A Girl's Story

David Arnason

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You've wondered what it would be like to be a character in a story, to sort of slip out of your ordinary self and into some other character. Well, I'm offering you the opportunity. I've been trying to think of a heroine for this story, and frankly, it hasn't been going too well. A writer's life isn't easy, especially if, like me, he's got a tendency to sometimes drink a little bit too much. Yesterday, I went for a beer with Dennis and Ken (they're real-life friends of mine) and we stayed a little longer than we should have. Then I came home and quickly mixed a drink and started drinking it so my wife would think the liquor on my breath came from the drink I was drinking and not from the drinks I had had earlier. I wasn't going to tell her about those drinks. Anyway, Wayne dropped over in the evening and I had some more drinks, and this morning my head isn't working very well.

To be absolutely frank about it, I always have trouble getting characters, even when I'm stone cold sober. I can think of plots; plots are really easy. If you can't think of one, you just pick up a book, and sure enough, there's a plot. You just move a few things around and nobody knows you stole the idea. Characters are the problem. It doesn't matter how good the plot is if your characters are dull. You can steal characters too, and put them into different plots. I've done that. I stole Eustacia Vye from Hardy and gave her another name. The problem was that she turned out a lot sulkier than I remembered and the plot I put her in was a light comedy. Now nobody wants to publish the story. I'm still sending it out, though. If you send a story to enough publishers, no matter how bad it is, somebody will ultimately publish it.

For this story I need a beautiful girl. You probably don't think you're beautiful enough, but I can fix that. I can do all kinds of retouching once I've got the basic material, and if I miss anything, Karl (he's my editor) will find it. So I'm going to make you fairly tall, about five-foot eight and a quarter in your stocking feet. I'm going to give you long blond hair because long blond hair is sexy and virtuous. Black hair can be sexy too, but it doesn't go with virtue. I've got to deal with a whole literary tradition where black-haired women are basically evil. If I were feeling better I might be able to do it in an ironic way, then black hair would be okay, but I don't think I'm up to it this morning. If you're going to use irony, then you've got to be really careful about tone. I could make you a redhead, but redheads have a way of turning out pixie-ish, and that would wreck my plot.

So you've got long blond hair and you're this tall slender girl with amazingly blue eyes. Your face is narrow and your nose is straight and thin. I could have turned up the nose a little, but that would have made you cute, and I really need a beautiful girl. I'm going to put a tiny black mole on your cheek. It's traditional. If you want your character to be really beautiful there has to be some minor defect.

Now, I'm going to sit you on the bank of a river. I'm not much for setting. I've read so many things where you get great long descriptions of the setting, and mostly it's just boring. When my last book came out, one of the reviewers suggested that the reason I don't do settings is that I'm not very good at them. That's just silly. I'm writing a different kind of story, not that old realist stuff. If you think I can't do setting, just watch.

There's a curl in the river just below the old dam where the water seems to make a broad sweep. That flatness is deceptive, though. Under the innocent sheen of the mirroring surface, the current is treacherous. The water swirls, stabs, takes sharp angles and dangerous vectors. The trees that lean from the bank shimmer with the multi-hued greenness of elm, oak, maple, and aspen. The leaves turn in the gentle breeze, showing their paler green undersides. The undergrowth, too, is thick and green, hiding the poison ivy, the poison sumac and the thorns. On a patch of grass that slopes gently to the water, the only clear part of the bank on that side of the river, a girl sits, a girl with long blond hair. She has slipped a ring from her finger and seems to be holding it towards the light.

You see? I could do a lot more of that, but you wouldn't like it. I slipped a lot of details in there and provided all those hints about strange and dangerous things under the surface. That's called foreshadowing. I put in the ring at the end there so that you'd wonder what was going to happen. That's to create suspense. You're supposed to ask yourself what the ring means. Obviously it has something to do with love, rings always do, and since she's taken it off, obviously something has gone wrong in the love relationship. Now I just have to hold off answering that question for as long as I can, and I've got my story. I've got a friend who's also a writer who says never tell the buggers anything until they absolutely have to know.

I'm going to have trouble with the feminists about this story. I can see that already. I've got that river that's calm on the surface and boiling underneath, and I've got those trees that are gentle and beautiful with poisonous and dangerous undergrowth. Obviously, the girl is going to be like that, calm on the surface but passionate underneath. The feminists are going to say that I'm perpetuating stereotypes, that by giving the impression the girl is full of hidden passion I'm encouraging rapists. That's crazy. I'm just using a literary convention. Most of the world's great books are about the conflict between reason and passion. If you take that away, what's left to write about?

So I've got you sitting on the riverbank, twirling your ring. I forgot the birds. The trees are full of singing birds. There are meadowlarks and vireos and even Blackburnian warblers. I know a lot about birds but I'm not going to put in too many. You've got to be careful not to overdo things. In a minute I'm going to enter your mind and reveal what you're thinking. I'm going to do this in the third person. Using the first person is sometimes more effective, but I'm always afraid to do a female character in the first person. It seems wrong to me, like putting on a woman's dress.

Your name is Linda. I had to be careful not to give you a biblical name like Judith or Rachel. I don't want any symbolism in this story. Symbolism makes me sick, especially biblical symbolism. You always end up with some crazy moral argument that you don't believe and none of the readers believe. Then you lose control of your characters, because they've got to be like the biblical characters. You've got this terrific episode you'd like to use, but you can't because Rachel or Judith or whoever wouldn't do it. I think of stories with a lot of symbolism in them as sticky.

Here goes.

Linda held the ring up towards the light. The diamond flashed rainbow colours. It was a small diamond, and Linda reflected that it was probably a perfect symbol of her relationship with Gregg. Everything Gregg did was on a small scale. He was careful with his money and just as careful with his emotions. In one week they would have a small wedding and then move into a small apartment. She supposed that she ought to be happy. Gregg was very handsome, and she did love him. Why did it seem that she was walking into a trap?

That sounds kind of distant, but it's supposed to be distant. I'm using indirect quotation because the reader has just met Linda, and we don't want to get too intimate right away. Besides, I've got to get a lot of explaining done quickly, and if you can do it with the character's thoughts, then that's best.

Linda twirled the ring again, then with a suddenness that surprised her, she stood up and threw it into the river. She was immediately struck by a feeling of panic. For a moment she almost decided to dive into the river to try to recover it. Then, suddenly, she felt free. It was now impossible to marry Gregg. He would not forgive her for throwing the ring away. Gregg would say he's had enough of her theatrics for one lifetime. He always accused her of being a romantic. She'd never had the courage to admit that he was correct, and that she intended to continue being a romantic. She was sitting alone by the river in a long blue dress because it was a romantic pose. Anyway, she thought a little wryly, you're only likely to find romance if you look for it in romantic places and dress for the occasion.

Suddenly, she heard a rustling in the bush, the sound of someone coming down the narrow path from the road above.

I had to do that, you see. I'd used up all the potential in the relationship with Gregg, and the plot would have started to flag if I hadn't introduced a new character. The man who is coming down the path is tall and athletic with wavy brown hair. He has dark brown eyes that crinkle when he smiles, and he looks kind. His skin is tanned, as if he spends a lot of time outdoors, and he moves gracefully. He is smoking a pipe. I don't want to give too many details. I'm not absolutely sure what features women find attractive in men these days, but what I've described seems safe enough. I got all of it from stories written by women, and I assume they must know. I could give him a chiselled jaw, but that's about as far as I'll go.

The man stepped into the clearing. He carried an old-fashioned wicker fishing creel and a telescoped fishing rod. Linda remained sitting on the grass, her blue dress spread out around her. The man noticed her and apologized.

"I'm sorry, I always come here to fish on Saturday afternoons and I've never encountered anyone here before." His voice was low with something of an amused tone in it.

"Don't worry," Linda replied. "I'll only be here for a little while. Go ahead and fish. I won't make any noise." In some way she couldn't understand, the man looked familiar to her. She felt she knew him. She thought she might have seen him on television or in a movie, but of course she knew that movie and television stars do not spend every Saturday afternoon fishing on the banks of small, muddy rivers.

"You can make all the noise you want," he told her. "The fish in this river are almost entirely deaf. Besides, I don't care if I catch any. I only like the act of fishing. If I catch them, then I have to take them home and clean them. Then I've got to cook them and eat them. I don't even like fish that much, and the fish you catch here all taste of mud."

"Why do you bother fishing then?" Linda asked him. "Why don't you just come and sit on the riverbank?"

"It's not that easy," he told her. "A beautiful girl in a blue dress may go and sit on a riverbank any time she wants. But a man can only sit on a riverbank if he has a very good reason. Because I fish, I am a man with a hobby. After a hard week of work, I deserve some relaxation. But if I just came and sat on the riverbank, I would be a romantic fool. People would make fun of me. They would think I was irresponsible, and before long I would be a failure." As he spoke, he attached a lure to his line, untelescoped his fishing pole, and cast his line into the water.

You may object that this would not have happened in real life, that the conversation would have been awkward, that Linda would have been a bit frightened by the man. Well, why don't you just run out to the grocery store and buy a bottle of milk and a loaf of bread? The grocer will give you change without even looking at you. That's what happens in real life, and if that's what you're after, why are you reading a book?

I'm sorry. I shouldn't have got upset. But it's not easy you know. Dialogue is about the hardest stuff to write. You've got all those "he saids" and "she saids" and "he replieds." And you've got to remember the quotation marks and whether the comma is inside or outside the quotation marks. Sometimes you can leave out the "he saids" and the "she saids" but then the reader gets confused and can't figure out who's talking. Hemingway is bad for that. Sometimes you can read an entire chapter without figuring out who's on what side.

Anyway, something must have been in the air that afternoon. Linda felt free and open.

Did I mention that it was warm and the sun was shining?

She chattered away, telling the stranger all about her life, what she had done when she was a little girl, the time her dad had taken the whole family to Hawaii and she got such a bad sunburn that she was peeling in February, how she was a better water-skier than Gregg and how mad he got when she beat him at tennis. The man, whose name was Michael (you can use biblical names for men as long as you avoid Joshua or Isaac), told her he was a doctor, but had always wanted to be a cowboy. He told her about the time he skinned his knee when he fell off his bicycle and had to spend two weeks in the hospital because of infection. In short, they did what people who are falling in love always do. They unfolded their brightest and happiest memories and gave them to each other as gifts.

Then Michael took a bottle of wine and a Klik sandwich out of his wicker creel and invited Linda to join him in a picnic. He had forgotten his corkscrew and he had to push the cork down into the bottle with his filletting knife. They drank wine and laughed and spat out little pieces of cork. Michael reeled in his line, and to his amazement discovered a diamond ring on his hook. Linda didn't dare tell him where the ring had come from. Then Michael took Linda's hand, and slipped the ring onto her finger. In a comic-solemn voice, he asked her to marry him. With the same kind of comic solemnity, she agreed. Then they kissed, a first gentle kiss with their lips barely brushing and without touching each other.

Now I've got to bring this to some kind of ending. You think that writers know how stories end before they write them, but that's not true. We're wracked with confusion and guilt about how things are going to end. And just as you're playing the role of Linda in this story, Michael is my alter ego. He even looks a little like me and he smokes the same kind of pipe. We all want this to end happily. If I were going to be realistic about this, I suppose I'd have to let them make love. Then, shaken with guilt and horror, Linda would go back and marry Gregg, and the doctor would go back to his practice. But I'm not going to do that. In the story from which I stole the plot, Michael turned out not to be a doctor at all, but a returned soldier who had always been in love with Linda. She recog-[illegible] because they had kissed as children, and even though they had grown up and changed, she recognized the flavour of wintergreen on his breath. That's no good. It brings in too many unexplained facts at the last minute.

I'm going to end it right here at the moment of the kiss. You can do what you want with the rest of it, except you can't make him a returned soldier, and you can't have them make love then separate forever. I've eliminated those options. In fact, I think I'll eliminate all options. This is where the story ends, at the moment of the kiss. It goes on and on forever while cities burn, nations rise and fall, galaxies are born and die, and the universe snuffs out the stars one by one. It goes on, the story, the brush of a kiss.

Poet and short-story writer David Arnason founded the *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, which he edited for several years, and was one of the founders of Turnstone Press. Among his popular short-story collections are *Fifty Stories and a Piece of Advice* (1982), *The Circus Performers' Bar* (1984), *The Happiest Man in the World and Other Stories* (1989), and *The Pagan Wall* (1992). Arnason teaches creative writing and Canadian literature at the University of Manitoba. *(Born Gimli, Manitoba 1940)*

RESPONDING

Meaning

1. a) Explain the *irony* of the title, "A Girl's Story."
   b) This story includes elements of *satire*. What is being satirized? Support your answer with specific evidence from the story.
2. How does the incident of the fishing act as a *metaphor* in this story?

Form and Style

3. a) This story is self-reflexive; that is, the story incorporates in the narrative references to the actual act of writing the story. What effect does this have on the reader's attitude to the story? How does it affect the *tone* of the piece?
4. One technique for creating humour is to *juxtapose* a grand or romantic image with something more ordinary. Identify three examples of this kind of humour in the last three paragraphs of the story. Why do you think the author chose to use this technique?

Exploring Context

5. a) Self-reflexivity is part of a literary movement called Postmodernism. Using a good dictionary of literary terms, look up the term Postmodernism and write a brief summary of its major characteristics.
   b) Apply what you have learned about Postmodernism to "A Girl's Story." What characteristics of this literary movement are or are not present in the story? Support your answer with specific reference to the text.

Creative Extension

6. The narrator ends the story with the kiss and tells the reader "You can do what you want with the rest of it, except you can't make him a returned soldier, and you can't have them make love then separate forever." Take over the story and, using the self-reflexive style, create a new ending.
7. Assume the role of either Michael or Linda and write a monologue describing your views on the story, the narrator, and his method of writing. Stay true to the character developed in the story.

Learning Goal

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V. S. NAIPAUL

1932–

In 1990 Queen Elizabeth made Vidia Naipaul a knight. The gesture seemed fitting both to Naipaul's many admirers and to his equally numerous critics. His admirers felt it was a just reward for a brilliant stylist and social observer whose books had already received most of the prizes available to an English-speaking writer. His critics felt, on the other hand, that the knighthood was bitterly ironic, for it marked Naipaul's faithful service to the British imperial order at the expense of all those societies, like his native Trinidad, which Britain had ruled so long and so harshly.

There is no doubt of Naipaul's contempt for the Caribbean society in which he grew up, the grandchild of Indian immigrants, and for all the former colonies that resemble it. Seemingly undeterred by the angry reactions of writers around the world, he has expressed this contempt again and again in his novels and books of travel, reaffirming stereotypes about lazy and violent "natives" that readers in the metropolis will accept as truth. The only place that seems exempt from his satire is Britain, where he was educated and where he has lived ever since.

V. S. Naipaul.

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Nevertheless, many students of Naipaul's prolific career note that his early work, including *Miguel Street* (1959), from which "B. Wordsworth" is taken, and *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), a humorous but tender novel based on the life of Naipaul's father, offer a far more complex and sympathetic picture of Caribbean life than either his later works or his polemical pronouncements. And even Derek Walcott, who has dissented strongly from Naipaul's views (see page 990), has called him "our finest writer of the English sentence."

B. Wordsworth

The English Romantic poet William Wordsworth is renowned for his extraordinary treatment of poor and outcast people, including children and beggars (see pages 473–489). For Wordsworth, such people seemed to embody an essential human dignity that was missing from the life dictated by social conventions. In a sense, they too were poets, for they see that life should be different from what it is. In a sort of tribute to the poet he had discovered at school, Naipaul transposes all this to the Caribbean, imagining a "Black Wordsworth" who would be the "brother" of "W" (or "White") Wordsworth and presenting him to us through the eyes of a child.

Three beggars called punctually every day at the hospitable houses in Miguel Street. At about ten an Indian came in his dhoti[1] and white jacket, and we poured a tin of rice into the sack he carried on his back. At twelve an old woman smoking a clay pipe came and she got a cent. At two a blind man led by a boy called for his penny.

Sometimes we had a rogue. One day a man called and said he was hungry. We gave him a meal. He asked for a cigarette and wouldn't go until we had lit it for him. That man never came again.

The strangest caller came one afternoon at about four o'clock. I had come back from school and was in my home-clothes. The man said to me, "Sonny, may I come inside your yard?"

He was a small man and he was tidily dressed. He wore a hat, a white shirt and black trousers.

I asked, "What you want?"

He said, "I want to watch your bees."

We had four small gru-gru[2] palm trees and they were full of uninvited bees.

I ran up the steps and shouted, "Ma, it have a man outside here. He say he want to watch the bees."

My mother came out, looked at the man and asked him in an unfriendly way, "What you want?"

The man said, "I want to watch your bees."

His English was so good, it didn't sound natural, and I could see my mother was worried.

She said to me, "Stay here and watch him while he watch the bees."

The man said, "Thank you, Madam. You have done a good deed today."

He spoke very slowly and very correctly as though every word was costing him money.

We watched the bees, this man and I, for about an hour, squatting near the palm trees.

The man said, "I like watching bees. Sonny, do you like watching bees?"

I said, "I ain't have the time."

He shook his head sadly. He said, "Tha what I do, I just watch. I can watch ants f days. Have you ever watched ants? And sco pions, and centipedes, and *congorees*[3]—ha you watched those?"

I shook my head.

I said, "What you does do, mister?"

He got up and said, "I am a poet."

I said, "A good poet?"

He said, "The greatest in the world."

"What your name, mister?"

"B. Wordsworth."

"B for Bill?"

"Black. Black Wordsworth. White Word worth was my brother. We share one heart. can watch a small flower like the morning glo and cry."

I said, "Why you does cry?"

"Why, boy? Why? You will know when yo grow up. You're a poet, too, you know. An when you're a poet you can cry for everything

I couldn't laugh.

He said, "You like your mother?"

"When she not beating me."

He pulled out a printed sheet from his hi pocket and said, "On this paper is the greate poem about mothers and I'm going to sell to you at a bargain price. For four cents."

I went inside and I said, "Ma, you want buy a poetry for four cents?"

My mother said, "Tell that blasted man haul his tail away from my yard, you hear."

I said to B. Wordsworth, "My mother s she ain't have four cents."

B. Wordsworth said, "It is the poet's tra edy."

And he put the paper back in his pocket. H didn't seem to mind.

I said, "Is a funny way to go round sellin poetry like that. Only calypsonians[4] do th sort of thing. A lot of people does buy?"

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[1] **dhoti** (dō'tē): a loincloth worn by Hindu men.

[2] **gru-gru:** tropical American palm trees.

[3] ***congorees:*** centipede-like creatures.

[4] **calypsonians** (kə'lĭp-sō'nē-ənz): singers of calypso m sic, a style that originated in the West Indies, characteriz by improvised lyrics on current subjects.

He said, "No one has yet bought a single copy."

"But what you does keep on going round, then?"

He said, "In this way I watch many things, and I always hope to meet poets."

I said, "You really think I is a poet?"

"You're as good as me," he said.

And when B. Wordsworth left, I prayed I would see him again.

About a week later, coming back from school one afternoon, I met him at the corner of Miguel Street.

He said, "I have been waiting for you for a long time."

I said, "You sell any poetry yet?"

He shook his head.

He said, "In my yard I have the best mango tree in Port of Spain. And now the mangoes are ripe and red and very sweet and juicy. I have waited here for you to tell you this and invite you to come and eat some of my mangoes."

He lived in Alberto Street in a one-roomed hut placed right in the centre of the lot. The yard seemed all green. There was the big mango tree. There was a coconut tree and there was a plum tree. The place looked wild, as though it wasn't in the city at all. You couldn't see all the big concrete houses in the street.

He was right. The mangoes were sweet and juicy. I ate about six, and the yellow mango juice ran down my arms to my elbows and down my mouth to my chin and my shirt was stained.

My mother said when I got home, "Where you was? You think you is a man now and could go all over the place? Go cut a whip for me."

She beat me rather badly, and I ran out of the house swearing that I would never come back. I went to B. Wordsworth's house. I was so angry, my nose was bleeding.

B. Wordsworth said, "Stop crying, and we will go for a walk."

I stopped crying, but I was breathing short. We went for a walk. We walked down St. Clair Avenue to the Savannah and we walked to the race-course.

B. Wordsworth said, "Now, let us lie on the grass and look up at the sky, and I want you to think how far those stars are from us."

I did as he told me, and I saw what he meant. I felt like nothing, and at the same time I had never felt so big and great in all my life. I forgot my anger and all my tears and all the blows.

When I said I was better, he began telling me the names of the stars, and I particularly remembered the constellation of Orion the Hunter, though I don't really know why. I can spot Orion even today, but I have forgotten the rest.

Then a light was flashed into our faces, and we saw a policeman. We got up from the grass.

The policeman said, "What you doing here?"

B. Wordsworth said, "I have been asking myself the same question for forty years."

We became friends, B. Wordsworth and I. He told me, "You must never tell anybody about me and about the mango tree and the coconut tree and the plum tree. You must keep that a secret. If you tell anybody, I will know, because I am a poet."

I gave him my word and I kept it.

I liked his little room. It had no more furniture than George's front room, but it looked cleaner and healthier. But it also looked lonely.

One day I asked him, "Mister Wordsworth, why you does keep all this bush in your yard? Ain't it does make the place damp?"

He said, "Listen, and I will tell you a story. Once upon a time a boy and girl met each other and they fell in love. They loved each other so much they got married. They were both poets. He loved words. She loved grass and flowers and trees. They lived happily in a single room, and then one day, the girl poet said to the boy poet, 'We are going to have another poet in the family.' But this poet was never born, because the girl died, and the young poet died with her, inside her. And the girl's husband was very sad, and he said he would never touch a thing in the girl's garden. And so the garden remained, and grew high and wild."

I looked at B. Wordsworth, and as he told me this lovely story, he seemed to grow older. I understood his story.

We went for long walks together. We went to the Botanical Gardens and the Rock Gardens. We climbed Chancellor Hill in the late afternoon and watched the darkness fall on Port of Spain, and watched the lights go on in the city and on the ships in the harbour.

He did everything as though he were doing it for the first time in his life. He did everything as though he were doing some church rite.

He would say to me, "Now, how about having some ice-cream?"

And when I said, yes, he would grow very serious and say, "Now, which café shall we patronize?" As though it were a very important thing. He would think for some time about it, and finally say, "I think I will go and negotiate the purchase with that shop."

The world became a most exciting place.

One day, when I was in his yard, he said to me, "I have a great secret which I am now going to tell you."

I said, "It really secret?"

"At the moment, yes."

I looked at him, and he looked at me. He said, "This is just between you and me, remember. I am writing a poem."

"Oh." I was disappointed.

He said, "But this is a different sort of poem. This is the greatest poem in the world."

I whistled.

He said, "I have been working on it for more than five years now. I will finish it in about twenty-two years from now, that is, if I keep on writing at the present rate."

"You does write a lot, then?"

He said, "Not any more. I just write one line a month. But I make sure it is a good line."

I asked, "What was last month's good line?"

He looked up at the sky, and said, *"The past is deep."*

I said, "It is a beautiful line."

B. Wordsworth said, "I hope to distil the experiences of a whole month into that single line of poetry. So, in twenty-two years, I shall have written a poem that will sing to all humanity."

I was filled with wonder.

Our walks continued. We walked along the sea-wall at Docksite one day, and I said, "Mr Wordsworth, if I drop this pin in the water, you think it will float?"

He said, "This is a strange world. Drop your pin, and let us see what will happen."

The pin sank.

I said, "How is the poem this month?"

But he never told me any other line. He merely said, "Oh, it comes, you know. It comes."

Or we would sit on the sea-wall and watch the liners come into the harbour.

But of the greatest poem in the world I heard no more.

I felt he was growing older.

"How you does live, Mr Wordsworth?" I asked him one day.

He said, "You mean how I get money?"

When I nodded, he laughed in a crooked way.

He said, "I sing calypsoes in the calypso season."

"And that last you the rest of the year?"

"It is enough."

"But you will be the richest man in the world when you write the greatest poem?"

He didn't reply.

One day when I went to see him in his little house, I found him lying on his little bed. He looked so old and so weak, that I found myself wanting to cry.

He said, "The poem is not going well."

He wasn't looking at me. He was looking through the window at the coconut tree, and he was speaking as though I wasn't there. He said, "When I was twenty I felt the power within myself." Then, almost in front of my eyes, I could see his face growing older and more tired. He said, "But that—that was a long time ago."

And then—I felt it so keenly, it was as though I had been slapped by my mother. I could see it clearly on his face. It was there for everyone to see. Death on the shrinking face.

He looked at me, and saw my tears and sat up.

He said, "Come." I went and sat on his knees.

He looked into my eyes, and he said, "Oh, you can see it, too. I always knew you had the poet's eye."

He didn't even look sad, and that made me burst out crying loudly.

He pulled me to his thin chest, and said, "Do you want me to tell you a funny story?" and smiled encouragingly at me.

But I couldn't reply.

He said, "When I have finished this story, I want you to promise that you will go away and never come back to see me. Do you promise?"

I nodded.

He said, "Good. Well, listen. That story I told you about the boy poet and the girl poet, do you remember that? That wasn't true. It was something I just made up. All this talk about poetry and the greatest poem in the world, that wasn't true, either. Isn't that the funniest thing you have heard?"

But his voice broke.

I left the house, and ran home crying, like a poet, for everything I saw.

I walked along Alberto Street a year later, but I could find no sign of the poet's house. It hadn't vanished, just like that. It had been pulled down, and a big, two-storeyed building had taken its place. The mango tree and the plum tree and the coconut tree had all been cut down, and there was brick and concrete everywhere.

It was just as though B. Wordsworth had never existed.

Reading Check

1. Why does B. Wordsworth ask to come into the narrator's yard?
2. How does the poet comfort the boy after his whipping?
3. What secret does B. Wordsworth share with his friend?
4. How does B. Wordsworth manage to support himself?
5. What is the last story the poet tells the narrator?

For Study and Discussion

Analyzing and Interpreting the Story

1. Although the child and his mother speak in dialect, the adult narrator speaks in standard English—as does B. Wordsworth. What does Naipaul suggest about the poet's place in society by making these distinctions in the characters' speech?

2. When the boy looks at the stars, they make him feel small and big at the same time. Can you explain this apparent paradox?

3. Consider two examples of B. Wordsworth's poetry: the line *"The past is deep"* and his response to the policeman's question, " 'What you doing here?' " Which do you think is better poetry? Why do you think Naipaul included both?

4. Notice that it is the little boy, rather than B. Wordsworth, who mentions money. Why do you suppose Naipaul includes this detail?

5. There are three versions of the end of this story: (1) when the boy sees that his friend is about to die; (2) when he sees that the house and garden have disappeared; and (3) when B. Wordsworth tells him the "funny story" and "his voice broke." Try to describe the difference of emphasis that each of these versions gives to the story.

DEAR LANG

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BY EMMA DONOGHUE

Dear Lang,

Happy Birthday! This one's a biggie: sixteen. Ar you excited? You must be. Unless, of course, you're the kind of eye-rolling adolescent who pretends not to be excited by anything. But I doubt that, somehow.

You're probably learning to drive already: scary thought. For me, I mean, not for you. I still shudder to recall the time you rode your fire truck straight off the porch. Shrieks, hot tears springing out of your eye but once I brushed the gravel off, there wasn't a mark on you. I guess it's all about knowing how to fall.

You won't remember the incident, of course. Funny the way small kids are all amnesiacs. (A cousin of mine had a martini too many after her son's third birthday party and groaned to me, "All this effort, three entire years of games and songs and special moments, and he won't remember a damn bit of it!")

I thought of including a present this year, but the

oblem is, Lang, I've got no idea what you like. What you're like. Do you spend all your free time online or shooting hoops or at the mall? There's this high school cycle by on my way to work, and I stare at the clusters teenagers outside: supermodel wannabees and geeky kids; goths and stoned-looking ones—I don't even know the current terms. I always wonder which group would be in. If any. I imagine you might be a loner, like I was when I was sixteen. (Well, not a sad loner like I was, writing poetry in the basement; I just mean, kind of a maverick, doing your own thing.) Unless, of course, you take after your mom, who was Miss Popularity. (Cheryl, if you're vetting this, I'm not going to say a word against you. So how about you give me a break and hand the letter to Lang, who's practically an adult now?)

When you were born, people said you were the dead spit of her, but then they always do when there's no dad. Neighbors, especially—you could tell they were desperate not to put their foot in it—they'd rush to tell her, "Oh, Cheryl, the baby's got your eyes, your chin, your coloring." I didn't see it myself. To me, your radiant moon face was like nothing I'd ever encountered.

The other day I thought of buying you a CD, an album your mom and I listened to so much when [illegible] were waiting for you to be born that it started getting [illegible] scratchy: k.d. lang's *Ingénue*. She must have told you that's who you were named for? (Unless she's completely [illegible] rewritten history.) I hope you haven't found it too burdensome a name. Do people who hear it assume you're going to be Chinese, like that pianist who played at the Olympics? We thought it was more distinctive than k.d.'s others (Kathy and Dawn), anyway. We were crazy about that CD, though the first time I heard "Constant Craving" I misheard it and asked your mom what "God Save Gravy" meant; she never let me forget it [illegible] one of us needed to make the other laugh, all we had to mutter was "God Save Gravy."

Now I've got the song stuck in my head, though [illegible] I haven't heard it in years. (The Germans call that an [illegible] ear worm; isn't that a great phrase?) Of course, you mightn't like it: when I was sixteen I hated any music an adult recommended, on principle. And you probably download all yours, anyway.

At the time I'm talking about, your mom was still just Cheryl, nobody's mom. Once you've been one—a mother, I mean—it's hard to remember that you were [illegible] ever anything else. That's a problem with having a kid [illegible] with someone, actually. It can be hard to see see each other as anything but parents; hard to remember to talk about anything but the baby. *How does Lang like the peas?* and *I found her tambourine down the back of the couch*, and *She did a huge squirty poo this morning.* (Sorry, I know that's embarrassing.) Your mom and I would sit in the kitchen having a sandwich, say, with you in your bouncy chair; we'd be talking to each other in a desultory way, but even if you were asleep we only had eyes for you. Especially if you were asleep, actually. For some reason, there's nothing in the world more riveting than a baby's sleeping face. But the point I'm trying to make, Lang, is that if you have a kid with someone you risk losing that someone. (Yeah, and maybe you'd lose them anyway, for other reasons, but a baby sure speeds things up.) I just thought I'd mention this rather depressing fact, in case at sixteen you've got any sentimental notions like I did, about how nice it would be to have a kid with someone you love.

Whoops, this letter's headed kind of sideways, sorry. But it's a bit like talking into the void, here. Like sitting in a recording studio and suspecting that the tech guys have turned the mic off and gone home. Hello, hello? Lang? You might not be reading this at all, of course.

Odds are not, in fact. But if I let myself think tha way, my hand freezes up, so let's assume instead tha you are reading it. I'm hoping you flick through th envelopes in the mailbox before your mom gets home I've put LANG in big capital letters so it'll jump out at you.

Have you any idea who I am? I suppose I should have introduced myself properly, because I think your mom probably didn't show you those birthday letters I sent when you were two, three, four, five, six, seven, eigh and nine. At least, I never heard back from you. Two possibilities: Cheryl threw my letters in the trash—ch she gave them to you, but you couldn't be bothered to write back to the woman who was once your YaYa. You can see why I prefer to believe the first. So every year I'd try again, hoping she'd have mellowed enough to give you the letter this time. I had a sort of ritual: The week before your birthday, I'd take a day off work and open a bottle of wine. (Have you survived a hangover yet? I didn't have my first till twenty, but your mom's first was at thirteen. Go on, ask her, see if she denies it. When I'd finished the letter, I always mailed one copy to this old address and a second to your grandmothe with a note asking her to send it on—but the woman

never did care for me and my mannish clothes. (I wish you knew your other grandma—my mom, I mean. You liked her; once in her garden she let you drink from the hose and soak your clothes even though it was April.) The third copy always went into the bottom of my filing cabinet.

Glancing at the first letter now, I see it starts rather hysterically: *Happy Age Two my yum-yum from your YaYa, who misses her darling duck so much!!!* When you were a bit older I used to try to say something in the birthday letters about what had happened, in child language, or rather, the kind of patronizing, vague language adults use to children: *Sometimes it just happens that two people who love each other stop being able to live in the same house*. . . . But it never worked, so I always took it out. I'd get so angry, I'd shake. What should I have said, *Your mom, who loves you very much, thinks it's best for you never to see me again?*

I was only twenty-four when you were born: Funny, that's nearer sixteen than what I am now, forty. I wasn't a complete idiot, in case you're wondering. I knew the deal: Only a handful of states were starting to allow two mothers back then, and ours wasn't one of them. If asked I would have said it was outrageous, but most days I didn't give it a thought. I had no aspirations to same-sex marriage; they didn't even use that phrase back then. When we did the pregnancy test, Cheryl and I were so exhilarated, so at one, it never crossed my mind that she'd try to take you away from me. Same thing when we filled out the birth cert the way the clinic advised us, with *Mother: Cheryl Louise Weinstein, Father: Unknown.* (If you look at your birth cert, Lang, that's my scrunched-up handwriting.) Yeah, I knew that if it came to a fight, I wouldn't have a hope in hell, but it really never occurred to me that she'd do such a thing: take you back, like a book or a ring. That's how naive I was, at twenty-four. I liked being called your YaYa; it didn't occur to me to get you to call me a mom-type name like they do nowadays, with their mummies and mommas and mama-janes, whatever. Not that it would have made any difference. I mean, I could have been called Second Chief Cherished and Equal Parent, and it wouldn't have meant squat in the eyes of the law.

I didn't see it coming, even after I moved out. I set up a nursery for you in my apartment, but then your mom started muttering about it being *too confusing* for *Lang.* Visits would only be *distressing,* apparently. I can't

forgive her those words. Even *stalker* (the time she told me to get off her doorstep or she'd call the police). The one I can't forgive is *roommate,* from that last letter she wrote (dictated by a lawyer, I could tell), informing me that I was not related to her or her child, I was just someone who used to be her roommate.

Sorry, Lang, does this sound like I'm bad-mouthing your mom? I suppose I am. But she adores you, and she was only trying to keep you for herself; parents do it all the time. The last time I wrote to you, you were only nine, and I didn't think you could begin to understand all this adult mess. (I hit a mental wall when you turned ten, I'm afraid; I did start a letter, that year, but I kept visualizing a pinched, pubescent version of your face, with a curling lip and narrowed eyes. I couldn't seem to think of anything to say that wasn't kiddy but wasn't inappropriate either.) Now you're all grown up, pretty much. I want you to hear the truth from me, or I guess I mean, my side of the story. What I dread—one of the things that's forcing me to try contacting you again after all these years—is that you might find out about me some other way. That you might decide, in that stern way teenagers think (at least that's how I thought, at sixteen), that I let you go too easily.

I swear, I kept calling till your mom got an unlisted number. I asked friends to intervene, and some wouldn't and were no longer friends of mine, and some tried and were no longer friends of your mom. If I was a stalker, it was because she forced me to be. I hung around the library during "Books 'n' Babes" and caught a few glimpses of you through the window, at least I thought it was you, but toddlers change so fast. I lurked in parking lots, outside your daycare, in all the local playgrounds. I did go to a lawyer, but she persuaded me I hadn't a chance. (It was 1993, after all, the year a judge had just taken a toddler from a lesbian and given him to his grandmother instead.)

Another worm's stuck in my ear now: that old blues song about god bless the child that's got its own. You probably don't know it, unless there are any sixteen-year-olds who listen to Billie Holiday. I think the "it" the child's got is money, but it could be anything, really. It's a strange song, from what I can remember, because you think it's going to be sappy, but it's really pretty grim: *Mama may have* and *Papa may have*, but you're much safer having your own.

I wonder if you call him Dad? Your stepfather, I mean. At least, I presume he hung around and became your stepfather. I can't imagine anyone who met you at age one not wanting to hang around. I notice that whenever I see one of these cases in the paper (I don't look for them, but the headlines jump out at me), the birth mother has usually gotten a man, gotten religion, rejected the "lifestyle." *Christian Mother Moves to Virginia to Escape Homosexual Ex*, that's my favorite, for its B-movie wording. *Mom Wins Child from Former Lesbian Partner.* (Confusing grammar, that one.) The papers sometimes call the other woman the "nonlegal parent" or the "social mother," as if it's all about throwing cocktail parties! (God help you, Lang, if you had to rely on me to teach you the social graces.) Or the "nonbiological mother," which sounds like an ad for detergent.

Nonbiological: as if I'm made of silicon or something. A cyborg. As if I have no body, or at least not one that ever touched you, my baby Lang, ever stubbed a toe on your wooden blocks, ever got a crick in the neck with you asleep on my shoulder on the couch all night, ever registered that surge of warmth on my belly that felt like love but actually meant you'd just peed through both our clothes. I don't tell people this, because they'd think I'm making it up—not lying, exactly, just kidding myself—but I swear it's a fact: In the weeks after you were born my nipples dripped, and once I put your mouth against my left breast and you latched on for a good half a minute, till Cheryl came in and asked a little snottily what I thought I was doing. (Well, she hadn't had much sleep.) That was one of the best moments in my life: feeling your serious tug on my left nipple, seeing your earlobe working, hearing the small, intent click of your jaw. I guess motherhood can happen in unexpected ways, like a storm moving in unscheduled or a moose suddenly standing there in the headlights.

Sorry, this letter is turning out quite a downer. I'm not like this most of the time, Lang, I'm really not. Jasmine claims I'm quite fun to live with, and she should know, having woken up beside me for more than four years now. When she and I had been together about six months, an old friend of mine got drunk and told me I'd no right to still be trailing around like one of the walking wounded when I was lucky enough to have found a woman like that. So I got my shit together. I went back to college, started swimming, went on antidepressants. Most days, these days, I'm more or less okay, and that's thanks to Jasmine. She's a clown. I

mean a professional one; she does the birthday-party circuit and never seems to get tired of it. I generally avoid kids, myself.

It's odd: I realize all these years I've been thinking of you as lost, but you've got no reason to think of yourself that way. It's me who lost you.

Reminds me of my cousin, the one I mentioned, with the three-year-old boy. He kept dashing off into crowds, so she got the bright idea of writing her cell number on his wrist before they went out. But the next time they were at a fair, sure enough he wandered off, and she had to have him paged three times over the course of half an hour before somebody brought him along to the Meeting Point (the booth that used to be called Lost Children till I guess they decided that was too emotive). *Why didn't you ask a lady to call the number?* she roared at him. *But I wasn't lost*, he said righteously, you *were lost*.

Fair point. For you, Lang, there's nothing missing. Nothing you're conscious of, at least. You aren't lost, you've just lost me, and you don't even know it. Though you must have wondered where your YaYa had disappeared to. *Wondered* is too intellectual for a fifteen-month-old; I mean something more primal. You must have cried for me, at least for a week or two. You must [illegible] have wanted me back: riding high on my shoulders, the [illegible] feel of my spikey hair when you grabbed it, the smell [illegible] of me. A year and a quarter, that's not nothing. The [illegible] year and a quarter. Maybe sometimes even now you feel [illegible] like something's missing, Lang, even if you don't know [illegible] what? (Then again, who doesn't feel that?)

I once joined a support group for people who'd lost [illegible] children, but I dropped out after a couple of months. [illegible] (Weeks, even? The meetings made me squirm so much [illegible] I'm probably remembering it as lasting longer than it [illegible] did.) The woman who ran it called herself the moderator, as if she had magical powers to make everything [illegible] feel more moderate, but I just got more jealous and [illegible] judgmental. On the one hand, I felt irritated by one [illegible] woman who'd miscarried at four months and kept saying *my son* when the fact was—sorry and all that, but [illegible] it was a fetus. The way I saw it, I'd had a real child [illegible] and she'd had a dashed hope of one, which wasn't the [illegible] same thing at all. Then, on the other hand, there was [illegible] this quiet Guatemalan woman, and when the moderator finally got her to open her mouth in week three, it [illegible] turned out her seventeen-year-old son had been picked up by the police one night and never came home. [illegible] They never even admitted they'd arrested him.) Hearing that woman's story made me feel like I'd no right to complain, because after all, I had no reason to fear you were suffering: I knew Cheryl would raise you well and fight your corner. Maybe I'm just not a supportive enough person to be in a support group.

I talked about you all the time, Lang, the year I lost you. I had no shame: I made my lament to any neighbor, hairdresser, grocery clerk who'd listen. (I think I must have been hoping someone would say *Why, that's just terrible. Let me start a campaign to take it to the Supreme Court.*) Then I got tired of that look of frozen pity. I didn't "move on" (as the moderator of the support group was always urging us)—I just shut up.

Nowadays, people assume I'm childless. I don't blame them; if they don't know me well enough to have heard the story (and it's not one I tell at dinner parties), what else would they think? I look childless: the hair, the scarred leather jacket, the headphones, the air of having plenty of free time. Besides, moms talk about their kids, don't they? (They bore the pants off their listeners; they flash sheaves of photos like magicians saying *Pick a card, any card.*) I keep you to myself.

These days, I really only mention you to Jasmine, and not often, because it makes me maudlin. Not that she stops me. She says you're part of me, and she wouldn't want you not to be. She pictures you as this tiny invisible angel sitting on my shoulder. (My left shoulder, for some reason.)

The only big fight I remember was on our second anniversary, when she—ever so tactfully—raised the issue. *I've always wanted one*, she said.

I literally barked at her: *I've got one already, remember?* Then I left my steak untouched and I went out to sit in the car.

I know, I know. Childlessness brings out the child in me.

Something else I remember about that support group was that it gave me a warped view of the world. It seemed that the odds of holding on to a child were slim; kids were like feathers blown out of your hand no matter how you tried to clutch them. (One girl had had five in a row confiscated by Children's Aid. No, what's the word—apprehended. She never said why, but we all quietly assumed there were reasons. One week she announced to the group that she was pregnant again. She said she might be allowed to keep this one, and we

all had to nod and grin as if we believed her.)

The moderator of the group was always at us to document our kids. Not as in putting together a file for the sake of proving to the newspapers that the police had indeed arrested your son. She meant a warm, fuzzy, scrapbook-type thing. A nice idea, I guess; it would make your child's life with you seem like it really happened, even if one day they'd fallen on an escalator or been snatched by their dad who took them back to Pakistan or whatever. A scrapbook like that might be some comfort on crazy days when you thought you'd imagined the whole thing. It did seem useful for the parents whose child had died, because it gave the story some shape: babyhood, toddlerdom, pony rides, trick-or-treating, hospital, funeral, with Grandma up in heaven. . . . (In a café, a friend once asked me if I ever wished you were dead so I could do my mourning and get on with my life. *Never*, I'd roared, so loudly that everybody turned around and stared. But it was true. I've always been glad you're in the world, Lang. Even if I don't know where.)

I had a scrapbook already, so I didn't do one in the group. I'd made two of them, actually; your mom laughed and said she didn't know where I found the time. LANG: YEAR ONE, I wrote on the cover of the firs like you were the start of some utopia. It wasn't a bab book like you could buy in the stores, because the all said *mom* and *dad* everywhere, obviously; it was blank book made of bumpy handmade paper. I filled i with sketches of you and funny lists, like: date of firs projectile vomiting, date first fell off sofa, first nursed for two hours twenty minutes straight, first grabbed my ears and wouldn't let go. . . . I didn't have a date for "first smile" because it seemed like you were born smiling, little flickers and twitches at least, and every body says sternly, *Those are only gas*, and it's hard to prove which is the first real one: They all looked real to me, they just got less newborn wise and more fat-bab smart. I taped in a blackened cent you swallowed tha took eight days to come out the other end.

Anyway, I don't know the actual dates of any of these milestones because I didn't think to take the YEAR ONE scrapbook when I left the house. Ask your mom if you want to see it. I doubt she's ever shown it to you, because it's full of references to me, and if she tried to cut them out it would be like one of those censored letters from World War Two, all lacy, more holes than paper.

The YEAR TWO book, luckily for me, happened to be in my backpack the night I left, because I was working on the page about your first time tobogganing. I'm looking at it now, turning the gaudy rainbow pages. It starts with your first birthday party: giant bubbles (they left sticky marks on the grass), and an Eeyore cake that you spat out because you'd never tasted sugar; it'd been all pureed yam and barley till then. As a bookmark, there's a sparkler I stuck in your cake, thinking it would be more exciting than a solitary candle, but when I held you over the table to blow the sparkler out, you grabbed it instead and burned your hand and your mom got furious with me. (She was furious with me most of the time by then.) YEAR TWO has thirteen pages filled in with things like: first concert, first entire bag of potato chips, first time you threw a Walkman over the banister. . . . (Do you know what Walkmans are, Lang? Like iPods but bulkier, and they only held one cassette. I know, seems a feeble invention, but we enjoyed them hugely.)

I don't look at it all the time or anything. A year might go by. Then I'll get into a mood to read through those thirteen pages for hours on end, and Jasmine knows not to interrupt me; she goes off and makes a casserole or something. I showed it to her once, and she read it very respectfully, holding it like it was some ancient manuscript that might fall to dust any moment. She turned over a page after a drawing of you on the sled and suddenly it was blank; she turned back to see if she'd missed something. No, I told her, it really did end on the word *mitten*.

Jesus, I miss you, Lang. Does that strike you as ludicrous? I admit I don't know the girl I'm missing. The toddler I remember from 1993 waddles and staggers, lurching through my dreams. The girl who's sixteen—her, I just have to make up in my head. For every month I lived with you, the real you has lived a year without me. Wow, you're probably a babysitter by now. (It's a great job for loners, if you are one; that's how I made my pocket money till I left home.)

What are you like? The question torments me. I know you're intelligent; that much was obvious from day one. Probably beautiful too, though it's hard to extrapolate sixteen-year-old features from the fat face of a toddler. Still quick to laugh? Once I put a wicker basket over my head and you snorted so much that apple juice ran out your snub nose. But maybe any fifteen-month-old would find that funny. Avocado's still my favorite food. Is it yours? You probably don't chase squirrels anymore, but do you still climb sand dunes? When you cross a bridge, do you stop to throw pebbles into the water like we always used to? I wonder whether I left any mark on you at all.

I've only got two pictures: the ones I happened to have in my wallet. I've blown them up to book size and framed them, but I keep them in a drawer, because otherwise, casual visitors might ask, ***Who's that?*** They look like two different children, though they were taken around the same time. One is a close-up of your face, but I can tell you're in the bath because of a trace of a bubble-bath goatee I used to put on you; you're showing three gleaming teeth, laughing as if you're about to go up like a firework. In the other picture you're at your birthday party, in your mom's lap, looking kind of nervous, with your shirt riding up. You're paying her no attention, but she's your safety, your springboard, your daily bread. Bitter as I am, I think I can say that I'd never have tried to wrench you out of her grasp.

I took more of the photos. (Is that the definition of a dad? An un-mom, anyway. Moms haven't got enough free hands for a camera.) There must have been pictures that showed me and you together, but I haven't got any.

There's no proof I ever kissed your velvet neck or hiked through the woods with you asleep in a carrier on my back. I don't know whether your mom threw all the photos of me away, but she'd have had to, wouldn't she? Logically.

What does she tell you when you ask, I wonder—that she was single when she went to the clinic? That you're your stepfather's, but he had a phobia about being photographed in those days? Or does she say that there was another mother, who chose to leave? She better not have told you that.

I didn't choose it, but yes, it was my fault. You're old enough to hear this, and I might as well tell you before she does. When you were a year old, Lang, I had a thing, a small fling. You're a teenager; surely you can understand acting on a stupid impulse? I was tired, ground down from arguments. I was twenty-five. I did what parents so often do, but I was stupid enough to forget that I didn't have the rights of a parent.

Jasmine always tells me to stop blaming myself; she says maybe I deserved to lose Cheryl but not you. I don't know about that, but I comfort myself with the thought that your mom would probably have cut me out anyway, sooner or later. If she always had the potential to be that ruthless, then surely the time would have come—even if I'd behaved impeccably—when she'd have fallen for some guy and told me to move out. That way I get to pretend my hands were clean.

Jasmine also says she'd love to meet you—but I can tell she doesn't believe you'll ever knock on our door. Whereas I believe it; I insist on believing it. I'm cynical enough on other matters, but on that I'm unshakable. You're my child behind a door, behind a wall, under a spell, lost in a fog. Or rather you're in dazzling sunlight and I'm in the fog. I have to believe that you'll come and find me someday—even if it's just out of curiosity or rebellion; I'm not fussy—and we'll take it from there. I don't care if you're not anything like I've imagined, not anything like me. I just want to know you.

But the wait is more than I can bear. Yesterday I saw a blond teenager in a borrowed Saturn opposite me at an intersection, and for a second I convinced myself it was you, but the eyes were wrong. I write to all the schools you might be attending, though your mom could have moved to another city, of course. (I did that myself, the year after it happened, because I couldn't seem to stop driving by the house.) I leave messages on any bulletin boards that a sixteen-year-old girl might come across; I've been kicked off a few when they think I'm a pervert.

"Why bother?" I can almost hear you asking it, in a bored voice. "It's too late now, so what's the point? It's not even like I'm the donor: the mysterious other half of your genes. I'm just a woman who messed up her chance to raise you.

But that's not the real Lang talking, I don't believe that, That's the pouty *Gossip Girl* version I make up to scare myself when I can't sleep. I knew you for a year and a quarter, the real you; I knew you from day one. You had a generous and hilarious spirit and I'm betting you have it still.

I suppose all I really want to tell you, my daughter, is that I love you, and I won't stop. Even though—I admit this through clenched teeth—I suspect your life's been just fine without me in it. On the whole, it's for the best that you haven't known what you've been missing. And yeah, you might have been different if I'd had the chance to look after you for sixteen years instead of one, but I don't care: However you are, I don't want you to be any different.

The other reason I've gotten around to writing to you this year is to tell you some news, which I've left

till the end because I don't know how you'll feel about it. Or how I feel about it, if I'm going to be honest. Did your mom and your stepfather . . . have you got any brothers or sisters? Well, you're about to get another.

I gave in, last Christmas, and not just because it wasn't fair to Jasmine. Something in me finally said yes. Maybe it was turning forty. Maybe I got sick of avoiding small children. I guess I thought I can't ever go back to being not-a-mother, so I might as well try another roll of the dice.

Jasmine got pregnant first go (so I wouldn't have time to change my mind, she jokes). He's due in November. I say he, but we don't know yet; all I know is that I'm praying for a boy, so he'll be that much less like you. But that's ridiculous, really, because babies are babies. He or she, this one will make little goatlike cries like you did, kick the air, spit up on my shirt, have little scratchy nails and a look of wonder. Some things will be different, but some will be so much the same that I could cry just thinking about it. I've decided to be YaYa again: Anything else sounds wrong.

Sixteen years is a long gap. The received wisdom's changed again: no solids till six months, crib bumpers and walkers are banned, and it's all about slings. I'll be careful this time; I won't fuck around metaphorically or literally. The laws have changed in our state, thank God, and I'll get all the paperwork done as fast as it can be. This child will get to keep his mom and his YaYa—with all our pros and cons—for life.

You can't imagine how scared I am, Lang. Not just of the usual bogies: umbilical cords wrapped around throats, SIDS, car crashes . . . Jasmine getting that mad Mussolini stare, *mine mine all mine*, and refusing to sign the adoption papers. . . . Between you and me, I'm terrified that after a decade and a half of grief and nostalgia—whining, some would call it—it's too late for me. That I'm damaged goods: that my capacity to mother is not just a little creaky but totally rusted up. That I've gotten used to my life, and I like it the way it is. That—this sounds so blasphemous, I wouldn't say it aloud—that I'll miss being childless.

Wish me luck? Wish us all luck? I hope some day you can meet this kid, Lang. In the meantime I'll raise him to look at your picture and say his sister's name.

Till next year, always,

your YaYa

THE SILK ROAD
RUNS THROUGH TUPPERNECK, N.H.

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BY GREGORY MAGUIRE

The Happy Man

Naguib Mahfouz

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He woke up in the morning and discovered that he was happy. "What's this?" he asked himself. He could not think of any word which described his state of mind more accurately and precisely than "happy." This was distinctly peculiar when compared with the state he was usually in when he woke up. He would be half-asleep from staying so late at the newspaper office. He would face life with a sense of strain and contemplation. Then he would get up, whetting his determination to face up to all inconveniences and withstand all difficulties.

Today he felt happy, full of happiness, as a matter of fact. There was no arguing about it. The symptoms were quite clear, and their vigour and obviousness were such as to impose themselves on his senses and mind all at once. Yes, indeed; he was happy. If this was not happiness, then what was? He felt that his limbs were well proportioned and functioning perfectly. They were working in superb harmony with each other and with the world around him. Inside him, he felt a boundless power, and imperishable energy, an ability to achieve anything with confidence, precision, and obvious success. His heart was overflowing with love for people, animals, and things, and with an all-engulfing sense of optimism and joy. It was as if he were no longer troubled or bothered by fear, anxiety, sickness, death, argument, or the question of earning a living. Even more important than that, and something he could not analyze, it was a feeling which penetrated to every cell of his body and soul; it played a tune full of delight, pleasure, serenity, and peace, and hummed in its incredible melodies the whispering sound of the world, which is denied to the unhappy.

He felt drunk with ecstasy and savoured it slowly with a feeling of surprise. He asked himself where it had come from and how; the past provided no explanation, and the future could not justify it. Where did it come from, then, and how?! How long would it last? Would it stay with him till breakfast? Would it give him enough time to get to the newspaper office? Just a minute though, he thought . . . it won't last because it can't. If it did, man would be turned into an angel or something even higher.

So he told himself that he should devote his attention to savouring it, living with it, and storing up its nectar before it became a mere memory with no way of proving it or even being sure that it had ever existed.

He ate his breakfast with a relish, and this time nothing distracted his attention while he was eating. He gave "Uncle" Bashir, who was waiting on him, such a beaming smile that the poor man felt rather alarmed and taken aback. Usually he would only look in his direction to give orders or ask questions, although, on most occasions, he treated him fairly well.

"Tell me, 'Uncle' Bashir," he asked the servant, "am I a happy man?"

The poor man was startled. He realized why his servant was confused; for the first time ever he was talking to him as a colleague or friend. He encouraged his servant to forget about his worries and asked him with unusual insistence to answer his question.

"Through God's grace and favour, you are happy," the servant replied.

"You mean, I should be happy. Anyone with my job, living in my house, and enjoying my health should be happy. That's what you want to say. But do you think I'm really happy?"

The servant replied, "You work too hard, sir;" after yet more insistence, "It's more than any man can stand. . . ."

He hesitated, but his master gestured to him to continue with what he had to say.

"You get angry a lot," he said, "and have fierce arguments with your neighbours. . . ."

He interrupted him by laughing loudly. "What about you?" he asked. "Don't you have any worries?"

"Of course, no man can be free of worry."

"You mean that complete happiness is an impossible quest?"

"That applies to life in general. . . ."

How could he have dreamed up this incredible happiness? He or any other human being? It was a strange, unique happiness, as though it were a private secret he had been given. In the meeting hall of the newspaper building, he spotted his main rival in this world sitting down thumbing through a magazine. The man heard his footsteps but did not look up from the magazine. He had undoubtedly noticed him in some way and was therefore pretending to ignore him so as to keep his own peace of mind. At some circulation meetings, they would argue so violently with each other that sparks began to fly and they would exchange bitter words. One stage more, and they would come to blows. A week ago, his rival had won in the union elections, and he had lost. He had felt pierced by a sharp, poisoned arrow, and the world had darkened before his eyes. Now here he was approaching his rival's seat; the sight of him sitting there did not make him excited, nor did the memories of their dispute spoil his composure. He approached him with a pure and carefree heart, feeling drunk with his incredible happiness; his face showed an expression full of tolerance and forgiveness. It was as though he were approaching some other man toward whom he had never had any feelings of enmity, or perhaps he might be renewing a friendship again. "Good morning!" he said without feeling any compunction.

The man looked up in amazement. He was silent for a few moments until he recovered, and then returned the greeting curtly. It was as though he did not believe his eyes and ears.

He sat down alongside the man. "Marvelous weather today. . . ." he said.

"Okay. . . ." the other replied guardedly.

"Weather to fill your heart with happiness."

His rival looked at him closely and cautiously. "I'm glad that you're so happy. . . ." he muttered.

"Inconceivably happy. . . ." he replied with a laugh.

"I hope," the man continued in a rather hesitant tone of voice, "that I shan't spoil your happiness at the meeting of the administrative council. . . ."

"Not at all. My views are well-known, but I don't mind if the members adopt your point of view. That won't spoil my happiness!"

"You've changed a great deal overnight," the man said with a smile.

"The fact is that I'm happy, inconceivably happy."

The man examined his face carefully. "I bet your dear son has changed his mind about staying in Canada?!" he asked.

"Never, never, my friend," he replied, laughing loudly. "He is still sticking to his decision. . . ."

"But that was the principle reason for being so sad. . . ."

"Quite true. I've often begged him to come back out of pity for me in my loneliness and to serve his country. But he told me that he's going to open an engineering office with a Canadian partner; in fact, he's invited me to join him in it. Let him live where he'll be happy. I'm quite happy here—as you can see, inconceivably happy. . . ."

The man still looked a little doubtful. "Quite extraordinarily brave!" he said.

"I don't know what it is, but I'm happy in the full meaning of the word."

Yes indeed, this was full happiness; full, firm, weighty, and vital. As deep as absolute power, widespread as the wind, fierce as fire, bewitching as scent, transcending nature. It could not possibly last.

The other man warmed to his display of affection. "The truth is," he said, "that I always picture you as someone with a fierce and violent temperament which causes him a good deal of trouble and leads him to trouble other people."

"Really?"

"You don't know how to make a truce; you've no concept of intermediate solutions. You work with your nerves, with the marrow in your bones. You fight bitterly, as though any problem is a matter of life and death!"

"Yes, that's true."

He accepted the criticism without any difficulty and with an open heart. His wave expanded into a boundless ocean of happiness. He struggled to control an innocent, happy laugh, which the other man interpreted in a way far removed from its pure motive.

"So then," he asked, "you think it's necessary to be able to take a balanced view of events, do you?"

"Of course. I remember, by way of example, the argument we had the day before yesterday about racism. We both had the same views on the subject; it's something worth being zealous about, even to the point of anger. But what kind of anger? An intellectual anger, abstract to a certain extent; not the type which shatters your nerves, ruins your digestion, and gives you palpitations. No so?"

"That's obvious; I quite understand. . . ." He struggled to control a second laugh and succeeded. His heart refused to renounce one drop of its joy. Racism, Vietnam, Palestine . . . no problem could assail that fortress of happiness which was encircling his heart. When he remembered a problem, his heart guffawed. He was happy. It was a tyrannical happiness, despising all misery and laughing at any hardship; it wanted to laugh, dance, sing, and distribute its spirit of laughter, dancing, and singing among the various problems of the world.

He could not bear to stay in his office at the newspaper; he felt no desire to work at all. He hated the very idea of thinking about his daily business and completely failed to bring his mind down from its stronghold in the kingdom of happiness. How could he possibly write about a trolley bus falling into the Nile when he was so intoxicated by this frightening happiness? Yes, it really was frightening. How could it be anything else, when there was no reason for it at all, when it was so strong that it made him exhausted and paralyzed his will; apart from the fact that it had been with him for half a day without letting up in the slightest degree?!

He left the pages of paper blank and started walking backward and forward across the room, laughing and cracking his fingers....

He felt slightly worried; it did not penetrate deep enough to spoil his happiness but paused on the surface of his mind like an abstract idea. It occurred to him that he might recall the tragedies of his life so that he could test their effect on his happiness. Perhaps they would be able to bring back some idea of balance or security, at least until his happiness began to flag a little. For example, he remembered his wife's death in all its various aspects and details. What had happened? The event appeared to him as a series of movements without any meaning or effect, as though it had happened to some other woman, the wife of another man, in some distant historical age. In fact, it had a contagious effect which prompted a smile and then even provoked laughter. He could not stop himself laughing, and there he was guffawing, ha... ha... ha!

The same thing happened when he remembered the first letter his son had sent him saying that he wanted to emigrate to Canada. The sound of his guffaws as he paraded the bloody tragedies of the world before him would have attracted the attention of the newspaper workers and passersby in the street, had it not been for the thickness of the walls. He could do nothing to dislodge his happiness. Memories of unhappy times hit him like waves being thrown onto a sandy beach under the golden rays of the sun.

He excused himself from attending the administrative council and left the newspaper office without writing a word. After lunch, he lay down on his bed as usual but could not sleep. In fact, sleep seemed an impossibility to him. Nothing gave him any indication that it was coming, even slowly. He was in a place alight and gleaming, resounding with sleeplessness and joy. He had to calm down and relax, to quiet his senses and limbs, but how could he do it? He gave up trying to sleep and got up. He began to hum as he was walking around his house. If this keeps up, he told himself, I won't be able to sleep, just as I can't work or feel sad. It was almost time for him to go to the club, but he did not feel like meeting any friends. What was the point of exchanging views on public affairs and private worries?! What would they think if they found him laughing at every major problem? What would they say? How would they picture things? How would they explain it? No, he did not need anyone, nor did he want to spend the evening talking. He should be by himself and go for a long walk to get rid of some of his excess vitality and think about his situation. What had happened to him? How was it that this incredible happiness had overwhelmed him? How long would he have to carry it on his shoulders? Would it keep depriving him of work, friends, sleep, and peace of mind?! Should he resign himself to it? Should he abandon himself to the flood to play with him as the whim took it? Or should he look for a way out for himself through thought, action, or advice?

When he was called into the examination room in the clinic of his friend, the specialist in internal medicine, he felt a little alarmed. The doctor looked at him with a smile. "You don't look like someone who's complaining about being ill," he said.

"I haven't come to see you because I'm ill," he told the doctor in a hesitant tone of voice, "but because I'm happy!"

The doctor looked piercingly at him with a questioning air.

"Yes," he repeated to underline what he had said, "because I'm happy!"

There was a period of silence. On one side, there was anxiety, and on the other, questioning and amazement.

"It's an incredible feeling which can't be defined in any other way, but it's very serious. . . ."

The doctor laughed. "I wish your illness were contagious," he said, prodding him jokingly.

"Don't treat it as a joke. It's very serious, as I told you. I'll describe it to you. . . ."

He told him all about his happiness from the time he had woken up in the morning till he had felt compelled to visit him.

"Haven't you been taking drugs, alcohol, or tanquilizers?"

"Absolutely nothing like that."

"Have you had some success in an important sphere of your life: work . . . love . . . money?"

"Nothing like that either. I've twice as much to worry about as I have to make me feel glad. . . ."

"Perhaps if you were patient for a while. . . ."

"I've been patient all day. I'm afraid I'll be spending the night wandering around. . . ."

The doctor gave him a precise, careful, and comprehensive examination and then shrugged his shoulders in despair. "You're a picture of health," he said.

"And so?"

"I could advise you to take a sleeping pill, but it would be better if you consulted a nerve specialist. . . ."

The examination was repeated in the nerve specialist's clinic with the self-same precision, care, and comprehensiveness. "Your nerves are sound," the doctor told him. "They're in enviable condition!"

"Haven't you got a plausible explanation for my condition?" he asked hopefully.

"Consult a gland specialist!" the doctor replied, shaking his head.

The examination was conducted for a third time in the gland specialist's clinic with the same precision, care, and comprehensiveness.

"I congratulate you!" the doctor told him. "Your glands are in good condition."

He laughed. He apologized for laughing, laughing as he did so. Laughter was his way of expressing his alarm and despair.

He left the clinic with the feeling that he was alone, alone in the hands of his tyrannical happiness, with no helper, no guide, and no friend. Suddenly, he remembered the doctor's sign he sometimes saw from the window of his office in the newspaper building. It was true that he had no confidence in psychiatrists even though he had read about the significance of psychoanalysis. Apart from that, he knew that their tentacles were very long and they kept their patients tied in a sort of long association. He laughed as he remembered the method of cure through free association and the problems which it eventually uncovers. He was laughing as his feet carried him toward the psychiatrist's clinic, and imagined the doctor listening to his incredible complaints about feeling happy, when he was used to hearing people complain about hysteria, schizophrenia, anxiety, and so on.

"The truth is, Doctor, that I've come to see you because I'm happy!"

He looked at the doctor to see what effect his statement had had on him but noticed that he was keeping his composure. He felt ridiculous. "I'm inconceivably happy. . . ." he said in a tone of confidence.

He began to tell the doctor his story, but the latter stopped him with a gesture of his hand. "An overwhelming, incredible, debilitating happiness?" he asked quietly.

He stared at him in amazement and was on the point of saying something, but the doctor spoke first. "A happiness which has made you stop working," he asked, "abandon your friends, and detest going to sleep?. . ."

"You're a miracle!" he shouted.

"Every time you get involved in some misfortune," the psychiatrist continued quietly, "you dissolved into laughter?. . ."

"Sir. . . are you familiar with the invisible?"

"No!" he said with a smile, "nothing like that. But I get a similar case in my clinic at least once a week!"

"Is it an epidemic?" he asked.

"I didn't say that, and I wouldn't claim that it's been possible to analyze one case into its primary elements as yet."

"But is it a disease?"

"All the cases are still under treatment."

"But are you satisfied without any doubt that they aren't natural cases?. . ."

"That's a necessary assumption for the job; there's only. . . ."

"Have you noticed any of them to be deranged in?. . ." he asked anxiously, pointing to his head.

"Absolutely not," the doctor replied convincingly. "I assure you that they're all intelligent in every sense of the word. . . ."

The doctor thought for a moment. "We should have two sessions a week, I think?" he said.

"Very well. . . ." he replied in resignation.

"There's no sense in getting alarmed or feeling sad. . . ."

Alarmed, sad? He smiled, and his smile kept on getting broader. A laugh slipped out, and before long, he was dissolving into laughter. He was determined to control himself, but his resistance collapsed completely. He started guffawing loudly. . . .

Naguib Mahfouz began writing when he was seventeen and is now highly respected throughout the Arabic-speaking world. In novels such as *The Children of Gebelawi* (1959), *Small Talk on the Nile* (1966), and *Miramar* (1967), Mahfouz frequently uses allegory and symbolism to address political concerns. An English translation of his short story "The Happy Man" appeared in *God's World* (1973). Mahfouz won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988. *(Born Cairo, Egypt 1911)*

RESPONDING

Meaning

1. In your own words, explain what this story suggests about the human capacity for happiness.
2. a) A *caricature* is a comic exaggeration of a character's particular traits. Are there elements in the protagonist's characterization that are close to caricature? Explain.
   b) Which elements of his character and situation are realistic and believable?
   c) How do these various elements affect your response to his dilemma?

Form and Style

3. The author uses a series of *metaphors* to describe the protagonist's feelings of happiness. Identify two metaphors you found particularly effective and explain why.
4. What is the basic *irony* in the happy man's situation? How does the author play on the humour inherent in the situation?

Exploring Context

5. Existentialism is a philosophy of life that emphasizes personal choice and subjectivity; that is, the idea that our everyday choices, actions, and reactions determine who and what we are. Find out more about existentialism, using the Internet and other sources. Write a summary of what you have discovered, and explain how "The Happy Man" reflects elements of this philosophy.

Creative Extension

6. Write a poem or song lyric based on the theme of the quest for happiness. Consider how you will structure your piece (use of refrains, syntax, etc.) to convey your thoughts and emotions. Choose your diction and imagery carefully. Present a dramatic reading or performance of your piece.
7. With a partner, present a dramatic reading of one scene from the story. Use gestures, pauses, and facial expressions to emphasize the humour in the scene.

2

OLD MAN

I lose my days, me. Maybe it's that *Weesageechak* takes them. My great-granddaughter is dead, I know that much. Little Linda Cheechoo. Black eyes like my Minnie's. It's their story I need to tell.

Weesageechak, he was out bothering me again today. He was in the form of a dog again. Bit me in the ass when I wasn't looking. When he wasn't looking I gave him my boot in the mouth. We're even for now. I know that it was just a week or two ago that we all walked Linda home. It isn't so bad, not remembering everything. As long as I remember the good things. Walking her home was a good thing on a bad day. I stood watching the plane come in. I watched it touch the earth, slide its wheels on the gravel like a goose slides its landing feet onto water. Then I watched some nephews and grandsons lift the casket from the belly of that goose and into the back of a pickup truck. The whole reserve watched with me. We walked slow behind that truck, walked Linda all the way to her home.

The sonofabitch *Weesageechak* followed too. He'd shapeshifted into the form of a one-toothed mutt with dried shit hanging from the fur below his tail. He darted out in front of the pickup, made it hit the brakes hard. The casket slid a little

off-centre. *Weesageechak* started yapping at it crazy, like the mange rotted his brain. He stopped when he saw me and pulled back his lips so I could see his one tooth and bleeding gums.

Me, my fingers are all bent now and my eyes get foggy in the morning, and at night too. That trickster *Weesageechak* likes to bother me, likes to remind me that life is a lot of laughing, even if that laughing is all at me. Sometimes he's a crow in the trees watching me with his black pebble eyes, cawing at me with his silly laugh when I stop on the road to catch my breath. Mostly he's a dog, one in particular. Ugliest dog in the world. Sometimes he's a wind and puffs up his cheeks and blows a cold breeze down my back that makes my hands shake and spill hot coffee onto my lap. I'm so old now that he is my only friend left. All the others dead. I'm not sure how old I am, me. My granddaughter, Mary, Linda's mother, says I'm a hundred. That sounds like a good age. Nice and round for a skinny old man.

Lots of family. So many I don't know all my great-grandsons and granddaughters. But I knew Linda. She looked after me. I told her stories in exchange. Gave her her first pair of rain boots that she wore all through childhood.

I had my nephew Remi drive me over to Mary's to visit with her family. This was before they were able to fly Linda's body home, I think. I look out the car window and think of my old life. I had lots of children. Thirteen. Twelve are still alive. My wife is dead a long time. We were happy living in the bush. Daytimes spent trapping and hunting. Nights telling stories and making babies. I'll see her again soon.

When I lived in the forest, everyone knew me as the man who could heal sicknesses. My wife and me would collect roots and plants, keep certain parts from different animals, dry them out and crush them up. Cured lots of people. Nobody knows that about me anymore. I protected family and friends. My daughter Minnie, my oldest, she was the only one I could not protect. When the government told me one day that they would take my children to teach them, that's the day I began losing my power. It's the day I gave up living in the bush to be close to my children. I'd still go out, take my children when they were not in school. But that wasn't too often. The less I went out in the bush, the more the sonofabitch *Weesageechak* came to visit me. He loves it when someone catches me talking to him. People think I'm a crazy old man talking to dogs and crows. That's OK. Maybe, if they live long enough, he will come to visit them too.

When Remi drove me to Mary's house, it was before Linda came home on the plane, before we walked her casket home. It was the night after Linda took her life. Mary told me her body would be home in a day or two. It's the small things that confuse me now. I can't keep order of all the events. Linda was down south in a school. Linda took her life. I went to her mother's house the next day. Lots of people there. Linda came in on a plane three days later and we walked her body home. The funeral a few days after that. I think that is how it went. Me, I try to remember these things so I can tell the story proper. I think it's *Weesageechak* taking my memory and shaking it up before he gives it back to me. I'll have to scold him when I see him.

At my granddaughter Mary's house, lots of people. Much of the reserve, all of Linda's friends. But Linda wasn't there. Mary reminded me that they couldn't get her body home for a day or two. So I pictured Linda in my head instead. I could still see the little girl I took out to the muskeg in autumn for the hunt, the girl I called Little Goose, the same name I called

my own daughter Minnie years before that. Linda was one of the last of my relations still wanting to learn the old ways. So I taught her. She was just like Minnie.

Mary started crying, so I reminded her of the pet goose I used to have when she was a little girl and my daughter was still alive. It was a good goose. I'd canoe up to the marshes that I knew would be busy with birds ready to fly away for the winter and my goose would swim behind me. All the other hunters figured I had some magic they didn't know about, and some were jealous enough they threatened to eat my bird.

I told this story and from wherever he was hiding, *Weesageechak* blew hot air into my stomach and I made a loud fart. I grinned and this made Mary laugh a little through her tears. I told her the rest of my story, of how I would get out decoys and when the geese swung low to investigate, I'd send my pet bird out to swim around and draw them in the rest of the way.

Some little boys hid behind the TV listening so I took out my pretend shotgun and tracked the geese. The boys' heads followed along the arc of mine and when my head was just slightly ahead of the geese I said, "BANG BANG!" loud enough to make the little boys jump, and everyone who listened to my story tracked the geese falling like feathered V's to the earth where they splashed in the marsh outside Linda's window.

The hunting moon rose above Linda's house, as big and orange as anyone had seen it. It would be a good night to drum and sing a mourning song but I didn't know if anyone knew how to anymore.

Some of Linda's brothers got into the booze and took their long hair out of their ponytails and they grew louder. Their mother told them to go outside and the boys told her Linda was their sister they grew up with and played with and fought with and she would want them to tip a drink in her honour. Linda's father is no longer here. Drowned a few summers ago. It was dark now and the crowd was bigger. They spilled out the front and back doors and everyone talked and some cried and some laughed for the sake of Linda.

Before Mary left me I told her the story of my daughter Minnie, my Little Goose — how, many years ago, when my hair was still black and thick, I brought her and my pet bird to autumn camp and left them there for the day while I checked the traplines. It's a story everyone has heard a hundred times from a hundred mouths, but it was good right then for Linda's mother to know that another knew her suffering.

"When I returned, my Minnie was gone," I told her, holding my hands out and weighing empty air. Hours later I noticed that my bird was gone too. Both of them, gone without a trace. When the Mounties came out days later they said she was dead and drowned in the swollen river. Some older ones on the reserve still tell their grandchildren when they stray too far from home that the *windigos*, the forest cannibals, got her. My wife's heart cracked from the weight of our Little Goose being gone.

I let Mary go by telling her I had to get some fresh air. Outside I could feel *Weesageechak*'s eyes staring at me, but I couldn't locate him in the crowd of people talking and gesturing and wiping eyes. I made my way over to Linda's friends. They were the closest to her of anyone gathered there. I could tell by the way they'd separated themselves from the others, how they talked quietly and had shut themselves off. I found a seat on a snow machine waiting for winter and listened to them.

"She was a fucking bitch," one of the girls said. She had short hair, and a black leather jacket on. The other two girls and the two boys with them nodded angry, puffing on cigarettes.

A second girl said, "Only a bitch doesn't call when she's feeling down like that."

"Especially when the last thing she says to you before she leaves is that she loves you like a sister," the first one said.

The two boys in the group stayed quiet, let the young women say what they needed to.

"If she was a sister the bitch would have called one of us," the first girl said. "Stupid slut." The boys just nodded and looked at their shoes, smoking their cigarettes quickly.

"I'd call you first if I was going to pull some shit like that, wouldn't I, Minnie?" the second girl said, nodding to a silent third girl standing closest to the boys. "I wouldn't go pull no shit like Linda," she said in her sing-song way of talking. Her words made the first, tough girl begin to cry. The others didn't know what to do.

I looked up at the third girl, Minnie, and it was my Minnie I saw in the darkness. She looked over at me and her eyes were black pebbles. She was still young and beautiful after all these years. She was upset that Linda took her own life. Minnie so desperately wanted to keep hers. One of the boys reached out and hugged the tough girl. If I went to hug Minnie, I thought, she would disappear. A dog on a leash yapped somewhere behind the group. I saw that Minnie had permed her hair just like Linda.

I know just what *Weesageechak* was trying to get me to do. He was taunting me to cry and shout to this girl who was my daughter's ghost. He wanted me to make an old fool man of myself. Sometimes he's as easy to read as a north wind carrying snow clouds. His jokes have turned cruel lately. The dog that'd been yapping began to howl and pull on his leash. I recognized the voice. One of the boys in Minnie's group walked over and swatted it on the nose. This gave me an idea.

Standing up, I walked over to my young Minnie's group. It felt like I was young and drunk on rye for the first time. *Weesageechak* couldn't believe my nerve. He barked when I came near. The young ones looked at everyone's shoes but mine when I said *wachay* to them.

"Linda was a good girl," I said. "She should have stayed with us longer." Her friends didn't say anything, just stared at the ground. "I don't know why she took her life," I said. "I don't know if anyone knows." The dog strained on his leash and whined, on the verge of a howl. I forced myself not to look at my daughter. "Linda should have stayed to experience what all of us older ones have experienced. I want all of you to stay here a long time and see all of the things I have seen," I told them.

I reached out to feel each one's warmth. Minnie shivered when I touched her last. She was cold in her T-shirt. "I'm sorry I left you to check my lines," I told her. Words I waited sixty years to speak. "All I want now is for you to still be here." The dog lurched at his chain, howling, and Minnie jumped. My hand was left shaking in the cold air.

"I'm cold," she said. "'Scuse me, Grandpa, I'm going to get a smoke and a coffee inside." The others mumbled and left with her. I sat down by the dog.

"I said what I needed to," I told him. He whined and licked my hand. "You are a sonofabitch," I said, and he howled. I unlatched him from his leash and he trotted off. I looked up at the big moon and laughed.

Inside, I saw the priest sitting with Mary now. Before he came to this reserve there was another black robe who treated us like we were little children. He could not see the size of our hearts and, because he didn't understand us, believed they were small. I remember him. I actually told him one time that he didn't know us, that he did not know how big our hearts were. That made him angry. I watched this one get angry at my grandson Joseph because he drinks and wanted Linda's funeral to be Indian. I watched as this priest told Mary not to talk to her own brother, and I watched as Joseph left Mary's house. This priest thought he had no heart at all. This priest is no better than the other. I went over and told Mary to remember the old ways with the new. I told her that we are a people with a heart strong as a drumbeat. I said this in our language because this belongs to us. Poor Mary. I could see she felt pulled in two.

After that night I didn't see *Weesageechak* for a couple of days. I'd gotten him good at that wake by doing what he didn't expect me to. It is a good feeling to trick the trickster.

Seeing my grandson Joseph again made me start thinking about drumming and singing. He was once the best singer I had ever heard. He looked like my father and had his size. But Joseph lost his path somewhere along the way. That he wanted to drum at his niece's funeral was a good thing too, on a bad day. *Gitchi-Manitou* makes it so that there is always some reason for the death of a relation. In Linda's death I was able to say what I needed to say to my Minnie, and my grandson saw hope.

Joseph came to me after the wake and asked me to go to the sweat lodge with him. We got some rocks hot on the fire so they glowed red. Then we brought them in the lodge and closed the flaps up tight and sat naked together, praying and singing, pouring water on the stones so that the heat burned our lungs and all of the bad poured out of our bodies. After, I teased him that I got drunk on his fumes in there, that he'd lost all the weight of his liquor. He smiled and looked happier than I'd ever seen him. I was happy too that in our loss, good things began to come.

That night I sat by the river and listened to him drum again. I let the sound of his voice carry me up above the river and onto a cloud where I dreamed I was with Linda and she told me that she was OK and that she was sad for what she had done and how she had hurt her mother. I held her hand and we smiled at one another. Before she left me in my dream, Linda told me that the drumming and singing were a good thing to hear again, that the drumming was our heart, our little heart growing big, that the singing was the children not born yet, talking to the Grandfathers who were gone. It was our way of surviving through everything we had to survive. Linda had grown wise since crossing over to that place where I visited her.

As I stood outside the church before her funeral, *Weesageechak* showed up in his ugliest-dog-in-the-world costume, but he kept a distance, worried I had another trick up my sleeve. I waved to him and he barked. An old nun I'd known for many years came up to me and we talked a short while. I said to her, "Hello, Sister Jane," and she said, "Hello, Mr. Cheechoo," and we talked of Linda when she was a little girl, and how she always wore her rain boots, rain or shine. That nun and me, we had a good laugh together. She asked me to sit with her during the mass.

When that priest began telling us that Linda could not go to heaven because she committed suicide, Sister Jane began to

shake. But I wasn't angry. I knew Linda was already there. I watched my granddaughter Mary raise her head to look at this priest, and then I watched all my relations who had come from many different places raise their heads too. We all raised our heads up as if we were one big person, growing bigger by the minute.

And then it came. A single drumbeat from the back of the church, travelling through it the way I once saw lightning travel through water. And then it came again, then again. The priest, he didn't like that. He shouted and began to walk towards Joseph and his beating drum in the back of the church, but by the time he got to Linda's casket we had already stood as one, blocking him from going farther. All of us who knew how circled the drum and beat it with him, using our hands, our shoes, our palms. We lifted our heads up and tightened our voices and sang a song for Linda and for her mother. For all of us. I looked to my granddaughter Mary, her dark eyes Linda's, Minnie's. I looked to my grandson Joseph and he looked to me. I looked around me at all my relations around this drum, and to Sister Jane, who'd come to join us. We all stood in a circle and lifted up our voices to Linda and to *Gitchi-Manitou*, to God. And I began to feel something good that I'd not felt in a long time.

BY ANY OTHER NAME

Santha Rama Rau

The title of this essay comes from Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet:

> *What's in a name? That which we call a rose*
> *By any other name would smell as sweet.*

As you read the essay, think about Rama Rau's reasons for choosing this particular title.

interesting narration

setting interesting

At the Anglo-Indian day school in Zorinabad[1] to which my sister and I were sent when she was eight and I was five and a half, they changed our names. On the first day of school, a hot, windless morning of a north Indian September, we stood in the headmistress's study and she said, "Now you're the *new* girls. What are your names?"

My sister answered for us. "I am Premila, and she"—nodding in my direction—"is Santha."

The headmistress had been in India, I suppose, fifteen years or so, but she still smiled her helpless inability to cope with Indian names. Her rimless half-glasses glittered, and the precarious bun on the top of her head trembled as she shook her head. "Oh, my dears, those are much too hard for me. Suppose we give you pretty English names. Wouldn't that be more jolly? Let's see, now—Pamela for you, I think." She shrugged in a baffled way at my sister. "That's as close as I can get. And for *you*" she said to me, "how about Cynthia? Isn't that nice?"

My sister was always less easily intimidated than I was, and while she kept a stubborn silence, I said, "Thank you," in a very tiny voice.

We had been sent to that school because my father, among his responsibilities as an officer of the civil service, had a tour of duty to perform in the villages around that steamy little provincial town, where he had his headquarters at that time. He used to make his shorter inspection tours on horseback, and a week before, in the stale heat of a typically postmonsoon[2] day, we had waved goodbye to him and a little procession—an assistant, a secretary, two bearers, and the man to look after the bedding rolls and luggage. They rode away through our large garden, still bright green from the rains, and we turned back into the twilight of the house and the sound of fans whispering in every room.

her family background.

Up to then, my mother had refused to send Premila to school in the British-run establishments of that time, because, she mother's expression ?

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[1] **Zorinabad:** town in northern India.

[2] **postmonsoon:** referring to the dry spell that generally follows the rainy season, when ocean winds called monsoons bring rain to India.

the other in agony

used to say, "you can bury a dog's tail for seven years and it still comes out curly, and you can take a Britisher away from his home for a lifetime and he still remains insular." The examinations and degrees from entirely Indian schools were not, in those days, considered valid. In my case, the question had never come up, and probably never would have come up if Mother's extraordinary good health had not broken down. For the first time in my life, she was not able to continue the lessons she had been giving us every morning. So our Hindi[3] books were put away, the stories of the Lord Krishna[4] as a little boy were left in midair, and we were sent to the Anglo-Indian school.

That first day at school is still, when I think of it, a remarkable one. At that age, if one's name is changed, one develops a curious form of dual personality. I remember having a certain detached and disbelieving concern in the actions of "Cynthia," but certainly no responsibility. Accordingly, I followed the thin, erect back of the headmistress down the veranda to my classroom feeling, at most, a passing interest in what was going to happen to me in this strange, new atmosphere of School.

The building was Indian in design, with wide verandas opening onto a central courtyard, but Indian verandas are usually whitewashed, with stone floors. These, in the tradition of British schools, were painted dark brown and had matting on the floors. It gave a feeling of extra intensity to the heat.

I suppose there were about a dozen Indian children in the school—which contained perhaps forty children in all—and four of them were in my class. They were all sitting at the back of the room, and I went to join them. I sat next to a small, solemn girl who didn't smile at me. She had long, glossy black braids and wore a cotton dress, but she still kept on her Indian jewelry—a gold chain around her neck, thin gold bracelets, and tiny ruby studs in her ears. Like most Indian children, she had a rim of black kohl[5] around her eyes. The cotton dress should have looked strange, but all I could think of was that I should ask my mother if I couldn't wear a dress to school, too, instead of my Indian clothes.

I can't remember too much about the proceedings in class that day, except for the beginning. The teacher pointed to me and asked me to stand up. "Now, dear, tell the class your name."

I said nothing.

"Come along," she said, frowning slightly. "What's your name, dear?"

"I don't know," I said, finally.

The English children in the front of the class—there were about eight or ten of them—giggled and twisted around in their chairs to look at me. I sat down quickly and opened my eyes very wide, hoping in that way to dry them off. The little girl with the braids put out her hand and very lightly touched my arm. She still didn't smile.

bad ex pat kid

Most of that morning I was rather bored. I looked briefly at the children's drawings pinned to the wall, and then concentrated on a lizard clinging to the ledge of the high, barred window behind the teacher's head. Occasionally it would shoot out its long yellow tongue for a fly, and then it would rest, with its eyes closed and its belly palpitating, nice use of setting

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[3] **Hindi** (hin'dē): an Indo-European language that is now considered the official language of India.

[4] **Lord Krishna:** in the Hindu religion, human form taken by the god Vishnu; many Hindu stories recount episodes in the life of Lord Krishna.

[5] **kohl** (kōl): dark powder used as eye makeup.

Wernher Krutein/Gamma-Liaison, Inc.

Schoolgirl in Ahmadabad, India.

as though it were swallowing several times quickly. The lessons were mostly concerned with reading and writing and simple numbers—things that my mother had already taught me—and I paid very little attention. The teacher wrote on the easel blackboard words like "bat" and "cat," which seemed babyish to me; only "apple" was new and incomprehensible.

she already knows

When it was time for the lunch recess, I followed the girl with braids out onto the veranda. There the children from the other classes were assembled. I saw Premila at once and ran over to her, as she had charge of our lunchbox. The children were all opening packages and sitting down to eat sandwiches. Premila and I were the only ones who had Indian food—thin wheat chapatties,[6] some vegetable curry, and a bottle of buttermilk. Premila thrust half of it into my hand and whispered fiercely that I should go and sit with my class, because that was what the others seemed to be doing.

The enormous black eyes of the little Indian girl from my class looked at my food longingly, so I offered her some. But she only shook her head and plowed her way solemnly through her sandwiches.

I was very sleepy after lunch, because at home we always took a siesta. It was usually a pleasant time of day, with the bedroom darkened against the harsh afternoon sun, the drifting off into sleep with the sound of Mother's voice reading a story in one's mind and, finally, the shrill, fussy voice of the ayah[7] waking one for tea.

At school, we rested for a short time on low, folding cots on the veranda, and then we were expected to play games. During the hot part of the afternoon we played indoors, and after the shadows had begun to lengthen and the slight breeze of the evening had come up we moved outside to the wide courtyard.

I had never really grasped the system of competitive games. At home, whenever we played tag or guessing games, I was always allowed to "win"—"because," Mother used to tell Premila, "she is the youngest, and we have to allow for that." I had often heard her say it, and it seemed quite reasonable to signs of privilege

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[6] **chapatties** (chə-pä'tēz): thin unleavened fried bread.

[7] **ayah** (ä'yə): nanny in India.

competition was a cultural difference

me, but the result was that I had no clear idea of what "winning" meant.

When we played twos-and-threes[8] that afternoon at school, in accordance with my training, I let one of the small English boys catch me, but was naturally rather puzzled when the other children did not return the courtesy. I ran about for what seemed like hours without ever catching anyone, until it was time for school to close. Much later I learned that my attitude was called "not being a good sport," and I stopped allowing myself to be caught, but it was not for years that I really learned the spirit of the thing.

When I saw our car come up to the school gate, I broke away from my classmates and rushed toward it yelling, "Ayah! Ayah!" It seemed like an eternity since I had seen her that morning—a wizened, affectionate figure in her white cotton sari,[9] giving me dozens of urgent and useless instructions on how to be a good girl at school. Premila followed more sedately, and she told me on the way home never to do that again in front of the other children.

When we got home we went straight to Mother's high, white room to have tea with her, and I immediately climbed onto the bed and bounced gently up and down on the springs. Mother asked how we had liked our first day in school. I was so pleased to be home and to have left that peculiar Cynthia behind that I had nothing whatever to say about school, except to ask what "apple" meant. But Premila told Mother about the classes, and added that in her class they had weekly tests to see if they had learned their lessons well.

I asked, "What's a test?"

Premila said, "You're too small to have them. You won't have them in your class for donkey's years."[10] She had learned the expression that day and was using it for the first time. We all laughed enormously at her wit. She also told Mother, in an aside, that we should take sandwiches to school the next day. Not, she said, that *she* minded. But they would be simpler for me to handle.

That whole lovely evening I didn't think about school at all. I sprinted barefoot across the lawns with my favorite playmate, the cook's son, to the stream at the end of the garden. We quarreled in our usual way, waded in the tepid water under the lime trees, and waited for the night to bring out the smell of the jasmine.[11] I listened with fascination to his stories of ghosts and demons, until I was too frightened to cross the garden alone in the semidarkness. The ayah found me, shouted at the cook's son, scolded me, hurried me in to supper—it was an entirely usual, wonderful evening.

It was a week later, the day of Premila's first test, that our lives changed rather abruptly. I was sitting at the back of my class, in my usual inattentive way, only half listening to the teacher. I had started a rather guarded friendship with the girl with the braids, whose name turned out to be Nalini (Nancy in school). The three other Indian children were already fast friends. Even at that age it was apparent to all of us that friendship with the English or Anglo-Indian children was out of the question. Occasionally, during the class, my new friend and I

Separation of races

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[8] **twos-and-threes:** game similar to tag.

[9] **sari** (sä′rē): a long piece of cloth wrapped around the body to form a skirt and mantle; it is the main form of dress worn by Hindu women.

[10] **donkey's years:** English expression meaning "a long time."

[11] **jasmine** (jaz′min): tropical shrub with fragrant flowers.

would draw pictures and show them to each other secretly.

The door opened sharply and Premila marched in. At first, the teacher smiled at her in a kindly and encouraging way and said, "Now, you're little Cynthia's sister?"

Premila didn't even look at her. She stood with her feet planted firmly apart and her shoulders rigid, and addressed herself directly to me. "Get up," she said. "We're going home."

I didn't know what had happened, but I was aware that it was a crisis of some sort. I rose obediently and started to walk toward my sister.

"Bring your pencils and your notebook," she said.

I went back for them, and together we left the room. The teacher started to say something just as Premila closed the door, but we didn't wait to hear what it was.

In complete silence we left the school grounds and started to walk home. Then I asked Premila what the matter was. All she would say was "We're going home for good."

[illegible]

It was a very tiring walk for a child of five and a half, and I dragged along behind Premila with my pencils growing sticky in my hand. I can still remember looking at the dusty hedges, and the tangles of thorns in the ditches by the side of the road, smelling the faint fragrance from the eucalyptus trees and wondering whether we would ever reach home. Occasionally a horse-drawn tonga[12] passed us, and the women, in their pink or green silks, stared at Premila and me trudging along on the side of the road. A few coolies[13] and a line of women carrying baskets of vegetables on their heads smiled at us. But it was nearing the hottest time of day, and the road was almost deserted. I walked more and more slowly, and shouted to Premila, from time to time, "Wait for me!" with increasing peevishness. She spoke to me only once, and that was to tell me to carry my notebook on my head, because of the sun.

bad mood

When we got to our house the ayah was just taking a tray of lunch into Mother's room. She immediately started a long, worried questioning about what are you children doing back here at this hour of the day.

Mother looked very startled and very concerned, and asked Premila what had happened.

Premila said, "We had our test today, and She made me and the other Indians sit at the back of the room, with a desk between each one."

Mother said, "Why was that, darling?"

"She said it was because Indians cheat," Premila added. "So I don't think we should go back to that school."

kids power

Mother looked very distant, and was silent a long time. At last she said, "Of course not, darling." She sounded displeased.

We all shared the curry she was having for lunch, and afterward I was sent off to the beautifully familiar bedroom for my siesta. I could hear Mother and Premila talking through the open door.

Mother said, "Do you suppose she understood all that?"

Premila said, "I shouldn't think so. She's a baby."

Mother said, "Well, I hope it won't bother her."

Of course, they were both wrong. I understood it perfectly, and I remember it all very clearly. But I put it happily away, because it had all happened to a girl called Cynthia, and I never was really particularly interested in her.

great ending

a lot of power

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12. **tonga:** two-wheeled carriage.
13. **coolies:** manual laborers.

First Thoughts

Do you think that because the author was called Cynthia at school, she would have always felt that what happened there was not significant? Why do you think that Premila's name change did not have a similar effect on her?

Identifying Facts

1. How old are the author and her sister at the time of this incident? Why had the girls' mother not sent them to a British-run school before?
2. For about how long has the headmistress lived in India? What reason does she give for changing Santha's and Premila's names?
3. What causes the English children to laugh at the author on her first day of school? How do her clothes and lunch differ from those of the Indian children who have been there longer?

Interpreting Meanings

1. What is Santha's mother afraid might happen if her daughters attend a British-run school? What do the details about the other Indian students show about her fears?
2. What criticisms of the headmistress does the third paragraph imply? What related criticism of the British in India does the eighth paragraph imply?
3. What prompts Premila to leave school? What does the incident reveal about the British attitude toward and treatment of Indians?
4. How do you know that this is an **informal essay**? How does the author's childhood attitude toward names contrast with the idea implied by the title
5. Why do you think Rama Rau drew her title from a Shakespearean play instea of a classical Indian work?

Applying Meanings

Have you ever felt differently when peopl called you a different name (Beth or Lizz instead of Elizabeth, or Chuck instead of Charles)? Explain, providing examples.

Creative Writing Response

Writing a Personal Essay. Write a brie personal essay describing your first day school or some other school-related experience from your childhood.

Critical Writing Response

Analyzing an Essay's Purpose. In one paragraph, explain what you see as Ram Rau's main purpose in writing this essay. In a second paragraph, describe your response to the essay and tell whether or not you think Rama Rau accomplishes he purpose.

To help you decide what the essay's pu pose is, you may find it helpful to list, on chart like the one below, the selection details that point to the author's purpose. Remember to consider how the title relates to the essay's message.

Detail or Incident	Message It Helps t Convey

John Donne (1572–1631) was born in London and attended Cambridge University before studying law. For some years a member of the British government, he also established a reputation as a poet of great wit and verbal dexterity. His later poems, especially those written after the death of his wife, take on a more somber tone, and Donne increasingly turned to overtly religious themes. Ordained as a minister in 1615, he later became a royal chaplain and dean of St. Paul's Cathedral. There, he composed highly original sermons that brought him considerable renown as a preacher. Although his reputation dimmed after his death, he was rediscovered in the early twentieth century as one of the greatest of English writers.

JOHN DONNE

No Man Is an Island

John Donne's oft-quoted statement—"No man is an island"—occurs in a book of meditations he wrote when he lay sick and presumably dying. Donne collected his meditations in a volume and published it as *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*. Meditation XVII from that volume is excerpted here.

Donne's images are both conventional and distinctive. He writes from within a tradition that sees human life as fulfilled in an afterlife, and that regards sickness and suffering in this life as a valuable reminder of eternity and of the salvation that is the religious person's final goal. What remains most memorable about this piece today, however, for believers and non-believers alike, is the splendid way that Donne explains how all human lives are intertwined, and how human pain and sorrow and death, wherever they occur, concern us all. And that is why the bell, which ostensibly tolls for another, also tolls for each of us.

death bell.

Perchance he for whom this bell tolls may be so ill, as that he knows not it tolls for him; and perchance I may think myself so much better than I am, as that they who are about me, and see my state, may have caused it to toll for me, and I know not that. The church is Catholic, universal, so are all her actions; all that she does belongs to all. When she baptizes a child, that action concerns me; for that child is thereby connected to that body which is my head too, and ingrafted into that body whereof I am a member. And when she buries a man, that action concerns me: all mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated; God employs several translators; some pieces are translated by age, some by sickness, some by war, some by justice; but God's hand is in every translation, and his hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves again for that library where every book shall lie open to one another.

Henry VII — Catholic
Henry VIII - Catholic then Anglican
Mary Q of Scotts · ~~Catholic~~
Elizabeth I - Church of England
James VI - Protestant
Charles I — Protestant
Charles II —

Rome
→ Catholic
religion in England

As therefore the bell that rings to a sermon calls not upon the preacher only, but upon the congregation to come, so this bell calls us all; but how much more me, who am brought so near the door by this sickness. Here was a contention as far as a suit (in which both piety and dignity, religion and estimation, were mingled), which of the religious orders should ring to prayers first in the morning; and it was determined, that they should ring first that rose earliest. If we understand aright the dignity of this bell that tolls for our evening prayer, we would be glad to make it ours by rising early, in that application, that it might be ours as well as his, whose indeed it is. The bell doth toll for him that thinks it doth; and though it intermit again, yet from that minute that that occasion wrought upon him, he is united to God.

Who casts not up his eye to the sun when it rises? but who takes off his eye from a comet when that breaks out? Who bends not his ear to any bell which upon any occasion rings? but who can remove it from that bell which is passing a piece of himself out of this world?

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were: any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

Neither can we call this a begging of misery, or a borrowing of misery, as though we were not miserable enough of ourselves, but must fetch in more from the next house, in taking upon us the misery of our neighbors. Truly it were an excusable covetousness if we did, for affliction is a treasure, and scarce any man hath enough of it.

No man hath affliction enough that is not matured and ripened by it, and made fit for God by that affliction. If a man carry treasure in bullion, or in a wedge of gold, and have none coined into current money, his treasure will not defray him as he travels. Tribulation is treasure in the nature of it, but it is not current money in the use of it, except we get nearer and nearer our home, heaven, by it. Another man may be sick too, and sick to death, and this affliction may lie in his bowels, as gold in a mine, and be of no use to him; but this bell, that tells me of his affliction, digs out and applies that gold to me: if by this consideration of another's danger I take mine own into contemplation, and so secure myself, by making my recourse to my God, who is our only security.

ⓐ paragraph
p 174

SIBILITIES FOR WRITING

Analyze Donne's use of metaphor and other imagery. How does this poetic language contribute to the meditation's effect?

2. Paragraph by paragraph, closely analyze your own response to Donne's prose. What does the meditation communicate to you?

3. Apply Donne's message to the contemporary world. Use examples to suggest the extent to which people follow Donne's words and the extent to which they do not.

Brent Staples (b. 1951) grew up in the poor neighborhood of Chester, Pennsylvania, and attended Widener University on scholarship, later receiving a doctorate in psychology from the University of Chicago. After a short stint as a teacher, he found a job as a reporter with the Chicago Sun-Times *and was later hired by the* New York Times, *where he is now a member of the editorial board and contributes opinion pieces under his own by-line. His 1994 memoir* Parallel Time: Growing Up in Black and White *explores his experiences as a black youth trying to escape the poverty and violence that surrounded his family and the tragic inability of his younger brother to do so.*

BRENT STAPLES

Just Walk on By: Black Men and Public Space

The title, "Just Walk on By: Black Men and Public Space," conveys the casual manner of Brent Staples's essay about a black male's power to intimidate white people. Staples tells a series of stories and then reflects on their significance. The first story, which is a paradigm for the others, reveals the fear that he as a large black man induces in others, particularly in white women. He describes people's responses to seeing him—locking their cars, walking on the opposite of the street, holding tightly to their pocketbooks. And he describes the actions he takes to alleviate their unfounded fear of him—whistling melodies from classical music, for example.

Acknowledging that women and men, black and white are victimized disproportionately by young black males through violent crime, Staples offers some reasons why this is so. But he also explains his own very real fear that, as a black male, he may be victimized by other people's mistaken fear of him, since he is basically a timid and unthreatening soul. The precautions he takes are his attempt to minimize that fear and to protect himself from its potentially dangerous consequences.

My first victim was a woman—white, well dressed, probably in her early twenties. I came upon her late one evening on a deserted street in Hyde Park, a relatively affluent neighborhood in an otherwise mean, impoverished section of Chicago. As I swung onto the avenue behind her, there seemed to be a discreet, uninflammatory distance between us. Not so. She cast back a worried glance. To her, the youngish black man—a broad six feet two inches with a beard and billowing hair, both hands shoved into the pockets of a bulky military jacket—seemed menacingly close. After a few more quick glimpses, she picked up her pace and was soon running in earnest. Within seconds she disappeared into a cross street.

That was more than a decade ago, I was twenty-two years old, a graduate student newly arrived at the University of Chicago. It was in the echo of that terrified woman's footfalls that I first began to know the unwieldy inheritance I'd come into—the ability to alter public space in ugly ways. It was clear that she thought herself the quarry of a mugger, a rapist, or worse. Suffering a bout of insomnia, however, I was stalking sleep, not defenseless wayfarers. As a softy who is scarcely able to take a knife to a raw chicken—let alone hold one to a person's throat—I was surprised, embarrassed, and dismayed all at once. Her flight made me feel like an accomplice in tyranny. It also made it clear that I was indistinguishable from the muggers who occasionally seeped into the area from the surrounding ghetto. That first encounter, and those that followed, signified that a vast, unnerving gulf lay between nighttime pedestrians—particularly women—and me. And I soon gathered that being perceived as dangerous is a hazard in itself. I only needed to turn a corner into a dicey situation, or crowd some frightened, armed person in a foyer somewhere, or make an errant move after being pulled over by a policeman. Where fear and weapons meet—and they often do in urban America—there is always the possibility of death.

In that first year, my first away from my hometown, I was to become thoroughly familiar with the language of fear. At dark, shadowy intersections, I could cross in front of a car stopped at a traffic light and elicit the *thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk* of the driver—black, white, male, or female—hammering down the door locks. On less traveled streets after dark, I grew accustomed to but never comfortable with people crossing to the other side of the street rather than pass me. Then there were the standard unpleasantries with policemen, doormen, bouncers, cabdrivers, and others whose business it is to screen out troublesome individuals *before* there is any nastiness.

I moved to New York nearly two years ago and I have remained an avid night walker. In central Manhattan, the near-constant crowd cover minimizes tense one-on-one street encounters. Elsewhere—in SoHo, for example, where sidewalks are narrow and tightly spaced buildings shut out the sky—things can get very taut indeed.

After dark, on the warrenlike streets of Brooklyn where I live, I often see women who fear the worst from me. They seem to have set their faces on neutral, and with their purse straps strung across their chests bandolier-style, they forge ahead as though bracing themselves against being tackled. I understand, of course, that the danger they perceive is not a hallucination. Women are particularly vulnerable to street violence, and young black males are drastically overrepresented among the perpetrators of that violence. Yet these truths are no solace against the kind of alienation that comes of being ever the suspect, a fearsome entity with whom pedestrians avoid making eye contact.

It is not altogether clear to me how I reached the ripe old age of twenty-two without being conscious of the lethality nighttime pedestrians attributed to me. Perhaps it was because in Chester, Pennsylvania, the small, angry industrial town where I came of age in the 1960s, I was scarcely noticeable against a backdrop of gang warfare, street knifings, and murders. I grew up one of the good boys, had perhaps a half-dozen fistfights. In retrospect, my shyness of combat has clear sources.

As a boy, I saw countless tough guys locked away; I have since buried several, too. They were babies, really—a teenage cousin, a brother of twenty-two, a childhood friend in his mid-twenties—all gone down in episodes of bravado played out in the streets. I came to doubt the virtues of intimidation early on. I chose, perhaps unconsciously, to remain a shadow—timid, but a survivor.

The fearsomeness mistakenly attributed to me in public places often has a perilous flavor. The most frightening of these confusions occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when I worked as a journalist in Chicago. One day, rushing into the office of a magazine I was writing for with a deadline story in hand, I was mistaken for a burglar. The office manager called security and, with an ad hoc posse, pursued me through the labyrinthine halls, nearly to my editor's door. I had no way of proving who I was. I could only move briskly toward the company of someone who knew me.

Another time I was on assignment for a local paper and killing time before an interview. I entered a jewelry store on the city's affluent Near North Side. The proprietor excused herself and returned with an enormous red Doberman pinscher straining at the end of a leash. She stood, the dog extended toward me, silent to my questions, her eyes bulging nearly out of her head. I took a cursory look around, nodded, and bade her good night.

Relatively speaking, however, I never fared as badly as another black male journalist. He went to nearby Waukegan, Illinois, a couple of summers ago to work on a story about a murderer who was born there. Mistaking the reporter for the killer, police officers hauled him from his car at gunpoint and but for his press credentials would probably have tried to book him. Such episodes are not uncommon. Black men trade tales like this all the time.

Over the years, I learned to smother the rage I felt at so often being taken for a criminal. Not to do so would surely have led to madness. I now take precautions to make myself less threatening. I move about with care, particularly late in the evening. I give a wide berth to nervous people on subway platforms during the wee hours, particularly when I have exchanged business clothes for jeans. If I happen to be entering a building behind some people who appear skittish, I may walk by, letting them clear the lobby before I return, so as not to seem to be following them. I have been calm and extremely congenial on those rare occasions when I've been pulled over by the police.

And on late-evening constitutionals I employ what has proved to be an excellent tension-reducing measure: I whistle melodies from Beethoven and Vivaldi and the more popular classical composers. Even steely New Yorkers hunching toward nighttime destinations seem to relax, and occasionally they even join in the tune. Virtually everybody seems to sense that a mugger wouldn't be warbling bright, sunny selections from Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. It is my equivalent of the cowbell that hikers wear when they know they are in bear country.

POSSIBILITIES FOR WRITING

1. Staples's essay was published in the mid-1980s and has since been widely anthologized. How do you account for its popularity? In responding, consider both the way it is written, the points Staples has to make, and the essay's relevance today. Do you think this popularity is justified? Why or why not?
2. Rather than confront the fears and prejudice of the strangers he encounters, Staples explains that he goes out of his way to accommodate them. How does he do so? *Why* does he do so? How do you respond to his actions and motives?
3. Write about any times you have made strangers uncomfortable because of the way you "alter public space." How did you respond? Alternatively, write about any times you have judged others as threatening solely because of their appearance. Were your responses justified? Do you think people tend to mistrust one another based too much on appearances?

A[illegible] Quindlen (b. 1952) wrote a column for the New York Times *op-ed page during the early 1990s. She resigned her position in 1994 to devote more time to writing fiction. Since then she has published three novels,* One True Thing (1994), Black and Blue (1998), *and* Blessings (2002). *Her most recent book is* Good Dog. Stay (2007), *a work of nonfiction. In her work as both a columnist and a writer of fiction and nonfiction books, Quindlen's focus remains on social issues, especially the role and experience of women, and on family life. Her writing is down to earth and close to home. "Between the Sexes, A Great Divide" reveals Quindlen's wit and warmth as a writer and as a person.*

ANNA QUINDLEN

Between the Sexes, A Great Divide

In "Between the Sexes, A Great Divide," Anna Quindlen describes the gulf that separates boys and girls, men and women. She begins with the image of the empty space in the middle of a junior high school dance floor, girls huddled together on one side of the room, boys clustered on the other. Quindlen returns to this image later in the essay, using it to suggest the ways men and women live in separate and differentiated mental and emotional spaces.

Although Quindlen plays up the ways that men and women, girls and boys are divided from one another, she finds a way to reconcile their gender differences. Quindlen suggests that the two sexes do indeed eventually come together as partners, first on their school dance floor and later as married couples. And it is the dances both literal and figurative, she observes, not the differences, that matter.

Perhaps we all have the same memory of the first boy-girl party we attended. The floors were waxed, the music loud, the air thick with the smell of cologne. The boys stood on one side of the room and the girls on the other, each affecting a nonchalance belied by the shuffling male loafers and the occasional high birdlike sound of a female giggle.

Eventually, one of the taller, better-looking boys, perhaps dogged by two slightly shorter, squeakier acolytes, would make the big move across the chasm to ask the cutest girl to dance. Eventually, one of the girls would brave the divide to start a conversation on the other side. We would immediately develop a certain opinion of that girl, so that for the rest of our school years together, pajama parties would fairly crackle when she was not there.

None of us would consciously know it then, but what we were seeing, that great empty space in the center of the floor as fearful as a

trapdoor, was the great division between the sexes. It was wonderfu think of the time when it would no longer be there, when the school gym would be a great meeting ground in which we would mingle freely, girl and boy, boy and girl, person to person, all alike. And maybe that's going to happen sometime in my lifetime, but I can't say I know when.

I've thought about this for some time, because I've written some loving things about men, and some nasty things too, and I meant them all. And I've always been a feminist, and I've been one of the boys as well, and I've given both sides a pretty good shot. I've spent a lot of time telling myself that men and women are fundamentally alike, mainly in the service of arguing that women should not only be permitted but be welcomed into a variety of positions and roles that only men occupied.

And then something happens, a little thing usually, and all I can see is that great shiny space in the middle of the dance floor where no one ever meets. "I swear to God we are a different species," one of my friends said on the telephone recently. I can't remember whether the occasion was a fight with her husband, a scene at work or a contretemps with a mutual male friend of ours. No matter. She's said it before and she'll say it again, just like all my other friends have said it to me, and I to them. Men are the other.

We are the other, too, of course. That's why we want to believe so badly that there are no others at all, because over the course of human history being other has meant being symbols of divinity, evil, carnal degeneration, perfect love, fertility and death, to name a few. And anybody who has ever been a symbol knows that it's about as relaxing as sitting on a piece of Louis XV furniture. It is also true that over the course of history, we have been subordinate to others, symbols of weakness, dependency and emotions run amok.

Yet isn't it odd that I feel that the prejudice is somehow easier to deal with than the simple difference? Prejudice is evil and can be fought, while difference simply is. I live with three males, one husband and two sons, and occasionally I realize with great clarity that they are gazing across a divide at me, not because of big differences among us, but because of small ones.

The amaryllis bulb haunts me. "Why did you put an onion in a pot in the bathroom?" my elder son asked several months ago. I explained that it was not an onion but an amaryllis bulb and that soon it would grow into fabulous flowers. "What is that thing in the bathroom?" his father said later the same day. Impatiently I explained again. A look flashed between them, and then the littlest boy, too. Mom. Weird. Women.

Once I would have felt anger flame inside me at that. But I've done the same so many times now. On the telephone a friend and I will be commiserating about the failure of our husbands to listen when we talk, or their inexorable linear thinking, or their total blindness to the use and necessity of things like amaryllis bulbs. One of us will sigh, and the other will know what the sigh means. Husband. Strange. Men. Is it any wonder that our relationships are so often riddled with misunderstandings and disappointments?

In the children you can see the beginnings, even though we raise them in households in which mothers do things fathers once did, and vice versa. Children try to nail down the world, and themselves, early on and in a very primitive and real way. I remember a stage with my elder son in which, going through the supermarket or walking down the street, he would pin me down on each person walking by, and on such disparate cultural influences as Vanna White and Captain Kangaroo, by demanding that I tell him which genitalia category they fell in. Very soon, he got the idea: us and them, him and her. It was all very well to say that all people are the same inside (even if I had believed it) but he thought the outside was very important, too, and it helped him classify the world.

I must never forget, I suppose, that even in the gym, with all that space between us, we still managed to pick partners and dance. It's the dance that's important, not the difference. (I shouldn't leave out who leads and who follows. But I speak to that from a strange perspective, since any man who has ever danced with me can attest to the fact that I have never learned to follow.)

I have just met the dance downstairs. My elder son has one of his best friends over, and he does not care that she is a girl, and she does not care that he is a boy. But she is complaining that he is chasing her with the plastic spider and making her scream, and he is grinning maniacally because that is just exactly the response he is looking for, and they are both having a great time. Two children, raised in egalitarian households in the 1980s. Between them the floor already stretches, an ocean to cross before they can dance uneasily in one another's arms.

POSSIBILITIES FOR WRITING

1. To what extent do you find Quindlen's argument about the divide between the sexes persuasive? Do you find her images and examples compelling? Why or why not?
2. If women are indeed the "other" to men, and vice versa, then how does this otherness of each gender affect their ability to work together? What do women's and men's sexual differences mean for women being, as Quindlen argues, "not only permitted but welcomed into a variety of positions and roles that only men occupied"?
3. Write your own essay about the divide (or lack of one) between women and men. You may wish to use examples from your own experience to show how men and women misunderstand each other, or how they approach things in different ways. Or you may wish to use Quindlen's essay as the basis for a persuasive essay in which you agree, disagree, or qualify what Quindlen says about the great divide between the sexes.

Alice Walker (b. 1944) grew up in Eatonton, Georgia, the only daughter of a sharecropping family. A gifted student, she won scholarships to attend historically black Spelman College and, later, Sarah Lawrence. Walker published her first volume of poetry when she was twenty-four, and this was soon followed by a novel and a collection of short stories. Her fame increased with The Color Purple *(1982), a novel which won the Pulitzer Prize. During the 1970s and 1980s Walker was an ongoing contributor to Ms. magazine, where many of the essays collected in* In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose *(1983) and* Living by the Word *(1988) originally appeared. One of the most striking African American voices of her generation, Walker most recently published the short story collection* The Way Forward Is with a Broken Heart *(2000).*

ALICE WALKER

Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self

Alice Walker's essay about beauty grows out of a childhood experience during which she suffered an eye injury that left a psychological scar as well as a physical one. Walker shows how she learned to live with her wound, how she learned to accept her physical imperfection, and how she overcame her damaged self-regard, transforming it into a serene self-acceptance, scar and all.

By organizing her essay chronologically in a series of scenes narrated in the present tense, Walker increases its dramatic immediacy. She unifies her essay by describing the movement from being "cute" to being scarred and then to becoming psychologically and emotionally healed. As she traces this progression of her experience, Walker moves beyond her initial self-regard and self-pity to a larger vision of appreciation for all that is beautiful in life.

It is a bright summer day in 1947. My father, a fat, funny man with beautiful eyes and a subversive wit, is trying to decide which of his eight children he will take with him to the county fair. My mother, of course, will not go. She is knocked out from getting most of us ready: I hold my neck stiff against the pressure of her knuckles as she hastily completes the braiding and then ribboning of my hair.

My father is the driver for the rich old white lady up the road. Her name is Miss Mey. She owns all the land for miles around, as well as the house in which we live. All I remember about her is that she once offered in pay my mother thirty-live cents for cleaning her house, raking up piles of her magnolia leaves, and washing her family's clothes, and that my mother—she of no money, eight children, and a chronic earache—refused it. But I do not think of this in 1947. I am two and a half years old. I want to go everywhere my daddy goes. I am excited at the prospect of riding in a car. Someone has told me fairs are fun. That there is room in the car for only three of us doesn't faze me at all. Whirling happily in my starchy frock, showing off my biscuit-polished patent-leather shoes and lavender socks, tossing my head in a way that makes my ribbons bounce, I stand, hands on hips, before my father. "Take me, Daddy," I say with assurance; "I'm the prettiest!"

Why dignity not enough? Mother (women in difficult?

1st chunk

pretty special

Later, it does not surprise me to find myself in Miss-Mey's shiny black car, sharing the back seat with the other lucky ones. Does not surprise me that I thoroughly enjoy the fair. At home that night I tell the unlucky ones all I can remember about the merry-go-round, the man who eats live chickens, and the teddy bears, until they say: that's enough, baby Alice. Shut up now, and go to sleep.

It is Easter Sunday, 1950. I am dressed in a green, flocked, scalloped hem dress (handmade by my adoring sister, Ruth) that has its own smooth satin petticoat and tiny hot-pink roses tucked into each scallop. My shoes, new T-strap patent leather, again highly biscuit-polished. I am six years old and have learned one of the longest Easter speeches to be heard that day, totally unlike the speech I said when I was two: "Easter lilies/pure and white/blossom in/the morning light." When I rise to give my speech I do so on a great wave of love and pride and expectation. People in the church stop rustling their new crinolines. They seem to hold their breath. I can tell they admire my dress, but it is my spirit, bordering on sassiness (womanishness), they secretly applaud.

"That girl's a little *mess*," they whisper to each other, pleased.

Naturally I say my speech without stammer or pause, unlike those who stutter, stammer, or, worst of all, forget. This is before the word "beautiful" exists in people's vocabulary, but "Oh, isn't she the *cutest* thing!" frequently floats my way. "And got so much sense!" they gratefully add . . . for which thoughtful addition I thank them to this day.

cuteness + confidence

It was great fun being cute. But then, one day, it ended.

I am eight years old and a tomboy. I have a cowboy hat, cowboy hoots, checkered shirt and pants, all red. My playmates are my brothers, two and four years older than I. Their colors are black and green, the only difference in the way we are dressed. On Saturday nights we all go to the picture show, even my mother; Westerns are her favorite kind of movie.

boots

Back home, "on the ranch," we pretend we are Tom Mix, Hopalong Cassidy, Lash LaRue (we've even named one of our dogs Lash LaRue) we chase each other for hours rustling cattle, being outlaws, delivering damsels from distress. Then my parents decide to buy my brothers guns. These are not "real" guns. They shoot "BBs," copper pellets my brothers say will kill birds. Because I am a girl, I do not get a gun. Instantly I am relegated to the position of Indian. Now there appears a great distance between us. They shoot and shoot at everything with their new guns. I try to keep up with my bow and arrows.

One day while I am standing on top of our makeshift "garage"—pieces of tin nailed across some poles—holding my bow and arrow and looking out toward the fields, I feel an incredible blow in my right eye. I look down just in time to see my brother lower his gun.

injured

Both brothers rush to my side. My eye stings, and I cover it with my hand. "If you tell," they say, "we will get a whipping. You don't want that to happen, do you?" I do not. "Here is a piece of wire," says the older brother, picking it up from the roof; "say you stepped on one end of it and the other flew up and hit you." The pain is beginning to start. "Yes," I say. "Yes, I will say that is what happened." If I do not say this is what happened, I know my brothers will find ways to make me wish I had. But now I will say anything that gets me to my mother.

Confronted by our parents we stick to the lie agreed upon. They place me on a bench on the porch and I close my left eye while they examine the right. There is a tree growing from underneath the porch that climbs past the railing to the roof. It is the last thing my right eye sees. I watch as its trunk, its branches, and then its leaves are blotted out by the rising blood.

I am in shock. First there is intense fever, which my father tries to break using lily leaves bound around my head. Then there are chills: my mother tires to get me to eat soup. Eventually, I do not know how, my parents learn what has happened. A week after the "accident" they take me to see a doctor. "Why did you wait so long to come?" he asks, looking into my eye and shaking his head. "Eyes are sympathetic," he says. "If one is blind, the other will likely become blind too."

Could have been repaired

This comment of the doctor's terrifies me. But it is really how I look that bothers me most. Where the BB pellet struck there is a glob of whitish scar tissue, a hideous cataract, on my eye. Now when I stare at people—a favorite pastime, up to now—they will stare back. Not at the "cute" little girl, but at her scar. For six years I do not stare at anyone, because I do not raise my head.

Years later, in the throes of a mid-life crisis, I ask my mother and sist whether I changed after the "accident." "No," they say, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

So much on beauty

What do I mean?

I am eight, and, for the first time, doing poorly in school, where I have been something of a whiz since I was four. We have just moved to the place where the "accident" occurred. We do not know any of the people around us because this is a different county. The only time I see the friends I knew is when we go back to our old church. The new school is the former state penitentiary. It is a large stone building, cold and drafty, crammed to overflowing with boisterous, ill-disciplined children. On the third floor there is a huge circular imprint of some partition that has been torn out.

"What used to be here?" I ask a sullen girl next to me on our way past it to lunch.

"The electric chair," says she.

At night I have nightmares about the electric chair, and about all the people reputedly "fried" in it. I am afraid of the school, where all the students seem to be building criminals.

"What's the matter with your eye?" they ask, critically.

When I don't answer (I cannot decide whether it was an "accident" or not), they shove me, insist on a fight.

My brother, the one who created the story about the wire, comes to my rescue. But then brags so much about "protecting" me. I become sick.

Kids are unrelenting

After months of torture at the school, my parents decide to send the back to our old community, to my old school. I live with my grandparents and the teacher they board. But there is no room for Phoebe my cat. By the time my grandparents decide there is room, and I ask for my cat, she cannot be found. Miss Yarborough, the boarding teacher takes me under her wing, and begins to teach me to play the piano. But soon she marries an African—a "prince," she says—and is whisked away to his continent.

At my old school there is at least one teacher who loves me. She is the teacher who "knew me before I was born" and bought my first baby clothes. It is she who makes life bearable. It is her presence that finally helps me turn on the one child to the school who continually calls me "one-eyed bitch." One day I simply grab him by his coat and heat him until I am satisfied. It is my teacher who tells me my mother is ill.

My mother is lying in bed in the middle of the day, something I have never seen. She is in too much pain to speak. She has an abscess in her ear. I stand looking down on her, knowing that if she dies, I cannot live. She is being treated with warm oils and hot bricks held against her cheek. Finally a doctor comes. But I must go back to my grandparents' house. The weeks pass but I am hardly aware of it. All I know is that my mother might die, my father is not so jolly, my brothers still have their guns, and I am the one sent away from home.

Are they lying to her

"You did not change," they say.

Did I imagine the anguish of never looking up?

lie

I am twelve. When relatives come to visit I hide in my room. My cousin Brenda, just my age, whose father works in the post office and whose mother is a nurse, comes to find me. "Hello," she says. And then she asks, looking at my recent school picture, which I did not want taken, and on which the "glob," as I think of it, is clearly visible, "You still can't see out of that eye?"

"No," I say and flop back on the bed over my book.

That night, as I do almost every night, I abuse my eye. I rant and rave at it, in front of the mirror. I plead with it to clear up before morning. I tell it I hate and despise it. I do not pray for sight. I pray for beauty.

"You did not change," they say.

lie

I am fourteen and baby-sitting for my brother Bill, who lives in Boston. He is my favorite brother and there is a strong bond between us. Understanding my feelings of shame and ugliness he and his wife take me to a local hospital, where the "glob" is removed by a doctor named O. Henry. There is still a small bluish crater where the scar tissue was, but the ugly white stuff is gone. Almost immediately I become a different person from the girl who does not raise her head. Or so I think. Now that I've raised my head I win the boyfriend of my dreams. Now that I've raised my head I have plenty of friends. Now that I've raised my head classwork comes from my lips as faultlessly as Easter speeches did, and I leave high school as valedictorian, most popular student, and *queen*, hardly believing my luck. Ironically, the girl who was voted most beautiful in our class (and was) was later shot twice through the chest by a male companion, using a "real" gun, while she was pregnant. But that's another story in itself. Or is it?

She changes back

"You did not change," they say.

It is now thirty years since the "accident." A beautiful journalist comes to visit and to interview me. She is going to write a cover story for her magazine that focuses on my latest book. "Decide how you want to look on the cover," she says. "Glamorous, or whatever."

blind in that eye

Never mind "glamorous," it is the "whatever" that I hear. Suddenly all I can think of is whether I will get enough sleep the night before the photography session: if I don't, my eye will be tired and wander, as blind eyes will.

At night in bed with my lover I think up reasons why I should not appear on the cover of a magazine. "My meanest critics will say I've sold out," I say. "My family will now realize I write scandalous books."

"But what's the real reason you don't want to do this?" he asks.

"Because in all probability," I say in a rush, "my eye won't be straight."

"It will be straight enough," he says. Then, "Besides, I thought you'd made your peace with that."

with all her

And I suddenly remember that I have.

accomplishments (caught up in beauty)

I remember:

I am talking to my brother Jimmy, asking if he remembers anything unusual about the day I was shot. He does not know I consider that day the last time my father, with his sweet home remedy of cool lily leaves, chose me, and that I suffered and raged inside because of this. "Well," he says, "all I remember is standing by the side of the highway with Daddy, trying to flag down a car. A white man stopped, but when Daddy said he needed somebody to take his little girl to the doctor, he drove off."

last time her father chose her — it was relevant to him

I remember:

I am in the desert for the first time. I fall totally in love with it. I am so overwhelmed by its beauty. I confront for the first time consciously, the meaning of the doctor's words years ago: "Eyes are sympathetic. If one is blind, the other will likely become blind too." I realize I have dashed about the world madly, looking at this looking at that, storing up images against the fading of the light. *But I might have missed seeing the desert!* The shock of that possibility—and gratitude for over twenty-five years of sight—sends me literally to my knees. Poem after poem comes—which is perhaps how poets pray.

inspired by the desert

On Sight

I am so thankful I have seen
The Desert
And the creatures in the desert
And the desert Itself.

The desert has its own moon
Which I have seen
With my own eye.

There is no flag on it.
Trees of the desert have arms
All of which are always up
That is because the moon is up
The sun is up
Also the sky
The stars
Clouds
None with flags

If there *were* flags, I doubt
the trees would point.
Would you?

But mostly, I remember this:

I am twenty-seven and my baby daughter is almost three. Since her birth I have worried about her discovery that her mother's eyes are different from other people's. Will she be embarrassed? I think. What will she say? Every day she watches a television program called "Big Blue Marble." It begins with a picture of the earth as it appears from the moon. It is bluish, a little battered-looking, but full of light, with whitish clouds swirling around it. Every time I see it I weep with love, as if it is a picture of Grandma's house. One day when I am putting Rebecca down for her nap, she suddenly focuses on my eye. Something inside me cringes, gets ready to try to protect myself. All children are cruel about physical differences, I know from experience, and that they don't always mean to be in another matter. I assume Rebecca will be the same.

But no-o-o-o. She studies my face intently as we stand, her inside and me outside her crib. She even holds my face maternally between her dimpled little hands. Then, looking every bit as serious and lawyerlike as her father, she says, as if it may just possibly have slipped my attention: "Mommy, there's a *world* in your eye." (As in, "Don't be alarmed, or do anything crazy.") And then, gently, but with great interest: "Mommy, where did you *get* that world in your eye?"

For the most part, the pain left then. (So what, if my brothers grew up to buy even more powerful pellet guns for their sons and to carry real guns themselves. So what, if a young "Morehouse man" once nearly fell off the steps of Trevor Arnett Library because he thought my eyes were blue.) Crying and laughing I ran to the bathroom, while Rebecca mumbled and sang herself off to sleep. Yes indeed, I realized, looking into the mirror. There *was* a world in my eye. And I saw that it was possible to love it: that in fact, for all it had taught me of shame and anger and inner vision, I *did* love it. Even to see it drifting out of orbit in boredom, or rolling up out of fatigue, not to mention floating back at attention in excitement (bearing witness, a friend has called it), deeply suitable to my personality, and even characteristic of me.

deciding to accept yourself

That night I dream I am dancing to Stevie Wonder's song "Always" (the name of the song is really "As," but I hear it as "Always"). As I dance, whirling and joyous, happier than I've ever been in my life, another bright-faced dancer joins me. We dance and kiss each other and hold each other through the night. The other dancer has obviously come through all right, as I have done. She is beautiful, whole and free. And she is also me.

falls in love with self

POSSIBILITIES FOR WRITING

1. Trace Walker's image of herself from childhood onward as it is related to the disfiguring of her eye. Note particularly that paragraphs 34—40 take place prior to the following paragraphs that end the essay. The final image of the two dancers resolves the essay, but does it seem to you a true resolution for Walker? Why or why not?
2. Walker's picture of herself here is of someone who is highly self-absorbed, in some cases, perhaps, even vain. Do you find her generally sympathetic or not? Point to specific passages in the text that contribute to your response.
3. Like Walker as child, people can be highly self-conscious about some aspect of their appearance. In your experience—both in terms of your thoughts about your own appearance and thoughts about their appearance friends may have shared with you—is such self-consciousness generally justified or not?