yes, that one*. He even wondered what Johnson saw in her. "She won't last long," he remembered thinking, as he watched Johnson, a handsome man, but rather flushed with drink, flirting with some unknown girl while Barbara stood by a wall looking on. He thought she had a sullen expression.

She was a pale girl, not slim, for her frame was generous, but her figure could pass as good. Her straight yellow hair was parted on one side in a way that struck him as gauche. He did not notice what she wore. But her eyes were all right, he remembered: large, and solidly green, square-looking because of some trick of the flesh at their corners. Emeraldlike eyes in the face of a schoolgirl, or young schoolmistress who was watching her lover flirt and would later sulk about it.

Her name sometimes cropped up in the papers. She was a stage decorator, a designer, something on those lines.

Then a Sunday newspaper had a competition for stage design and she won it. Barbara Coles was one of the "names" in the theatre, and her photograph was seen about. It was always serious. He remembered having thought her sullen.

One night he saw her across the room at a party. She was talking with a well-known actor. Her yellow hair was still done on one side, but now it looked sophisticated. She wore an emerald ring on her right hand that seemed deliberately to invite comparison with her eyes. He walked over and said: "We have met before, Graham Spence." He noted, with discomfort, that he sounded abrupt. "I'm sorry, I don't remember, but how do you do?" she said, smiling. And continued her conversation.

He hung around a bit, but soon she went off with a group of people she was inviting to her home for a drink. She did not invite Graham. There was about her an assurance, a carelessness, that he recognised as the signature of success. It was then, watching her laugh as she went off with her friends, that he used the formula: *"Yes, that one."* And he went home to his wife with enjoyable expectation, as if his date with Barbara Coles were already arranged.

His marriage was twenty years old. At first it had been stormy, painful, tragic – full of partings, betrayals and sweet reconciliations. It had taken him at least a decade to realise that there was nothing remarkable about this marriage that he had lived through with such surprise of the mind and the senses. On the contrary, the marriages of most of the people he knew, whether they were first, second or third attempts, were just the same. His had run true to form even to the serious love affair with the young girl for whose sake he had *almost* divorced his wife – yet at the last moment had changed his mind, letting the girl down so that he must have her for always (not unpleasurably) on his conscience. It was with humiliation that he had understood that this drama was not at all the unique thing he had imagined. It was nothing more than the experience of everyone in his circle. And presumably in everybody else's circle too?

Anyway, round about the tenth year of his marriage he had seen a good many things clearly, a certain kind of emotional adventure went from his life, and the marriage itself changed.

His wife had married a poor youth with a great future as a writer. Sacrifices had been made, chiefly by her, for that future. He was neither unaware of them, nor ungrateful; in fact he felt permanently

guilty about it. He at last published a decently successful book, then a second which now, thank God, no one remembered. He had drifted into radio, television, book reviewing.

He understood he was not going to make it; that he had become – not a hack, no one could call him that – but a member of that army of people who live by their wits on the fringes of the arts. The moment of realisation was when he was in a pub one lunchtime near the B.B.C. where he often dropped in to meet others like himself: he understood that was why he went there – they *were* like him. Just as that melodramatic marriage had turned out to be like everyone else's – except that it had been shared with one woman instead of with two or three – so it had turned out that his unique talent, his struggles as a writer had led him here, to this pub and the half dozen pubs like it, where all the men in sight had the same history. They all had their novel, their play, their book of poems, a moment of fame, to their credit. Yet here they were, running television programmes about which they were cynical (to each other or to their wives) or writing reviews about other people's books. Yes, that's what he had become, an impresario of other people's talent. These two moments of clarity, about his marriage and about his talent, had roughly coincided: and (perhaps not by chance) had coincided with his wife's decision to leave him for a man younger than himself who had a future, she said, as a playwright. Well, he had talked her out of it. For her part she had to understand he was not going to be the T. S. Eliot or Graham Greene of our time – but after all, how many were? She must finally understand this, for he could no longer bear her awful bitterness. For his part he must stop coming home drunk at five in the morning, and starting a new romantic affair every six months which he took so seriously that he made her miserable because of her implied deficiencies. In short he was to be a good husband. (He had always been a dutiful father.) And she a good wife. And so it was: the marriage became stable, as they say.

The formula: *Yes, that one* no longer implied a necessarily sexual relationship. In its more mature form, it was far from being something he was ashamed of. On the contrary, it expressed a humorous respect for what he was, for his real talents and flair, which had turned out to be not artistic after all, but to do with emotional life, hard-earned experience. It expressed an ironical dignity, a proving to himself not only: I can be honest about myself, but also: I have earned the best in *that* field whenever I want it.

He watched the field for the women who were well known in the arts, or in politics; looked out for photographs, listened for bits of gossip. He made a point of going to see them act, or dance, or orate. He built up a not unshrewed picture of them. He would either quietly pull strings to meet her or – more often, for there was a gambler's pleasure in waiting – bide his time until he met her in the natural course of events, which was bound to happen sooner or later. He would be seen out with her a few times in public, which was in order, since his work meant he had to entertain well-known people, male and female. His wife always knew, he told her. He might have a brief affair with this woman, but more often than not it was the appearance of an affair. Not that he didn't get pleasure from other people envying him – he would make a point, for instance, of taking this woman into the pubs where his male colleagues went. It was that his real pleasure came when he saw her surprise at how well she was understood by him. He enjoyed the atmosphere he was able to set up between an intelligent woman and himself: a humorous complicity which had in it much that was unspoken, and which almost made sex irrelevant.

Onto the list of women with whom he planned to have this relationship went Barbara Coles. There was no hurry. Next week, next month, next year, they would meet at a party. The world of well-known people in London is a small one. Big and little fishes, they drift around, nose each other, flirt their fins, wriggle off again. When he bumped into Barbara Coles, it would be time to decide whether or not to sleep with her.

Meanwhile he listened. But he didn't discover much. She had a husband and children, but the husband seemed to be in the background. The children were charming and well brought up, like everyone else's children. She had affairs, they said; but while several men he met sounded familiar with her, it was hard to determine whether they had slept with her, because none directly boasted of her. She was spoken of in terms of her friends, her work, her house, a party she had given, a job she had found someone. She was liked, she was respected, and Graham Spence's self-esteem was flattered because he had chosen her. He looked forward to saying in just the same tone: "Barbara Coles asked me what I thought about the set and I told her quite frankly...."

Then by chance he met a young man who did boast about Barbara Coles; he claimed to have had the great love affair with her, and recently at that; and he spoke of it as something generally known. Graham realised how much he had already become involved with her in his imagination because of how perturbed he was now, on account of the character of this youth, Jack Kennaway. He had recently become successful as a magazine editor – one of those young men who, not as rare as one might suppose in the big cities, are successful from sheer impertinence, effrontery. Without much talent or taste, yet he had the charm of his effrontery. "Yes, I'm going to succeed, because I've decided to; yes, I may be stupid, but not so stupid that I don't know my deficiencies. Yes, I'm going to be successful because you people with integrity, etc., etc., simply don't believe in the possibility of people like me. You are too cowardly to stop me. Yes, I've taken your measure and I'm going to succeed because I've got the courage, not only to be unscrupulous, but to be quite frank about it. And besides, you admire me, you must, or otherwise you'd stop me ...." Well, that was young Jack Kennaway, and he shocked Graham. He was a tall, languishing young man, handsome in a dark melting way, and, it was quite clear, he was either asexual or homosexual. And this youth boasted of the favours of Barbara Coles; boasted, indeed, of her love. Either she was a raving neurotic with a taste for neurotics; or Jack Kennaway was a most accomplished liar; or she slept with anyone. Graham was intrigued. He took Jack Kennaway out to dinner in order to hear him talk about Barbara Coles. There was no doubt the two were pretty close – all those dinners, theatres, weekends in the country – Graham Spence felt he had put his finger on the secret pulse of Barbara Coles; and it was intolerable that he must wait to meet her; he decided to arrange it.

It became unnecessary. She was in the news again, with a run of luck. She had done a successful historical play, and immediately afterwards a modern play, and then a hit musical. In all three, the sets were remarked on. Graham saw some interviews in newspapers and on television. These all centered around the theme of her being able to deal easily with so many different styles of theatre; but the real point was, of course, that she was a woman, which naturally added piquancy to the thing. And now Graham Spence was asked to do a half-hour radio interview with her. He planned the questions he would ask her with care, drawing on what people had said of her, but above all on his instinct and experience with women. The interview was to be at nine-thirty at night; he was to pick her up at six from the theatre where she was currently at work, so that there would be time, as the letter from the B.B.C. had put it, "for you and Miss Coles to get to know each other."

At six he was at the stage door, but a message from Miss Coles said she was not quite ready, could he wait a little. He hung about, then went to the pub opposite for a quick one, but still no Miss Coles. So he made his way backstage, directed by voices, hammering, laughter. It was badly lit, and the group of people at work did not see him. The director, James Poynter, had his arm around Barbara's shoulders. He was newly well-known, a carelessly good-looking young man reputed to be intelligent. Barbara Coles wore a dark blue overall, and her flat hair fell over her face so that she kept pushing it back with the hand that had the emerald on it. These two stood close, side by side. Three young men, stagehands, were on the other side of a trestle which had sketches and drawings on it. They were studying some sketches. Barbara said, in a voice warm with energy: "Well, so I thought if we did *this* – do you see, James? What do you think, Steven?" "Well, love," said the young man she called Steven, "I see your idea, but I wonder if. . ." "I think you're right, Babs," said the director. "Look," said Barbara, holding one of the sketches toward Steven, "look, let me show you." They all leaned forward, the five of them, absorbed in the business.

Suddenly Graham couldn't stand it. He understood he was shaken to his depths. He went off stage, and stood with his back against a wall in the dingy passage that led to the dressing rooms. His eyes were filled with tears. He was seeing what a long way he had come from the crude, uncompromising, admirable young egomaniac he had been when he was twenty. That group of people there – working, joking, arguing, yes, that's what he hadn't known for years. What bound them was the democracy of respect for each other's work, a confidence in themselves and in each other. They looked like people banded together against a world which they – no, not despised, but which they measured, understood, would fight to the death, out of respect for what *they* stood for, for what *it* stood for. It was a long time since he felt part of that balance. And he understood that he had seen Barbara Coles when she was most herself, at ease with a group of people she worked with. It was then, with the tears drying on his eyelids,

which felt old and ironic, that he decided he would sleep with Barbara Coles. It was a necessity for him. He went back through the door onto the stage, burning with this single determination.

The five were still together. Barbara had a length of blue gleaming stuff which she was draping over the shoulder of Steven, the stagehand. He was showing it off, and the others watched. "What do you think, James?" she asked the director. "We've got that sort of dirty green, and I thought . . ." "Well," said James, not sure at all, "well, Babs, well. . ."

Now Graham went forward so that he stood beside Barbara, and said: "I'm Graham Spence, we've met before." For the second time she smiled socially and said: "Oh I'm sorry, I don't remember." Graham nodded at James, whom he had known, or at least had met off and on, for years. But it was obvious James didn't remember him either.

"From the B.B.C.," said Graham to Barbara, again sounding abrupt, against his will. "Oh I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I forgot all about it. I've got to be interviewed," she said to the group. "Mr. Spence is a journalist." Graham allowed himself a small smile ironical of the word journalist, but she was not looking at him. She was going on with her work. "We should decide tonight, she said. "Steven's right." "Yes, I am right," said the stagehand. "She's right, James, we need that blue with that sludge-green everywhere." "James," said Barbara, "James, what's wrong with it? You haven't said." She moved forward to James, passing Graham. Remembering him again, she became contrite. "I'm sorry," she said, "we can none of us agree. Well, look" – she turned to Graham – "you advise us, we've got so involved with it that . . ." At which James laughed, and so did the stagehands. "No, Babs," said James, "of course Mr. Spence can't advise. He's just this moment come in. We've got to decide. Well I'll give you till tomorrow morning. Time to go home, it must be six by now."

"It's nearly seven," said Graham, taking command.

"It isn't!" said Barbara, dramatic. "My God, how terrible, how appalling, how could I have done such a thing . . ." She was laughing at herself. "Well, you'll have to forgive me, Mr. Spence, because you haven't got any alternative."

They began laughing again: this was clearly a group joke. And now Graham took his chance. He said firmly, as if he were her director, in fact copying James Poynter's manner with her: "No, Miss Coles, I won't forgive you, I've been kicking my heels for nearly an hour." She grimaced, then laughed and accepted it. James said: "There, Babs, that's how you ought to be treated. We spoil you." He kissed her on the cheek, she kissed him on both his, the stagehands moved off. "Have a good evening, Babs," said James, going, and nodding to Graham, who stood concealing his pleasure with difficulty. He knew, because he had had the courage to be firm, indeed, peremptory, with Barbara, that he had saved himself hours of maneuvering. Several drinks, a dinner – perhaps two or three evenings of drinks and dinners – had been saved because he was now on this footing with Barbara Coles, a man who could say: "No, I won't forgive you, you've kept me waiting."

She said: "I've just got to . . ." and went ahead of him. In the passage she hung her overall on a peg. She was thinking, it seemed, of something else, but seeing him watching her, she smiled at him, companionably: he realised with triumph it was the sort of smile she would offer one of the stagehands, or even James. She said again: "Just one second . . ." and went to the stage-door office. She and the stage doorman conferred. There was some problem. Graham said, taking another chance: "What's the trouble, can I help?" – as if he could help, as if he expected to be able to.

"Well . . ." she said, frowning. Then, to the man: "No, it'll be all right. Goodnight." She came to Graham. "We've got ourselves into a bit of a fuss because half the set's in Liverpool and half's here and – but it will sort itself out." She stood, at ease, chatting to him, one colleague to another. All this was admirable, he felt; but there would be a bad moment when they emerged from the special atmosphere of the theatre into the street. He took another decision, grasped her arm firmly, and said: "We're going to have a drink before we do anything at all, it's a terrible evening out." Her arm felt resistant, but remained within his. It was raining outside, luckily. He directed her, authoritative: "No, not that pub, there's a nicer one around the corner." "Oh, but I like this pub," said Barbara, "we always use it."

"Of course you do," he said to himself. But in that pub there would be the stagehands, and probably James, and he'd lose contact with her. He'd become *a journalist* again. He took her firmly out of danger around two corners, into a pub he picked at random. A quick look around – no, they weren't there. At least, if there were people from the theatre, she showed no sign. She asked for a beer. He ordered her a

double Scotch, which she accepted. Then, having won a dozen preliminary rounds already, he took time to think. Something was bothering him – what? Yes, it was what he had observed backstage, Barbara and James Poynter. Was she having an affair with him? Because if so, it would all be much more difficult. He made himself see the two of them together, and thought with a jealousy surprisingly strong: *Yes, that's it.* Meantime he sat looking at her, seeing himself look at her, *a man gazing in calm appreciation at a woman:* waiting for her to feel it and respond. She was examining the pub. Her white woollen suit was belted, and had a not unprovocative suggestion of being a uniform. Her flat yellow hair, hastily pushed back after work, was untidy. Her clear white skin, without any colour, made her look tired. Not very exciting, at the moment, thought Graham, but maintaining his appreciative pose for when she would turn and see it. He knew what she would see: he was relying not only on the "warm kindly" beam of his gaze, for this was merely a reinforcement of the impression he knew he made. He had black hair, a little greyed. His clothes were loose and bulky-masculine. His eyes were humorous and appreciative. He was not, never had been, concerned to lessen the impression of being settled, dependable: the husband and father. On the contrary, he knew women found it reassuring.

When she at last turned she said, almost apologetic: "Would you mind if we sat down? I've been lugging great things around all day." She had spotted two empty chairs in a corner. So had he, but rejected them, because there were other people at the table. "But my dear, of course!" They took the chairs, and then Barbara said, "If you'll excuse me a moment." She had remembered she needed make-up. He watched her go off, annoyed with himself. She was tired; and he could have understood, protected, sheltered. He realised that in the other pub, with the people she had worked with all day, she would not have thought: "I must make myself up, I must be on show." That was for outsiders. She had not, until now, considered Graham an outsider, because of his taking his chance to seem one of the working group in the theatre; but now he had thrown his opportunity away. She returned armored. Her hair was sleek, no longer defenceless. And she had made up her eyes. Her eyebrows were untouched, pale gold streaks above the brilliant green eyes whose lashes were blackened. Rather good, he thought, the contrast. Yes, but the moment had gone when he could say: Did you know you had a smudge on your cheek? Or – my dear girl! – pushing her hair back with the edge of a brotherly hand. In fact, unless he was careful, he'd be back at starting point.

He remarked: "That emerald is very cunning" – smiling into her eyes. She smiled politely, and said: "It's not cunning, it's an accident, it was my grandmother's." She flirted her hand lightly by her face, though, smiling. But that was something she had done before, to a compliment she had had before, and often. It was all social, she had become social entirely. She remarked: "Didn't you say it was half past nine we had to record?"

"My dear Barbara, we've got two hours. We'll have another drink or two, then I'll ask you a couple of questions, then we'll drop down to the studio and get it over, and then we'll have a comfortable supper."

"I'd rather eat now, if you don't mind. I had no lunch, and I'm really hungry."

"But my dear, of course." He was angry. Just as he had been surprised by his real jealousy over James, so now he was thrown off balance by his anger: he had been counting on the long quiet dinner afterwards to establish intimacy. "Finish your drink and I'll take you to Nott's." Nott's was expensive. He glanced at her assessingly as he mentioned it. She said: "I wonder if you know Butler's? It's good and it's rather close." Butler's was good, and it was cheap, and he gave her a good mark for liking it. But Nott's it was going to be. "My dear, we'll get into a taxi and be at Nott's in a moment, don't worry."

She obediently got to her feet: the way she did it made him understand how badly he had slipped. She was saying to herself: Very well, he's like that, then all right, I'll do what he wants and get it over with.....

Swallowing his own drink he followed her, and took her arm in the pub doorway. It was polite within his. Outside it drizzled. No taxi. He was having bad luck now. They walked in silence to the end of the street. There Barbara glanced into a side street where a sign said: BUTLER'S. Not to remind him of it, on the contrary, she concealed the glance. And here she was, entirely at his disposal, they might never have shared the comradely moment in the theatre.

They walked half a mile to Nott's. No taxis. She made conversation: this was, he saw, to cover any embarrassment he might feel because of a half-mile walk through rain when she was tired. She was

talking about some theory to do with the theatre, with designs for theatre building. He heard himself saying, and repeatedly: Yes, yes, yes. He thought about Nott's, how to get things right when they reached Nott's. There he took the headwaiter aside, gave him a pound, and instructions. They were put in a corner. Large Scotches appeared. The menus were spread. "And now, my dear," he said, "I apologise for dragging you here, but I hope you'll think it's worth it."

"Oh, it's charming, I've always liked it. It's just that. . ." She stopped herself saying: it's such a long way. She smiled at him, raising her glass, and said: "It's one of my very favourite places, and I'm glad you dragged me here." Her voice was flat with tiredness. All this was appalling; he knew it; and he sat thinking how to retrieve his position. Meanwhile she fingered the menu. The headwaiter took the order, but Graham made a gesture which said: Wait a moment. He wanted the Scotch to take effect before she ate. But she saw his silent order; and, without annoyance or reproach, leaned forward to say, sounding patient: "Graham, please, I've got to eat, you don't want me drunk when you interview me, do you?"

"They are bringing it as fast as they can," he said, making it sound as if she were greedy. He looked neither at the headwaiter nor at Barbara. He noted in himself, as he slipped further and further away from contact with her, a cold determination growing in him; one apart from, apparently, any conscious act of will, that come what may, if it took all night, he'd be in her bed before morning. And now, seeing the small pale face, with the enormous green eyes, it was for the first time that he imagined her in his arms. Although he had said: Yes, that one, weeks ago, it was only now that he imagined her as a sensual experience. Now he did, so strongly that he could only glance at her, and then away towards the waiters who were bringing food.

"Thank the Lord," said Barbara, and all at once her voice was gay and intimate. "Thank heavens. Thank every power that is. ..." She was making fun of her own exaggeration; and, as he saw, because she wanted to put him at his ease after his boorishness over delaying the food. (She hadn't been taken in, he saw, humiliated, disliking her.). "Thank all the gods of Nott's," she went on, "because if I hadn't eaten inside five minutes I'd have died, I tell you." With which she picked up her knife and fork and began on her steak. He poured wine, smiling with her, thinking that this moment of closeness he would not throw away. He watched her frank hunger as she ate, and thought: Sensual – it's strange I hadn't wondered whether she would be or not.

"Now," she said, sitting back, having taken the edge off her hunger: "Let's get to work."

He said: "I've thought it over very carefully – how to present you. The first thing seems to me, we must get away from that old chestnut: Miss Coles, how extraordinary for a woman to be so versatile in her work ... I hope you agree?" This was his trump card. He had noted, when he had seen her on television, her polite smile when this note was struck. (The smile he had seen so often tonight.) This smile said: All right, if you have to be stupid, what can I do?

Now she laughed and said: "What a relief. I was afraid you were going to do the same thing." "Good, now you eat and I'll talk."

In his carefully prepared monologue he spoke of the different styles of theatre she had shown herself mistress of, but not directly: he was flattering her on the breadth of her experience; the complexity of her character, as shown in her work. She ate, steadily, her face showing nothing. At last she asked: "And how did you plan to introduce this?"

He had meant to spring that on her as a surprise, something like: Miss Coles, a surprisingly young woman for what she has accomplished (she was thirty? thirty-two?) and a very attractive one.

"Perhaps I can give you an idea of what she's like if I say she could be taken for the film star Marie Carletta..." The Carletta was a strong earthy blonde, known to be intellectual. He now saw he could not possibly say this: he could imagine her cool look if he did. She said: "Do you mind if we get away from all that – my manifold talents, et cetera ..." He felt himself stiffen with annoyance; particularly because this was not an accusation, he saw she did not think him worth one. She had assessed him: This is the kind of man who uses this kind of flattery and therefore. ... It made him angrier that she did not even trouble to say: Why did you do exactly what you promised you wouldn't? She was being invincibly polite, trying to conceal her patience with his stupidity.

"After all," she was saying, "it is a stage designer's job to design what comes up. Would anyone take, let's say Johnnie Cranmore" (another stage designer) "onto the air or television and say: How very

versatile you are because you did that musical about Java last month and a modern play about Irish labourers this?"

He batted down his anger. "My dear Barbara, I'm sorry. I didn't realise that what I said would sound just like the mixture as before. So what shall we talk about?"

"What I was saying as we walked to the restaurant: can we get away from the personal stuff?"

Now he almost panicked. Then, thank God, he laughed from nervousness, for she laughed and said: "You didn't hear one word I said."

"No, I didn't. I was frightened you were going to be furious because I made you walk so far when you were tired."

They laughed together, back to where they had been in the theatre. He leaned over, took her hand, kissed it. He said: "Tell me again." He thought: Damn, now she's going to be earnest and intellectual.

But he understood he had been stupid. He had forgotten himself at twenty – or, for that matter, at thirty; forgotten one could live inside an idea, a set of ideas, with enthusiasm. For in talking about her ideas (also the ideas of the people she worked with) for a new theatre, a new style of theatre, she was as she had been with her colleagues over the sketches or the blue material. She was easy, informal, almost chattering. This was how, he remembered, one talked about ideas that were a breath of life. The ideas, he thought, were intelligent enough; and he would agree with them, with her, if he believed it mattered a damn one way or another, if any of these enthusiasms mattered a damn. But at least he now had the key, he knew what to do. At the end of not more than half an hour, they were again two professionals, talking about ideas they shared, for he remembered caring about all this himself once. When? How many years ago was it that he had been able to care?

At last he said: "My dear Barbara, do you realise the impossible position you're putting me in? Margaret Ruyen who runs this programme is determined to do you personally, the poor woman hasn't got a serious thought in her head."

Barbara frowned. He put his hand on hers, teasing her for the frown: "No, wait, trust me, we'll circumvent her." She smiled. In fact Margaret Ruyen had left it all to him, had said nothing about Miss Coles.

"They aren't very bright – the brass," he said. "Well, never mind: we'll work out what we want, do it, and it'll be a fait accompli."

"Thank you, what a relief. How lucky I was to be given you to interview me." She was relaxed now, because of the whisky, the food, the wine, above all because of this new complicity against Margaret Ruyen. It would all be easy. They worked out five or six questions, over coffee, and took a taxi through rain to the studios. He noted that the cold necessity to have her, to make her, to beat her down, had left him. He was even seeing himself, as the evening ended, kissing her on the cheek and going home to his wife. This comradeship was extraordinarily pleasant. It was balm to the wound he had not known he carried until that evening, when he had had to accept the justice of the word journalist. He felt he could talk forever about the state of the theatre, its finances, the stupidity of the government, the philistinism of ...

At the studios he was careful to make a joke so that they walked in on the laugh. He was careful that the interview began at once, without conversation with Margaret Ruyen; and that from the moment the green light went on, his voice lost its easy familiarity. He made sure that not one personal note was struck during the interview. Afterwards, Margaret Ruyen, who was pleased, came forward to say so; but he took her aside to say that Miss Coles was tired and needed to be taken home at once: for he knew this must look to Barbara as if he were squaring a producer who had been expecting a different interview. He led Barbara off, her hand held tight in his against his side. "Well," he said, "we've done it, and I don't think she knows what hit her."

"Thank you," she said, "it really was pleasant to talk about something sensible for once."

He kissed her lightly on the mouth. She returned it, smiling. By now he felt sure that the mood need not slip again, he could hold it.

"There are two things we can do," he said. "You can come to my club and have a drink. Or I can drive you home and you can give me a drink. I have to go past you."

"Where do you live?"

"Wimbledon." He lived, in fact, at Highgate; but she lived in Fulham. He was taking another chance, but by the time she found out, they would be in a position to laugh over his ruse.

"Good," she said. "You can drop me home then. I have to get up early." He made no comment. In the taxi he took her hand; it was heavy in his, and he asked: "Does James slave-drive you?"

"I didn't realize you knew him – no, he doesn't."

"Well I don't know him intimately. What's he like to work with?"

"Wonderful," she said at once. "There's no one I enjoy working with more."

Jealousy spurted in him. He could not help himself: "Are you having an affair with him?"

She looked: what's it to do with you? but said: "No, I'm not."

"He's very attractive," he said, with a chuckle of worldly complicity. She said nothing, and he insisted: "If I were a woman I'd have an affair with James."

It seemed she might very well say nothing. But she remarked: "He's married."

His spirits rose in a swoop. It was the first stupid remark she had made. It was a remark of such staggering stupidity that ... he let out a humoring snort of laughter, put his arm around her, kissed her, said: "My dear little Babs."

She said: "Why Babs?"

"Is that the prerogative of James. And of the stagehands?" he could not prevent himself adding. "I'm only called that at work." She was stiff inside his arm.

"My dear Barbara, then .... "He waited for her to enlighten and explain but she said nothing. Soon she moved out of his arm, on the pretext of lighting a cigarette. He lit it for her. He noted that his determination to lay her, and at all costs, had come back. They were outside her house. He said quickly: "And now, Barbara, you can make me a cup of coffee and give me a brandy." She hesitated; but he was out of the taxi, paying, opening the door for her. The house had no lights on, he noted. He said: "We'll be very quiet so as not to wake the children."

She turned her head slowly to look at him. She said, flat, replying to his real question: "My husband is away. As for the children, they are visiting friends tonight." She now went ahead of him to the door of the house. It was a small house, in a terrace of small and not very pretty houses. Inside a little, bright, intimate hall, she said: "I'll go and make some coffee. Then, my friend, you must go home because I'm very tired."

"Then my friend struck him deep, because he had become vulnerable during their comradeship. He said gabbling: "You're annoyed with me – oh, please don't, I'm sorry."

She smiled, from a cool distance. He saw, in the small light from the ceiling, her extraordinary eyes. "Green" eyes are hazel, are brown with green flecks, are even blue. Eyes are chequered, flawed, changing. Hers were solid green, but really, he had never seen anything like them before. They were like very deep water. They were like – well, emeralds; or the absolute clarity of green in the depths of a tree in summer. And now, as she smiled almost perpendicularly up at him, he saw a darkness come over them. Darkness swallowed the clear green. She said: "I'm not in the least annoyed." It was as if she had yawned with boredom. "And now I'll get the things ... in there." She nodded at a white door and left him. He went into a long, very tidy white room, that had a narrow bed in one corner, a table covered with drawings, sketches, pencils. Tacked to the walls with drawing pins were swatches of coloured stuffs. Two small chairs stood near a low round table: an area of comfort in the working room. He was thinking: I wouldn't like it if my wife had a room like this. I wonder what Barbara's husband ... ? He had not thought of her till now in relation to her husband, or to her children. Hard to imagine her with a frying pan in her hand, or for that matter, cosy in the double bed.

A noise outside: he hastily arranged himself, leaning with one arm on the mantelpiece. She came in with a small tray that had cups, glasses, brandy, coffeepot. She looked abstracted. Graham was on the whole flattered by this: it probably meant she was at ease in his presence. He realised he was a little tight and rather tired. Of course, she was tired too, that was why she was vague. He remembered that earlier that evening he had lost a chance by not using her tiredness. Well now, if he were intelligent ... She was about to pour coffee. He firmly took the coffeepot out of her hand, and nodded at a chair. Smiling, she obeyed him. "That's better," he said. He poured coffee, poured brandy, and pulled the table towards her. She watched him. Then he took her hand, kissed it, patted it, laid it down gently. Yes, he thought, I did that well.

Now, a problem. He wanted to be closer to her, but she was fitted into a damned silly little chair that had arms. If he were to sit by her on the floor... ? But no, for him, the big bulky reassuring man, there could be no casual gestures, no informal postures. Suppose I scoop her out of the chair onto the bed? He drank his coffee as he plotted. Yes, he'd carry her to the bed, but not yet.

"Graham," she said, setting down her cup. She was, he saw with annoyance, looking tolerant. "Graham, in about half an hour I want to be in bed and asleep."

As she said this, she offered him a smile of amusement at this situation – man and woman maneuvering, the great comic situation. And with part of himself he could have shared it. Almost, he smiled with her, laughed. (Not till days later he exclaimed to himself: Lord what a mistake I made, not to share the joke with her then: that was where I went seriously wrong). But he could not smile. His face was frozen, with a stiff pride. Not because she had been watching him plot; the amusement she now offered him took the sting out of that; but because of his revived determination that he was going to have his own way, he was going to have her. He was not going home. But he felt that he held a bunch of keys, and did not know which one to choose.

He lifted the second small chair opposite to Barbara, moving aside the coffee table for this purpose. He sat in this chair, leaned forward, took her two hands, and said: "My dear, don't make me go home yet, don't, I beg you." The trouble was, nothing had happened all evening that could be felt to lead up to these words and his tone – simple, dignified, human being pleading with human being for surcease. He saw himself leaning forward, his big hands swallowing her small ones; he saw his face, warm with the appeal. And he realised he had meant the words he used. They were nothing more than what he felt. He wanted to stay with her because she wanted him to, because he was her colleague, a fellow worker in the arts. He needed this desperately. But she was examining him, curious rather than surprised, and from a critical distance. He heard himself saying: "If James were here, I wonder what you'd do?" His voice was aggrieved; he saw the sudden dark descend over her eyes, and she said: "Graham, would you like some more coffee before you go?"

He said: "I've been wanting to meet you for years. I know a good many people who know you."

She leaned forward, poured herself a little more brandy, sat back, holding the glass between her two palms on her chest. An odd gesture: Graham felt that this vessel she was cherishing between her hands was herself. A patient, long-suffering gesture. He thought of various men who had mentioned her. He thought of Jack Kennaway, wavered, panicked, said: "For instance, Jack Kennaway."

And now, at the name, an emotion lit her eyes – what was it? He went on, deliberately testing this emotion, adding to it: "I had dinner with him last week – oh, quite by chance! – and he was talking about you."

"Was he?"

He remembered he had thought her sullen, all those years ago. Now she seemed defensive, and she frowned. He said: "In fact he spent most of the evening talking about you."

She said in short, breathless sentences, which he realised were due to anger: "I can very well imagine what he says. But surely you can't think I enjoy being reminded that ..." She broke off, resenting him, he saw, because he forced her down onto a level she despised. But it was not his level either: it was all her fault, all hers! He couldn't remember not being in control of a situation with a woman for years. Again he felt like a man teetering on a tightrope. He said, trying to make good use of Jack Kennaway, even at this late hour: "Of course, he's a charming boy, but not a man at all."

She looked at him, silent, guarding her brandy glass against her breasts.

"Unless appearances are totally deceptive, of course." He could not resist probing, even though he knew it was fatal. She said nothing.

"Do you know you are supposed to have had the great affair with Jack Kennaway?" he exclaimed, making this an amused expostulation against the fools who could believe it.

"So I am told." She set down her glass. "And now," she said, standing up, dismissing him. He lost his head, took a step forward, grabbed her in his arms, and groaned: "Barbara!"

She turned her face this way and that under his kisses. He snatched a diagnostic look at her expression – it was still patient. He placed his lips against her neck, groaned "Barbara" again, and waited. She would have to do something. Fight free, respond, something. She did nothing at all. At last she said: "For the Lord's sake, Graham!" She sounded amused: he was again being offered amusement.

But if he shared it with her, it would be the end of this chance to have her. He clamped his mouth over hers, silencing her. She did not fight him off so much as blow him off. Her mouth treated his attacking mouth as a woman blows and laughs in water, puffing off waves or spray with a laugh, turning aside her head. It was a gesture half annoyance, half humour. He continued to kiss her while she moved her head and face about under the kisses as if they were small attacking waves.

And so began what, when he looked back on it afterwards, was the most embarrassing experience of his life. Even at the time he hated her for his ineptitude. For he held her there for what must have been nearly half an hour. She was much shorter than he, he had to bend, and his neck ached. He held her rigid, his thighs on either side of hers, her arms clamped to her side in a bear's hug. She was unable to move, except for her head. When his mouth ground hers open and his tongue moved and writhed inside it, she still remained passive. And he could not stop himself. While with his intelligence he watched this ridiculous scene, he was determined to go on, because sooner or later her body must soften in wanting his. And he could not stop because he could not face the horror of the moment when he set her free and she looked at him. And he hated her more, every moment. Catching glimpses of her great green eyes, open and dismal beneath his, he knew he had never disliked anything more than those "jewelled" eyes. They were repulsive to him. It occurred to him at last that even if by now she wanted him, he wouldn't know it, because she was not able to move at all. He cautiously loosened his hold so that she had an inch or so leeway. She remained quite passive. As if, he thought derisively, she had read or been told that the way to incite men maddened by lust was to fight them. He found he was thinking: Stupid cow, so you imagine I find you attractive, do you? You've got the conceit to think that!

The sheer, raving insanity of this thought hit him, opened his arms, his thighs, and lifted his tongue out of her mouth. She stepped back, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, and stood dazed with incredulity. The embarrassment that lay in wait for him nearly engulfed him, but he let anger postpone it. She said positively apologetic, even, at this moment, humorous: "You're crazy, Graham. What's the matter, are you drunk? You don't seem drunk. You don't even find me attractive."

The blood of hatred went to his head and he gripped her again. Now she had got her face firmly twisted away so that he could not reach her mouth, and she repeated steadily as he kissed the parts of her cheeks and neck that were available to him: "Graham, let me go, do let me go, Graham." She went on saying this; he went on squeezing, grinding, kissing and licking. It might go on all night: it was a sheer contest of wills, nothing else. He thought: It's only a really masculine woman who wouldn't have given in by now out of sheer decency of the flesh! One thing he knew, however: that she would be in that bed, in his arms, and very soon. He let her go, but said: "I'm going to sleep with you tonight, you know that, don't you?"

She leaned with hand on the mantelpiece to steady herself. Her face was colourless, since he had licked all the makeup off. She seemed quite different: small and defenceless with her large mouth pale now, her smudged green eyes fringed with gold. And now, for the first time, he felt what it might have been supposed (certainly by her) he felt hours ago. Seeing the small damp flesh of her face, he felt kinship, intimacy with her, he felt intimacy of the flesh, the affection and good humour of sensuality. He felt she was flesh of his flesh, his sister in the flesh. He felt desire for her, instead of the will to have her; and because of this, was ashamed of the farce he had been playing. Now he desired simply to take her into bed in the affection of his senses.

She said: "What on earth am I supposed to do? Telephone for the police, or what?" He was hurt that she still addressed the man who had ground her into sulky apathy; she was not addressing *him* at all.

She said: "Or scream for the neighbours, is that what you want?"

The gold-fringed eyes were almost black, because of the depth of the shadow of boredom over them. She was bored and weary to the point of falling to the floor, he could see that.

He said: "I'm going to sleep with you."

"But how can you possibly want to?" – a reasonable, a civilised demand addressed to a man who (he could see) she believed would respond to it. She said: "You know I don't want to, and I know you don't really give a damn one way or the other."

He was stung back into being the boor because she had not the intelligence to see that the boor no longer existed; because she could not see that this was a man who wanted her in a way which she must respond to.

There she stood, supporting herself with one hand, looking small and white and exhausted, and utterly incredulous. She was going to turn and walk off out of simple incredulity, he could see that. "Do you think I don't mean it?" he demanded, grinding this out between his teeth. She made a movement – she was on the point of going away. His hand shot out on its own volition and grasped her wrist. She frowned. His other hand grasped her other wrist. His body hove up against hers to start the pressure of a new embrace. Before it could, she said: "Oh Lord, no, I'm not going through all that again. Right, then."

"What do you mean – right, then?" he demanded.

She said: "You're going to sleep with me. O.K. Anything rather than go through that again. Shall we get it over with?"

He grinned, saying in silence: "No darling, oh no you don't, I don't care what words you use, I'm going to have you now and that's all there is to it."

She shrugged. The contempt, the weariness of it, had no effect on him, because he was now again hating her so much that wanting her was like needing to kill something or someone.

She took her clothes off, as if she were going to bed by herself: her jacket, skirt, petticoat. She stood in white bra and panties, a rather solid girl, brown-skinned still from the summer. He felt a flash of affection for the brown girl with her loose yellow hair as she stood naked. She got into bed and lay there, while the green eyes looked at him in civilised appeal: Are you really going through with this? Do you have to? Yes, his eyes said back: I do have to. She shifted her gaze aside, to the wall, saying silently: Well, if you want to take me without any desire at all on my part, then go ahead, if you're not ashamed. He was not ashamed, because he was maintaining the flame of hate for her which he knew quite well was all that stood between him and shame. He took off his clothes, and got into bed beside her. As he did so, knowing he was putting himself in the position of raping a woman who was making it elaborately clear he bored her, his flesh subsided completely, sad, and full of reproach because a few moments ago it was reaching out for his sister whom he could have made happy. He lay on his side by her, secretly at work on himself, while he supported himself across her body on his elbow, using the free hand to manipulate her breasts. He saw that she gritted her teeth against his touch. At least she could not know that after all this fuss he was not potent.

In order to incite himself, he clasped her again. She felt his smallness, writhed free of him, sat up and said: "Lie down."

While she had been lying there, she had been thinking: The only way to get this over with is to make him big again, otherwise I've got to put up with him all night. His hatred of her was giving him a clair voyance: he knew very well what went on through her mind. She had switched on, with the determination to *get it all over with*, a sensual good humour, a patience. He lay down. She squatted beside him, the light from the ceiling blooming on her brown shoulders, her flat fair hair falling over her face. But she would not look at his face. Like a bored, skilled wife, she was: or like a prostitute. She administered to him, she was setting herself to please him. Yes, he thought, she's sensual, or she could be. Meanwhile she was succeeding in defeating the reluctance of his flesh, which was the tender token of a possible desire for her, by using a cold skill that was the result of her contempt for him. Just as he decided: Right, it's enough, now I shall have her properly, she made him come. It was not a trick, to hurry or cheat him, what defeated him was her transparent thought: Yes, that's what he's worth.

Then, having succeeded, and waited for a moment or two, she stood up, naked, the fringes of gold at her loins and in her armpits speaking to him a language quite different from that of her green, bored eyes. She looked at him and thought, snowing it plainly: What sort of man is it who... ? He watched the slight movement of her shoulders: a just-checked shrug. She went out of the room: then the sound of running water. Soon she came back in a white dressing gown, carrying a yellow towel. She handed him the towel, looking away in politeness as he used it. "Are you going home now?" she enquired hopefully, at this point.

"No, I'm not." He believed that now he would have to start fighting her again, but she lay down beside him, not touching him (he could feel the distaste of her flesh for his) and he thought: Very well, my dear, but there's a lot of the night left yet. He said aloud: "I'm going to have you properly tonight."

She said nothing, lay silent, yawned. Then she remarked consolingly, and he could have laughed outright from sheer surprise: "Those were hardly conducive circumstances for making love." She was *consoling* him. He hated her for it. A proper little slut: I force her into bed, she doesn't want me, but she still has to make me feel good, like a prostitute. But even while he hated her he responded in kind, from the habit of sexual generosity. "It's because of my admiration for you, because ... after all, I was holding in my arms one of the thousand women."

A pause. "The thousand?" she enquired, carefully.

"The thousand especial women."

"In Britain or in the world? You choose them for their brains, their beauty – what?"

"Whatever it is that makes them outstanding," he said, offering her a compliment.

"Well," she remarked at last, inciting him to be amused again: "I hope that at least there's a short list you can say I am on, for politeness' sake."

He did not reply for he understood he was sleepy. He was still telling himself that he must stay awake when he was slowly waking and it was morning. It was about eight. Barbara was not there. He thought: My God! What on earth shall I tell my wife? Where was Barbara? He remembered the ridiculous scenes of last night and nearly succumbed to shame. Then he thought, reviving anger: If she didn't sleep beside me here I'll never forgive her. ... He sat up, quietly, determined to go through the house until he found her and, having found her, to possess her, when the door opened and she came in. She was fully dressed in a green suit, her hair done, her eyes made up. She carried a tray of coffee, which she set down beside the bed. He was conscious of his big loose hairy body, half uncovered. He said to himself that he was not going to lie in bed, naked, while she was dressed. He said: "Have you got a gown of some kind?" She handed him, without speaking, a towel, and said: "The bathroom's second on the left." She went out. He followed, the towel around him. Everything in this house was gay, intimate - not at all like her efficient working room. He wanted to find out where she had slept, and opened the first door. It was the kitchen, and she was in it, putting a brown earthenware dish into the oven. "The next door," said Barbara. He went hastily past the second door, and opened (he hoped quietly) the third. It was a cupboard full of linen. "This door," said Barbara, behind him.

"So all right then, where did you sleep?"

"What's it to do with you? Upstairs, in my own bed. Now, if you have everything, I'll say goodbye, I want to get to the theatre."

"I'll take you," he said at once.

He saw again the movement of her eyes, the dark swallowing the light in deadly boredom. "I'll take you," he insisted.

"I'd prefer to go by myself," she remarked. Then she smiled: "However, you'll take me. Then you'll make a point of coming right in, so that James and everyone can see – that's what you want to take me for, isn't it?"

He hated her, finally, and quite simply, for her intelligence; that not once had he got away with anything, that she had been watching, since they had met yesterday, every movement of his campaign for her. However, some fate or inner urge over which he had no control made him say sentimentally: "My dear, you must see that I'd like at least to take you to your work."

"Not at all, have it on me," she said, giving him the lie direct. She went past him to the room he had slept in. "I shall be leaving in ten minutes," she said.

He took a shower, fast. When he returned, the workroom was already tidied, the bed made, all signs of the night gone. Also, there were no signs of the coffee she had brought in for him. He did not like to ask for it, for fear of an outright refusal. Besides, she was ready, her coat on, her handbag under her arm. He went, without a word, to the front door, and she came after him, silent.

He could see that every fibre of her body signalled a simple message: Oh God, for the moment when I can be rid of this boor! She was nothing but a slut, he thought.

A taxi came. In it she sat as far away from him as she could. He thought of what he should say to his wife.

Outside the theatre she remarked: "You could drop me here, if you liked." It was not a plea, she was too proud for that. "I'll take you in," he said, and saw her thinking: Very well, I'll go through with it to shame him. He was determined to take her in and hand her over to her colleagues, but he was afraid

she would give him the slip. But far from playing it down, she seemed determined to play it his way. At the stage door, she said to the doorman: "This is Mr. Spence, Tom—do you remember, Mr. Spence from last night?" "Good morning, Babs," said the man, examining Graham, politely, as he had been ordered to do.

Barbara went to the door to the stage, opened it, held it open for him. He went in first, then held it open for her. Together they walked into the cavernous, littered, badly lit place and she called out: "James, James!" A man's voice called out from the front of the house: "Here, Babs, why are you so late?"

The auditorium opened before them, darkish, silent, save for an early-morning busyness of charwomen. A vacuum cleaner roared, smally, somewhere close. A couple of stagehands stood looking up at a drop which had a design of blue and green spirals. James stood with his back to the auditorium, smoking. "You're late, Babs," he said again. He saw Graham behind her, and nodded. Barbara and James kissed. Barbara said, giving allowance to every syllable: "You remember Mr. Spence from last night?" James nodded: How do you do? Barbara stood beside him, and they looked together up at the blue-and-green backdrop. Then Barbara looked again at Graham, asking silently: All right now, isn't that enough? He could see her eyes, sullen with boredom.

He said: "Bye, Babs. Bye, James. I'll ring you, Babs." No response, she ignored him. He walked off slowly, listening for what might be said. For instance: "Babs, for God's sake, what are you doing with him?" Or she might say: "Are you wondering about Graham Spence? Let me explain."

Graham passed the stagehands who, he could have sworn, didn't recognise him. Then at last he heard James's voice to Barbara: "It's no good, Babs, I know you're enamoured of that particular shade of blue, but do have another look at it, there's a good girl. . . ." Graham left the stage, went past the office where the stage doorman sat reading a newspaper. He looked up, nodded, went back to his paper. Graham went to find a taxi, thinking: I'd better think up something convincing, then I'll telephone my wife.

Luckily he had an excuse not to be at home that day, for this evening he had to interview a young man (for television) about his new novel.

[1958]

### 3.1 Questions for the Text Interpretation

1. What makes Graham Spence interested in Barbara Coles? What do we learn of her through his eyes?
2. Why does so much of the story appear to be about Graham Spence rather than Barbara Coles? Instead of first-person narration by either of the characters, what point of view does Lessing use?
3. Describe Spence's "two moments of clarity" and his formula for life. How would you describe the place of women in his life plans?
4. What makes Spence want to sleep with Barbara Coles? Describe his feelings in the pub and at dinner.
5. Explain the significance of Spence's plans for introducing Coles. What does his introduction reveal about his attitude towards women and work?
6. Why does he refer to her as "my dear Barbara" and "my dear little Babs"? Explain how the "complicity against Margaret Ruyen" fits in with Spence's attitude towards women.
7. Describe the power struggle underlying the sex act in the story. Is this "date rape"? What do you think of Spence's actions? Of Barbara's?
8. What is the significance of the title of the story?
9. Explain why Barbara introduces Graham again to the men at work and why this is a final humiliation for Spence.

10. What principles are in opposition throughout the story, and what is Doris Lessing saying about women and work?

### 3.2 Tasks for Further Exploration

1. In “Women Have Always Worked: A Historical Overview”, Alice Kessler-Harris mentions the appropriateness in the workplace of one of the most meaningful slogans of the contemporary women’s movement, “the personal is political”. The slogan embodies a recognition that problems women experienced as individuals often reflected larger social relations. Sexual harassment on the job, for example, reflected the general perception of women as “sex objects” who were not to be taken seriously in the world of ideas or of work.

Contrast how Barbara Coles in this story is treated by the men at work and by Graham Spence. Then look at the other stories in this Section to determine whether or not “the personal is political”.

2. Which of the following “Ten Ways to Make a Woman Lose Effectiveness in an Organization”, identified by Judith D. Palmer, does Spence use? Use direct quotations from the story to prove your arguments:

- 1) overprotecting her;
- 2) excluding, avoiding, ignoring or forgetting;
- 3) inappropriate sexualization;
- 4) male-oriented language structure;
- 5) drawing her into traditional female roles;
- 6) staying one up;
- 7) discounting and discrediting;
- 8) loyalty tests (joking about another woman);
- 9) male solidarity;
- 10) self-protection.

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## Story 4

*Anzia Yeziarska*

1885-1970

*In this compelling account of an immigrant's attempt to find fulfilling work in the New World, Anzia Yeziarska explores what it means to be an American. Do Americans only compete for selfish gain, or is there room for every individual to make a contribution in the workplace? Reminding readers of America's past and present, Yeziarska touches the heart as well as the mind.*

### AMERICA AND I

As one of the dumb, voiceless ones I speak. One of the millions of immigrants beating, beating out their hearts at your gates for a breath of understanding.

Ach! America! From the other end of the earth where I came, America was a land of living hope, woven of dreams, aflame with longing and desire.

Choked for ages in the airless oppression of Russia, the Promised Land rose up – wings for my stifled spirit – sunlight burning through my darkness – freedom singing to me in my prison – deathless songs turning prison-bars into strings of a beautiful violin.

I arrived in America. My young, strong body, my heart and soul pregnant with the un-lived lives of generations clamoring for expression.

What my mother and father and their mother and father never had a chance to give out in Russia, I would give out in America. The hidden sap of centuries would find release; colors that never saw light – songs that died unvoiced – romance that never had a chance to blossom in the black life of the Old World.

In the golden land of flowing opportunity I was to find my work that was denied me in the sterile village of my forefathers. Here I was to be free from the dead drudgery for bread that held me down in Russia. For the first time in America, I'd cease to be a slave of the belly. I'd be a creator, a giver, a human being! My work would be the living joy of fullest self-expression.

But from my high visions, my golden hopes, I had to put my feet down on earth. I had to have food and shelter. I had to have the money to pay for it.

I was in America, among the Americans, but not of them. No speech, no common language, no way to win a smile of understanding from them, only my young, strong body and my untried faith. Only my eager, empty hands, and my full heart shining from my eyes!

God from the world! Here I was with so much richness in me but my mind was not wanted without the language. And my body, unskilled, untrained, was not even wanted in the factory. Only one of two chances was left open to me: the kitchen, or minding babies.

My first job was as a servant in an Americanized family. Once, long ago, they came from the same village from where I came. But they were so well-dressed, so well-fed, so successful in America, that they were ashamed to remember their mother tongue.

"What were to be my wages?" I ventured timidly, as I looked up to the well-fed, well-dressed "American" man and woman.

They looked at me with a sudden coldness. What have I said to draw away from me their warmth? Was it so low from me to talk of wages? I shrank back into myself like a low-down bargainer. Maybe they're so high up in well-being they can't any more understand my low thoughts for money.

From his rich height the man preached down to me that I must not be so grabbing for wages. Only just landed from the ship and already thinking about money when I should be thankful to associate with "Americans."

The woman, out of her smooth, smiling fatness assured me that this was my chance for a summer vacation in the country with her two lovely children. My great chance to learn to be a civilized being, to become an American by living with them.

So, made to feel that I was in the hands of American friends, invited to share with them their home, their plenty, their happiness, I pushed out from my head the worry for wages. Here was my first chance to begin my life in the sunshine, after my long darkness. My laugh was all over my face as I said to them: "I'll trust myself to you. What I'm worth you'll give me." And I entered their house like a child by the hand.

The best of me I gave them. Their house cares were my house cares. I got up early. I worked till late. All that my soul hungered to give I put into the passion with which I scrubbed floors, scoured pots, and washed clothes. I was so grateful to mingle with the American people, to hear the music of the American language, that I never knew tiredness.

There was such a freshness in my brains and such a willingness in my heart that I could go on and on – not only with the work of the house, but work with my head – learning new words from the children, the grocer, the butcher, the iceman. I was not even afraid to ask for words from the policeman on the street. And every new word made me see new American things with American eyes. I felt like a Columbus, finding new worlds through every new word.

But words alone were only for the inside of me. The outside of me still branded me for a steerage immigrant. I had to have clothes to forget myself that I'm a stranger yet. And so I had to have money to buy these clothes.

The month was up. I was so happy! Now I'd have money. *My own, earned* money. Money to buy a new shirt on my back – shoes on my feet. Maybe yet an American dress and hat!

Ach! How high rose my dreams! How plainly I saw all that I would do with my visionary wages shining like a light over my head!

In my imagination I already walked in my new American clothes. How beautiful I looked as I saw myself like a picture before my eyes! I saw how I would throw away my immigrant rags tied up in my immigrant shawl. With money to buy – free money in my hands – I'd show them that I could look like an American in a day.

Like a prisoner in his last night in prison, counting the seconds that will free him from his chains, I trembled breathlessly for the minute I'd get the wages in my hand.

Before dawn I rose.

I shined up the house like a jewel-box.

I prepared breakfast and waited with my heart in my mouth for my lady and gentleman to rise. At last I heard them stirring. My eyes were jumping out of my head to them when I saw them coming in and seating themselves by the table.

Like a hungry cat rubbing up to its boss for meat, so I edged and simpered around them as I passed them the food. Without my will, like a beggar, my hand reached out to them.

The breakfast was over. And no word yet from my wages.

"*Gottuniu!*" I thought to myself. Maybe they're so busy with their own things they forgot it's the day for my wages. Could they who have everything know what I was to do with my first American dollars? How could they, soaking in plenty, how could they feel the longing and the fierce hunger in me, pressing up through each visionary dollar? How could they know the gnawing ache of my avid fingers for the feel of my own, earned dollars? *My* dollars that I could spend like a free person. *My* dollars that would make me feel with everybody alike!

Breakfast was long past.

Lunch came. Lunch past.

*Oi-i weh!* Not a word yet about my money.

It was near dinner. And not a word yet about my wages.

I began to set the table. But my head – it swam away from me. I broke a glass. The silver dropped from my nervous fingers. I couldn't stand it any longer. I dropped everything and rushed over to my American lady and gentleman.

"*Oi weh!* The money – my money – my wages!" I cried breathlessly.

Four cold eyes turned on me.

"Wages? Money?" The four eyes turned into hard stone as they looked me up and down. "Haven't you a comfortable bed to sleep, and three good meals a day? You're only a month here. Just came to America. And you already think about money. Wait till you're worth any money. What use are you without knowing English? You should be glad we keep you here. It's like a vacation for you. Other girls pay money yet to be in the country."

It went black for my eyes. I was so choked no words came to my lips. Even the tears went dry in my throat.

I left. Not a dollar for all my work.

For a long, long time my heart ached and ached like a sore wound. If murderers would have robbed me and killed me it wouldn't have hurt me so much. I couldn't think through my pain. The minute I'd see before me how they looked at me, the words they said to me – then everything began to bleed in me. And I was helpless.

For a long, long time the thought of ever working in an "American" family made me tremble with fear, like the fear of wild wolves. No – never again would I trust myself to an "American" family, no matter how fine their language and how sweet their smile.

It was blotted out in me all trust in friendship from "Americans." But the life in me still burned to live. The hope in me still craved to hope. In darkness, in dirt, in hunger and want, but only to live on!

There had been no end to my day – working for the "American" family.

Now rejecting false friendships from higher-ups in America, I turned back to the Ghetto. I worked on a hard bench with my own kind on either side of me. I knew before I began what my wages were to be. I knew what my hours were to be. And I knew the feeling of the end of the day.

From the outside my second job seemed worse than the first. It was in a sweat-shop of a Delancey Street basement, kept up by an old, wrinkled woman that looked like a black witch of greed. My work was sewing on buttons. While the morning was still dark I walked into a dark basement. And darkness met me when I turned out of the basement.

Day after day, week after week, all the contact I got with America was handling dead buttons. The money I earned was hardly enough to pay for bread and rent. I didn't have a room to myself. I didn't even have a bed. I slept on a mattress on the floor in a rat-hole of a room occupied by a dozen other immigrants. I was always hungry – oh, so hungry! The scant meals I could afford only sharpened my appetite for real food. But I felt myself better off than working in the "American" family, where I had three good meals a day and a bed to myself. With all the hunger and darkness of the sweat-shop, I had at least the evening to myself. And all night was mine. When all were asleep, I used to creep up on the roof of the tenement and talk out my heart in silence to the stars in the sky.

"Who am I? What am I? What do I want with my life? Where is America? Is there an America? What is this wilderness in which I'm lost?"

I'd hurl my questions and then think and think. And I could not tear it out of me, the feeling that America must be somewhere, somehow – only I couldn't find it – *my America*, where I would work for love and not for a living. I was like a thing following blindly after something far off in the dark!

"*Oi weh!*" I'd stretch out my hand up in the air. "My head is so lost in America! What's the use of all my working if I'm not in it? Dead buttons is not me."

Then the busy season started in the shop. The mounds of buttons grew and grew. The long day stretched out longer. I had to begin with the buttons earlier and stay with them till later in the night. The old witch turned into a huge greedy maw for wanting more and more buttons.

For a glass of tea, for a slice of herring over black bread, she would buy us up to stay another and another hour, till there seemed no end to her demands.

One day, the light of self-assertion broke into my cellar darkness.

"I don't want the tea. I don't want your herring," I said with terrible boldness. "I only want to go home. I only want the evening to myself!"

"You fresh mouth, you!" cried the old witch. "You learned already too much in America. I want no clock-watchers in my shop. Out you go!"

I was driven out to cold and hunger. I could no longer pay for my mattress on the floor. I no longer could buy the bite in the mouth. I walked the streets. I knew what it is to be alone in a strange city, among strangers.

But I laughed through my tears. So I learned too much already in America because I wanted the whole evening to myself? Well America has yet to teach me still more: how to get not only the whole evening to myself, but a whole day a week like the American workers.

That sweat-shop was a bitter memory but a good school. It fitted me for a regular factory. I could walk in boldly and say I could work at something, even if it was only sewing on buttons.

Gradually, I became a trained worker. I worked in a light, airy factory, only eight hours a day. My boss was no longer a sweater and a blood-squeezer. The first freshness of the morning was mine. And the whole evening was mine. All day Sunday was mine.

Now I had better food to eat. I slept on a better bed. Now, I even looked dressed up like the American-born. But inside of me I knew that I was not yet an American. I choked with longing when I met an American-born, and I could say nothing.

Something cried dumb in me. I couldn't help it. I didn't know what it was I wanted. I only knew I wanted. I wanted. Like the hunger in the heart that never gets food.

An English class for foreigners started in our factory. The teacher had such a good, friendly face, her eyes looked so understanding, as if she could see right into my heart. So I went to her one day for an advice: "I don't know what is with me the matter," I began. "I have no rest in me. I never yet done what I want."

"What is it you want to do, child?" she asked me.

"I want to do something with my head, my feelings. All day long, only with my hands I work."

"First you must learn English." She patted me as if I was not yet grown up. "Put your mind on that, and then we'll see."

So for a time I learned the language. I could almost begin to think with English words in my head. But in my heart the emptiness still hurt. I burned to give, to give something, to do something, to be something. The dead work with my hands was killing me. My work left only hard stones on my heart.

Again I went to our factory teacher and cried to her: "I know already to read and write the English language, but I can't put it into words what I want. What is it in me so different that can't come out?"

She smiled at me down from her calmness as if I were a little bit out of my head. "What *do you want* to do?"

"I feel. I see. I hear. And I want to think it out. But I'm like dumb in me. I only feel I'm different – different from everybody."

She looked at me close and said nothing for a minute. "You ought to join one of the social clubs of the Women's Association," she advised.

"What's the Women's Association?" I implored greedily.

"A group of American women who are trying to help the working-girl find herself. They have a special department for immigrant girls like you."

I joined the Women's Association. On my first evening there they announced a lecture: "The Happy Worker and His Work," by the Welfare director of the United Mills Corporation.

"Is there such a thing as a happy worker at his work?" I wondered. Happiness is only by working at what you love. And what poor girl can ever find it to work at what she loves? My old dreams about my America rushed through my mind. Once I thought that in America everybody works for love. Nobody has to worry for a living. Maybe this welfare man came to show me the *real* America that till now I sought in vain.

With a lot of polite words the head lady of the Women's Association introduced a higher-up that looked like the king of kings of business. Never before in my life did I ever see a man with such a sureness in his step, such power in his face, such friendly positiveness in his eye as when he smiled upon us.

"Efficiency is the new religion of business," he began. "In big business houses, even in up-to-date factories, they no longer take the first comer and give him any job that happens to stand empty. Efficiency begins at the employment office. Experts are hired for the one purpose, to find out how best to fit the worker to his work. It's economy for the boss to make the worker happy." And then he talked a lot more on efficiency in educated language that was over my head.

I didn't know exactly what it meant – efficiency – but if it was to make the worker happy at his work, then that's what I had been looking for since I came to America. I only felt from watching him that he was happy by his job. And as I looked on this clean, well-dressed, successful, one, who wasn't ashamed to say he rose from an office-boy, it made me feel that I, too, could lift myself up for a person.

He finished his lecture, telling us about the Vocational-Guidance Center that the Women's Association started.

The very next evening I was at the Vocational-Guidance Center. There I found a young, college-looking woman. Smartness and health shining from her eyes! She, too, looked as if she knew her way in America. I could tell at the first glance: here is a person that is happy by what she does.

"I feel you'll understand me," I said right away.

She leaned over with pleasure in her face: "I hope I can."

"I want to work by what's in me. Only, I don't know what's in me. I only feel I'm different."

She gave me a quick, puzzled look from the corner of her eyes. "What are you doing now?"

"I'm the quickest shirtwaist hand on the floor. But my heart wastes away by such work. I think and think, and my thoughts can't come out."

"Why don't you think out your thoughts in shirtwaists? You could learn to be a designer. Earn more money."

"I don't want to look on waists. If my hands are sick from waists, how could my head learn to put beauty into them?"

"But you must earn your living at what you know, and rise slowly from job to job."

I looked at her office sign: "Vocational Guidance," "What's your vocational guidance?" I asked. "How to rise from job to job – how to earn more money?"

The smile went out from her eyes. But she tried to be kind yet. "What *do* you want?" she asked, with a sigh of last patience.

"I want America to want me."

She fell back in her chair, thunderstruck with my boldness. But yet, in a low voice of educated self-control, she tried to reason with me:

"You have to *show* that you have something special for America before America has need of you."

"But I never had a chance to find out what's in me, because I always had to work for a living. Only, I feel it's efficiency for America to find out what's in me so different, so I could give it out by my work."

Her eyes half closed as they bored through me. Her mouth opened to speak, but no words came from her lips. So I flamed up with all that was choking in me like a house on fire:

"America gives free bread and rent to criminals in prison. They got grand houses with sunshine, fresh air, doctors and teachers, even for the crazy ones. Why don't they have free boarding-schools for immigrants-strong people – willing people? Here you see us burning up with something different, and America turns her head away from us."

Her brows lifted and dropped down. She shrugged her shoulders away from me with the look of pity we give to cripples and hopeless lunatics.

"America is no Utopia. First you must become efficient in earning a living before you can indulge in your poetic dreams."

I went away from the vocational-guidance office with all the air out of my lungs. All the light out of my eyes. My feet dragged after me like dead wood.

Till now there had always lingered a rosy veil of hope over my emptiness, a hope that a miracle would happen. I would open my eyes some day and suddenly find the America of my dreams. As a young girl hungry for love sees always before her eyes the picture of lover's arms around her, so I saw always in my heart the vision of Utopian America.

But now I felt that the America of my dreams never was and never could be. Reality had hit me on the head as with a club. I felt that the America that I sought was nothing but a shadow - an echo - a chimera of lunatics and crazy immigrants.

Stripped of all illusion, I looked about me. The long desert of wasting days of drudgery stared me in the face. The drudgery that I had lived through, and the endless drudgery still ahead of me rose over me like a withering wilderness of sand. In vain were all my cryings, in vain were all frantic efforts of my spirit to find the living waters of understanding for my perishing lips. Sand, sand was everywhere. With every seeking, every reaching out I only lost myself deeper and deeper in a vast sea of sand.

I knew now the American language. And I knew now, if I talked to the Americans from morning till night, they could not understand what the Russian soul of me wanted. They could not understand *me* anymore than if I talked to them in Chinese. Between my soul and the American soul were worlds of difference that no words could bridge over. What was that difference? What made the Americans so far apart from me?

I began to read the American history. I found from the first pages that America started with a band of Courageous Pilgrims. They had left their native country as I had left mine. They had crossed an unknown ocean and landed in an unknown country, as I.

But the great difference between the first Pilgrims and me was that they expected to make America, build America, create their own world of liberty. I wanted to find it ready made.

I read on. I delved deeper down into the American history. I saw how the Pilgrim Fathers came to a rocky desert country, surrounded by Indian savages on all sides. But undaunted, they pressed on through danger – through famine, pestilence, and want – they pressed on. They did not ask the Indians for sympathy, for understanding. They made no demands on anybody, but on their own indomitable spirit of persistence.

And I – I was forever begging a crumb of sympathy, a gleam of understanding from strangers who could not sympathize, who could not understand.

I, when I encountered a few savage Indian scalpers, like the old witch of the sweat-shop, like my "Americanized" countryman, who cheated me of my wages – I, when I found myself on the lonely, untrodden path through which all seekers of the new world must pass, I lost heart and said: "There is no America!"

Then came a light – a great revelation! I saw America – a big idea – a deathless hope – a world still in the making. I saw that it was the glory of America that it was not yet finished. And I, the last comer, had her share to give, small or great, to the making of America, like those Pilgrims who came in the *Mayflower*.

Fired up by this revealing light, I began to build a bridge of understanding between the American-born and myself. Since their life was shut out from such as me, I began to open up my life and the lives of my people to them. And life draws life. In only writing about the Ghetto I found America.

Great chances have come to me. But in my heart is always a deep sadness. I feel like a man who is sitting down to a secret table of plenty, while his near ones and dear ones are perishing before his eyes. My very joy in doing the work I love hurts me like secret guilt, because all about me I see so many with my longings, my burning eagerness, to do and to be, wasting their days in drudgery they hate, merely to buy bread and pay rent. And America is losing all that richness of the soul.

The Americans of to-morrow, the America that is every day nearer coming to be, will be too wise, too open-hearted, too friendly-handed, to let the least last-comer at their gates knock in vain with his gifts unwanted.

[1923]

#### 4.1. Questions for Text Interpretation

1. Explain the significance of the many references to voice, speech, music and language in the story.
2. Why does the narrator feel set apart from other immigrants as well as from naturalized and natural-born Americans? Explore the sources of alienation in the story.
3. Trace the emotional ups and downs of the narrator, finding examples of figurative language (metaphor, similes), such as "my heart ached and ached like a sore wound" used to intensify each experience.
4. Compare each work experience (domestic, sweatshop, etc.) in order to determine what the narrator achieves with each move.
5. What are the narrator's definitions of "my America", "the real America"?
6. How are the Women's Association and Vocational Guidance portrayed in this narrative?
7. Describe how the narrator's vision of the "America of tomorrow" arises out of the lessons she discovers from American history.
8. Identify the tone of the last paragraph – is it hopeful or despairing, jubilant or wary?

#### 4.2. Tasks for Further Exploration

1. Compare this brief fictional account to Yeziarska's novel "Breadgivers", the story of a Jewish immigrant's struggle to rise above her ascribed roles as a worker and as a woman. What limitations must each character surmount, both within herself and in society?
2. Select one of the many best-selling books considered "subliterature" (many paperbacks available in grocery stores, for example, and made into TV miniseries) about women – often immigrants – who

start out poor but “make it to the top”. How do these accounts compare with Yeziarska’s narrator’s experience? What qualities in real life create success for women in the workplace?

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## 5. Questions for Discussion or Writing about Section III

1. What is similar about the situations of the women workers in the given stories? What could each have done to escape the real or attempted tyranny of others? For example, couldn’t Delia or “Tom’s Husband” or Mrs. Wright simply have left their husbands, or couldn’t Barbara in “One Off the Short List” have got rid of Graham earlier?

2. Discuss the ways in which women treat each other in the stories (such as Bertha and Delia). What effect does competition among women have on the outcome of each narrative? Is it true that there are few depictions of female friendship in literature about work, or can you find examples to the contrary?

3. Which of the major and minor characters in these stories are happy in their work? What accounts for happiness in each case, and how is inner satisfaction related to external success in work?

4. Examine the positive and negative aspects of male - female relationships in the workplace. For example, how is “Tom’s Husband’s” relationship with men different from that of the women with male coworkers in the stories?

5. How is work used by these authors as a metaphor for women’s place in all of society? Examine several stories to separate their literal and symbolic messages.

6. One of the major obstacles to job satisfaction is that women don’t see work as integral to their personal identity and autonomy. Is this true of any of the women depicted in the stories in this section? Why or why not?

7. Each of the main characters in the short stories has to make a decision at the end of the story. How are personal ethics, religious values, social codes, sexual codes and work codes evident in the women’s final decisions?

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## 6. Model Composition and Essay Writing: Adulthood – Women and Work

Has “women working” replaced “women’s work?” Or, do the old stereotypes of women working solely in the home still apply? What do writers of short stories have to say that confirms or contradicts the following concerns: that many working women have two jobs – one paid, the other unpaid; that women are paid less to do more; that jobs and careers remain largely sex-segregated; that women’s talents are underutilized and underappreciated, whether women work within or outside of the home.

In these stories, we see women doing domestic work, both paid and unpaid, and being secretaries, waitresses, factory workers, business managers and set designers. And these portrayals do what essays and data analyses cannot be expected to do – present women’s feelings about their roles as workers, while they depict the resulting delicate web of relationships with coworkers and bosses, family and friends.

Women’s traditional role as responsible for housework is presented with mixed feelings. Women want to be of use, but do not want to be used or used up in meaningless, repetitious tasks. Interestingly, the same complaints are evident in works about women in office and business settings; no single role seems to arise as the universal answer to job satisfaction.

While women's frustrations in the workplace are shown by these authors in tell-tale incidents, women's triumphs are described as well. The women in "One Off the Short List" is the most notable example of someone happy in her work and part of a viable team of coworkers, and in fact, all of the women in the stories are determined to work well. Motivated by the desire for self-worth in addition to the basic need to survive, even overburdened women workers still seem to keep trying to be considered of value by their overseers.

In the face of male opposition to women at work, several of the women in these stories strive for "a triumphant indifference" or maintain "a cool distance". Others are constantly striving to please or are looking for symbols of approval. However, no matter what attitude the women take, the path to success and job satisfaction is not easy. Even the most successful of the women have to make compromises and deal with opposition at home or in society. A man who initially seems to enjoy the reversal or traditional roles in the story "Tom's Husband" says that he wouldn't mind if his wife failed in business. More dramatically, another woman's excellence at work only stimulates a man's desire to "have" her sexually.

In many of these narratives, the more successful and self-confident the women become, the more men feel like failures. And no statistics could reveal the senses of fear and threat as vividly as fiction: the fear that women will come out "on top" in a covertly sexual battle, the fear that women will be more powerful or more successful than their male counterparts, and the threat that women will be unfaithful in word or deed or will make men literally or symbolically impotent.

As always, the subtlety of language is a powerful vehicle for expressing these undercurrents of feelings and attitudes. Themes intertwined with the work motif – sex, fidelity and infidelity, power, aggression – are exemplified in words the characters use to describe each other. Diminutives and epithets, such as "my dear little girl" and "problem child" reveal condescending attitudes unmitigated by the tone of pretended affection. Recurrent images of women as subservient animals further contribute to the negative part of the picture of women at work.

The theme of competition between women in the workplace is almost as strong as that of dominance of men over women. There is an unfortunate struggle among women to gain approval and recognition. Even in the most flattering portrait of women at work, the female worker is forced into passing the male loyalty test of implicitly denigrating another woman's work.

Seldom do the women in these stories support another's work and, although women in literature are beginning to be depicted as friends, there are few stories about female friendship in the workplace.

Personal appearance is once again a major factor in women's acceptance, although both good looks and bad interfere more than help with success in these stories. Fine clothing and makeup are seen as sex symbols, while ordinary clothes make the woman nondescript. One male character spends an inordinate amount of time assessing the woman's outward appearance, saying that she looks drab without makeup, but "armoured ... no longer defenceless" with it.

In the same sense that women are "damned if they do and damned if they don't" in terms of good or poor looks in the workplace, neither passive nor aggressive behavior seems to be the answer in these stories, reflecting male executives' complaints that tough women at work aren't "feminine" but "womanly women" can't do the job. In both literature and life, the choice between being liked and being respected is difficult for women wanting just to be themselves.

Before confronting those myriad problems, women seem to carry the adolescent dream of being "special but accepted" with them to the workplace. Some seem surprised by the opposition to the dream, but become resigned to the lack of individuality allowed. Others try to ignore or to rise above situations, and some become aggressive as Delia in "Sweat" who is forced to defend her work with an upraised frying pan.

Yet the women continue to dream of being satisfied and accepted, seeing themselves as characters in the Bible, novels or television. The various forms of escapism in the stories show that the women find ways of coping with their situations, even when work becomes drudgery. Women here demonstrate a powerful societally reinforced capacity for accepting suffering. Most either smile or pretend to smile, continuing to strive for daily survival with a hope of eventual success.

The American dream that anyone willing to work hard can not only find meaningful work, but can "make it to the top" as well is brought to our renewed attention in the story "America and I", an

immigrant's initial view of work in America. In this story and others, authors ask, is there a place in the American dream for women, immigrants and other minority workers to rise above the secondary roles that society has given them? Women's contributions are not as trifling as they may appear to be to the world of working men.

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## **Bibliographical Sketches**

### **Adams, Alice (Boyd) 1926 - 1999**

Born in Fredericksburg, Virginia, Alice Adams held a series of secretarial and bookkeeping jobs before she went on to write *Families and Survivors* (1975) and other novels. She has contributed short stories to periodicals such as *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The New Yorker*, and *Paris Review*.

### **Bambara, Toni Cade 1939 - 1995**

Bambara studied at Queens College of the City University of New York and at Ecole de Mime Etienne Decroux in Paris, among other places, and served as visiting professor of African American studies at Duke University in 1974. Some of her works include *Tales and Stories for Black Folks* (1971), *Gorilla, My Love* (1972), and *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive: Collected Stories* (1977).

### **Colette (Sidonie-Gabrielle) 1873 - 1954**

#### **(Colette Willy)**

The premiere French woman novelist and journalist of the early twentieth century, Colette began writing stories of her girlhood under her husband's pen name, Willy. Colette divorced her husband, worked on the stage, and during her second and third marriages became a journalist and celebrated author of *Mitsou; or, How Girls Grow Wise* (1919), *Cheri* (1920), *Gigi* (1944), and other novels.

### **Hull, Helen (Rose) 1888 - 1971**

After two years as an instructor at Wellesley College, Hull moved on to Columbia University in 1914 where she taught and wrote about writing until her death in 1971. Her writings include *Creative Writing: The Story Form*, with Mabel Robinson (1932), *Uncommon People* (1936), and *Experiment: Four Short Novels* (1940).

### **Hunter, Kristin (Eggleston) 1931 - 2008**

This Philadelphia-born author of *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou* (1968) and *Guests in the Promised Land: Stories* (1973) has also written a television documentary (*Minority of one*) and had her novel *The*

*Landlord* (1966) filmed by United Artists. Hunter's *God Bless the Child* (1964) has been translated into German.

### **Hurston, Zora Neale 1903 - 1960**

Born in the first incorporated all-black town in America (Eatonville, Florida), Hurston was taken out of school at thirteen yet later went on to graduate from Barnard College in anthropology. Her novels and books of folklore are prime sources of black myth and legend. Some works include *Mules and Men* (1935), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and the autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1939). Zora Neale Hurston has also been represented in numerous anthologies, including *Black Writers in America* and *American Negro Short Stories*.

### **Jewett, Sarah Orne 1849 - 1909**

This regional novelist, short story writer, essayist, and poet was born in Maine and sold her first story at the age of nineteen. Beginning with *Deephaven* (1877), a collection of her short stories, Jewett proceeded to write about her native state as she watched it grow into the twentieth century. *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) is regarded as her best work; others include *Old Friends and New* (1879) and *A Country Doctor* (1884).

### **Lessing, Doris (May) 1919**

A left-wing English novelist born in Persia, Lessing was educated in Roman Catholic schools in Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia. Although her mother wanted her to be a pianist, Lessing left school at fourteen and began writing at eighteen. In addition to the much-lauded novel, *The Golden Notebook* (1962), Lessing also wrote works such as *The Grass Is Singing* (1950), *Mr. Dollinger* (a play, 1958), *Fourteen Poems* (1959), and *A Man and Two Women* (1963).

### **Oates, Joyce Carol 1938**

Oates had her first collection of short stories, *By the North Gate* (1963) published at the age of twenty-five while she taught at the University of Detroit. Since then, her work has been frequently anthologized in both scholarly and popular collections including *Best American Short Stories*, *O. Henry Awards Anthology*, *Southwest Review*, *Literary Review*, and *Virginia Quarterly Review*. Some works are *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (1967), *The Sweet Enemy* (a play, 1965), and *Anonymous Sins and Other Poems* (1969).

### **Paley, Grace 1922 - 2007**

A self-described anarchist, writer Grace Paley was a frequent antiwar activist. Her two major works, *The Little Disturbances of Man* (1959) and *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute* (1974), were separated by fifteen years of contributing stories to numerous periodicals. She received a Guggenheim

fellowship in fiction (1961) and the National Institute of Arts and Letters Award for short story writing (1970).

### **West, Jessamyn 1907 - 1984**

This Quaker, born in Indiana, has written everything from an opera libretto (*A Mirror for the Sky*, 1948) to collections of short stories (*Love, Death and the Ladies Drill Team*, 1955) to movie scripts (*Friendly Persuasion* and *The Big Country*). West has also contributed to various periodicals and collections.

### **Yeziarska, Anzia 1885 -1970**

This Polish immigrant left home at the age of seventeen to earn money for an education. She attended college and then published her well-received first collection of ghetto stories, *Hungry Hearts* (1920). After this came *Bread Givers* (1925), *Children of Loneliness* (1923), and *All That I Could Never Be* (1932).

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