**1. The Nature of Prose Fiction**

Have you ever read a novel or a short story? What are your reading when you are reading a short story or a novel? A story, of course, that is the answer that you might give. That is a correct answer. A novel and a short story is actually a story about human being.

A novel or short belongs to prose fiction. Then, the next question is “What is prose fiction?” Notice the word *fiction.* What is fiction? Fiction means something imaginative, something which is not real; a thing that we imagine. While, prose means a composition in which an author presents or expresses an idea or an emotive condition such as happiness, sadness, anger, etc.

However, we cannot conclude that prose fiction presents an imaginative idea or emotive condition, because there is no imaginative idea. The fiction here refers to the story that we are enjoying when reading a novel or short story. Therefore, the person, the acting, the place, the event, and the time found in the story are in the author’s imagination.

Imagination does not mean that prose fiction is not a reality. What happened to the person of a story is imaginative; however, it is factual in the sense that it can be found in real life. When you are reading a novel, let us say, *The Old Man and the Sea* of Hemingway, you will find an old fisherman namely Santiago. He is a poor fisherman who cannot catch any fish successfully. This is an imaginative person, but in real life we can find such old man.

In this sense, Weimann (in Desan, et all 1989: 37)says that literature represent the reality of the society, that is politics, economics, nature, and even science. An author observes, experience, and absorbs the reality into his consciousness. Then through a process of creativity, he produces a novel or short story.

2. The Division of Prose Fiction

A. The Short Story

Short story is, as can be inferred from its name, is a story which is not long. However, it is not a story which is composed in short form, nor it is a long story which is condensed. A short story has some characteristics. First, it consists of approximately 2,000 words (Koesnoesoebroto, 1998: 11). Second, it has few incidents, few characters, settings, scenes. It means reading a short story does not take a long time; it develops only one or two characters with a limited event.

Reading the previous paragraph should not lead you to think that short story is a condensed novel. Unlike novel, a short story produces only a single effect; a novel, on the other hands, may produce a complex effect. This is because the scope and structure of a novel is often complicated by episodes and sub-plot; while a short story exploits a single incident, and a simple structure.

This is not to say that a short story is an episode of a novel. It is not a part of a novel, since has its own story, structure, setting, theme, character, and incidents.

B. The Novelette and the Novel

Novel and novelette are similar but not alike. They are similar in the sense that the principles applied in novel will be applied to novelette (Koesnoesoebroto, 1998: 18). A novelette is a short novel which contains of 18,000 to 40,000 words. Hence, it is shorter than a novel, a novel contain more than that number words found in novelette. A novel may contain over 100,000 words.

Novel and novelette are both story composed in form of prose. However, we should aware of the prose fiction which is not a novel and prose fiction which is a novel.

First, a novel is perceptual in the sense that what is narrated is based on the novelist’s perception of the reality. In the pre-writing activity, a novelist sees and hears the reality surrounding him. Through a reflection, he constructs his perception into imaginative events, person, time and place.

Secondly, a novel is structural. The novelist composes a novel structurally. The events, the characters, theme, are composed with the beginning, middle and ends. Through a structure, we can study the development of the story, the development of the main characters, and presentation of theme.

Thirdly, a novel is sociological in the sense that it is middle-class genre. Since a novel is in the written form, it can be only enjoyed by illiteracy or educated people. The theme developed in a novel can only be response by educated people.

Fourthly, a novel is mythic. It is mythic in the sense that it presents a main character as a hero. In Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea* we can study how an old fisherman becomes a hero; he struggle alone in ocean against the wild sea and a big fish.

Fifthly, a novel is philosophical. A novel is philosophical means that the novelist develops a certain philosophical thinking or a philosophical climate. When reading *the Old Man and the Sea,* we can grasp a philosophical climate surrounding the main character. His struggle is actually a philosophical event, i.e. how an old man with limited physical power is fighting a strong big fish. He wins the fight, but he is defeated by the fate since he cannot enjoy the fish at the end. However, this has changed his neighbors’ perception that he is an unlucky person; they finally percept him as a hero.

Sixthly, a novel is subjective. Every novel has a subject matter which is developed through the story. Dorothy van Ghent (in Koesnosoebroto, 1998: 22) says that the subject matter of novels is “human relation in which are shown the directions of men’s soul.”

The last is that a novel is cultural in the sense that it expresses or reflects the cultural of its society. And English novel reflects the cultural of English people. We can study the way life of its people, their ways of thinking, the family relationship, and every aspect of culture. A novel can be more completely understood by exploring its people’s culture.

VARIETIES OF THE NOVEL

A. Historical Novel

This variety of novel is the reconstruction of life in the past time. The novelist uses history as the background of the story of love, heroic, adventures, etc. Robert Graves’ *Cladius* is an example of novel which uses the history of Rome as the background. In American Literature, there is Fenimore Cooper’s *The Spy*. In Indonesian novel, we have *Untung Suropati* byAbdul Muis.

B. Mystery or Detective Novel

 This kind of novel brings us the story of the mystery of life. For instance the mystery of murder. Once, some people die mysteriously. Everybody is scared of being murdered. And then somebody is trying to find the murderer. In finding the murderer the detective has to do a lot of dangerous things. Finally, the murderer is found. The good example of this kind of novel is Agatha Christi’s novels.

C. Science Fiction Novel

 This is a kind novel of novel the author in which mixes science and fiction to present a story. Kuiper (2012: 67) says that science fiction which is fantassy, but it is based on some aspects of science and technology and set the future. The ggod example of this type of novel is Jules Verne’s *Landing on the Moon.* This is about the human’s effort to land on the moon. The condition of the moon, the spaceship, and the astronauts’ conditions described in this novel is very scientific; it is scientifically real except the story which is fictional.

 There are two awards given to the best science fiction, i.e. Hugo Awards and Nebula Awards (Kuiper, 2012: 68). The first one is awarded by World Science Fiction Society (WSFS). The first story teller who received this award was Hugo Gernsback (1884–1967), the founder of *AmazingStories*, the first magazine exclusively for science fiction. His name is honored to this award.

The second award is provided by Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America (SFWA). This award is given to its member who produced amazing science story. The first Nebula Awards were given in 1965, and Frank Herbert’s *Dune* won the award for best novel. Nebula award is considered more prestigious than Hugo Awards which are voted by fiction fans.

Historical Development of the Novel

The novel has been the most popular literary genre in England since its emergence in the early eighteenth century. It is designed for the middle class—travel literature, diaries, annuals of piety and instruction criminal biographies. This era was characterized by the existence of books club and circulating library.

The philosophy at the time has been moved from the thought which said reality to be the universal truth to the thought which defined reality in the terms of individual and his sense impression. The individual gradually was considered the most important thing. This lead the people to a primary assumption that novel would report the actions of individual characters with detail sufficient and abundant to create the illusion of authenticity to the material fact of the everyday world. In other words, novel is often assumed to be realistic.

. Novels of this era were written in a variety of techniques. Yet they were kept in focusing on the presenting the real world and delineating the individualized characters acting at a given moment in a recognizable place.

A. Some Famous Novelist of 18th century

1. Daniel Defoe. His famous novel is *Robinson Crusoe* (1719)which presents the adventure of Robinson Crusoe in a remote land. Robinson Crusoe, the character in this novel, was considered to be realistic; the character was developed through causality that grows in the plot structure.
2. Samuel Richardson. His famous novels are *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa Harlowe* (1747-1748). These novels were developed through a series of letters. This technique is to make extensive analysis of characters as they think and feel. In terms of plot, Richardson discovered a titillating plot formula. This formula is known as “the principle of procrastinated rape” such as in *Pamela* in which the character who is a virtuous young housemaid whose honor is every day threatened by the son of his mistress.
3. Henry Fielding. Fielding was the first theorist of the novel with his definition of the comic epic which appears as a preface to his *Joseph Andrews* (1742).
4. Laurence Sterne who produced *Tristram Shandy.* This novel is an attempt to render life at the moment that is being lived. The structure of this novel is based on John Locke’s theory which says that association of ideas in the mind is an illogical process. Thus, anticipating the modern stream-of-consciousness technique. But, the chaotic as the novel seems to be, it is apparent not real chaos. The characters are Trastram and his—all creatures of fix ideas but as convincing the real persons. This phenomenon helped to make the novel popular success.
5. Tobial Smollett. He used exaggerated and distorted traits of human behavior to expose a crude and brutal society. His best novel *Hunpry Clinker (1771)* was his best novel. This is, according to some critics, a greatest epistolary novel in the English novel. It presents a picture of English life in the 1760s.

B. Novel of 19th century

The development of 19th century’s novel was marked by the major figures Jane Austen and Sir Walter Scott. Austen’s works are sometimes said to represent a feminization of Fielding’s variety of techniques and enormous world view. She had a smaller vision but many think and many intense. Her work *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) is a detailed presentation of world in fiction.

Sir Walter Scott, unlike Jane Austen, has a large and varied as reflected by his works. This novelist is considered to be the first successful one. His finest work is *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818). However, his other works, *The Bride of Midlothian* (1819) and *Ivanhoe* (1819) remain popular even today.

The other novelists are William Makepeace Thackeray, Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope, and Charlotte and Emily Bronte. They are typical Victorian Novelists.

The second half of the nineteenth century was marked by the publication of Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1875) in France, Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* (1862-1869) in Russia, and Nathaniel Hawthorne’ *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Herman Meville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851), and Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), and Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage.*

The historical development of the twentieth century was marked by Thomas Mann and Frans Rafka in Germany, Marcel Proust, Albert Camus, and Andre Gide in France;Joseph Conrad, Virgnia Woolf, James Joyce, and D. H. Lawrence in England; William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway in USA.

The Novels of this century are characterized by technique of writing which is fully achieved by the author achieved in conscious aesthetic and deliberately and experimental. In this sense Richard M. Castman in his book *A Guide to the Novel* says that the novel should be dramatic than assertive art. Twentieth novels are denser than its predecessors, more poetic, evocative, suggestive, metaphoric, and difficult.

 Novel of 20th Century

Novels written in in this century were influenced by the First World War which led the British into the disappearance. E.M. Foster is a novelist who was influenced by this situation. His first novel *Where Angel Fear to Tread* (1905) brings us the story about his view value of the British society at the time.

In his *A Passage to India* (1924)*,* his tells about English people in India who behave in traditional ways and are unable to see the inner true of the events. He also shows that people may succeed in a terms and fail in another one. Thus, unsuccessfully-making money people might be successful in another aspect of life. He seems to reject the money-oriented view.

The other novelist of this century is Arnold Bennett. His novels present characters that live in an area of industrial. His novel *The Old Wive’s Tale* (1908) two sisters, one is dependent and the other is independent. The first one is depend on a man who the leaves in Paris without money and help. The other sister stays at home and marries a man who works for her father’s shop.

H.G. Wells’ novel also talks about characters from lower level. However, most of his characters are living in happiness. His *Kipps* (1902) and *The History of Polly* (1910) are about people who work for shop. They succeed to make money and hence they are happy. His other novel is scientific novel. *The Time Machine* (1895) in is novel bringing the story of a machine that takes people travel through space and time. His other works are *The First Men on the Moon* (1901) and *Ann veronica* (1909),

Then we come to Somerset Maugham. This is also a very productive novelist. His first novel was *Lisa of Lambeth* (1897) which figure out the realistic life of slum, a city area with poor and dirty living condition, *Human Bandage*(1915) is about the hardship and difficulties if his life. His other novel is *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919)*.*

The other novelist is D.H. Lawrence. He is a novelist who thought that a novel must show how individual‘s view of his life is affected by convention of language, family, and religion. Novelist must show that people and their relationship keeps changing. These views are reflected in his novels such as *Son and Lovers* (1913), *The Rainbow* (finished in 1915), and *Women in Love* (1916).

James Joyce, who was born and educated in Ireland, was also a great English novelist. He wrote novel and short stories. His first short stories published as *Dubliner* (1914) are realistic story and carrying deep meaning. In his *The Dead* he tells about a husband’s self-satisfaction when discovering his wife’s love for a dead man’s body. In his *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) he revealed himself as a young man in the impersonated in a hero named Stephen Dedalus. His other work is *Ulyses* (1922). This is the most considerably English novel of the twentieth century.

Then we come to a woman novelist, Virginia Woolf. Her characters are the reflection of many types of people in many situations. Her novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927) is about a family on holiday in Scotland in September 1910. The character of this novel is James Ramsay wants to go the lighthouse by boat but is prevented by his father. He finally goes by boat; however, he starts to hate his father. Her other works are *Orlando* (1928), and *The Waves* (1931).

Another English novelist is Graham Greene. He has written many books which can be divided into two kinds—serious and entertainment books. His serious novels are about failed people. This is philosophically since this failed people are who very nearer God’ on the other hand ones who re away from God are more successful. His famous novels are *Brighton Rock* (1938) and *The Power and the Glory* (1940).

Another English novelist of 20th century is Iris Murdock. He wrote novels with the subject of the attempt of people with religious life. He creates two kinds of characters, i.e. people with strong aim and unable to notice anything else; and those who are without settled fixed pattern of life still wants to make changes. His famous novels are *Severed Head* (1961), *Under the Net* (1954), and *The Black Prince* (1954).

We also have the greatest comic novelist, Evelyn Waugh. Most of his characters are very satirical, comically unsympathetic, cruelly described. His novel *Decline and Fall* (1928) is about a young man’s innocence and the world’s dishonesty. His onther novels are *Scoop* (1937), *Brideshead Revisited* (1945)*, Men at Arms* (1952), *Officers and Gentlemen* (1955), and *Unconditional Surrender* (1961).

The Elements of Prose

A story is composed as a totality, in the sense that it must be comprehended as a unity. Elements of prose are constructed by the author in order that the reader may understand a story. However, every element is not standing on its own. Since a story must be understood as totality, all of the elements work together to construct a good story.

PLOT

Plot is one of the elements that compose a story. It is a technical term that refers the series of event in a story. The events are arranged in time and causality, hence it must be arranged logically. (Koesnosoebroto, 1988: 28).

So, what is the importance of plot? Robert and Jacobs (1987: 87) say that plot is a plan or groundwork of a story. In the plot every event is related logically. Thus, we cannot have a story without plot.

 However, plot is not a sequence of events, it is arranged in cause and effect relationship. Thus, a story, “The king died and then the queen died” is not a qualified plot. It will be qualified if it is arranged as cause and effect like “The king die and then queen died of grief.”

Plot is developed through conflict (Robert and Jacobs 1987: 87). Conflict might be, in elemntal for, is the opposition of two people who might argue, fight each other, etc. Conflcit also might be psychological. When a person is facing a dilema, then s/he is in psychological conflict, i.e. the conflict of two severe choices.

In short, plot is a device by which an author composed the story in pages in words. Thus, it has a function. The function of conflict is to draw the reader’s interest. When s/he becomes interested with the story, then curiosity will arise and so the reading activity will be continued. The reader might have questions such as “Why does the character acts like that? What will happen after this?”

Conflict in plot might be clear in the following example:

John and Jane meet at school and they fall in love. They go together for two year, and they plan to marry, but the problem arises. Jane wants to develop a career first, and after marriage she wants to be an equal contributor the family. John understands Jane’s desire for a career, but he wants to marry first and let her continue her studies afterwards in preparation for the goal. Jane believes that this solution will not work, insisting instead that it is a trap from which she will never escape. This conflict interrupts their plans, and they part in regret and anger. Going their separate ways even though they still love each other, both marry other people and build their lives and careers. Neither is completely happy even though they like and respect their spouses. Many years later, after they have children and grandchildren of their own, they meet again. John is now a widower and Jane has divorced. Their earlier conflict no longer being barrier, they marry and live successfully together. During their marriage, however, even their new happiness is tinged with reproach and regrets because of their earlier conflict, their increasing age, the lost years that they might have spent with each other. (Roberts &Jacobs, 1987: 88-89)

Can you find a conflict in that story? Notice how the conflict initiated which lead to the separation of John and Jane which leads them to marry another other people. However, their marriage is also in conflict which then leads them to divorce.

What causes the conflict? That is the question that you might have. Notice how John proposes marriage to Jane, and Jane’s responds. Jane agree to marry, however, she wants to develop her career first. However, John wants to marry first. This is source of conflict.

Conflict may be external and internal. The conflict between John and Jane in the previous example is external. External conflict may be political conflict, social conflict, conflict whithin family, etc. It is called external conflict because it is between a person and something external.

Internal conflict is also known as psychological conflict. It is internal because it is a conflict whithing a person. When a person has dilemma, then s/he has a psychological or internal conflict. A man who has has to choice, between marrying Jane and marrying Deborah is in internal conflict.

The Kinds of Plot

Koesnosoebroto (1998: 38-46) explains three kinds of plot, i.e. plot of fortune, plot of character, and plot of thought.

1. Plot of Fortune

This type of plot consists of the action plot, the pathetic plot, the tragic plot, the punitive plot,

1. The action plot. This is the most common and the sole interest lies in what happens next.
2. The pathetic plot.in this plot, the reader may have a sympathetic with the protagonist since s/he undergoes misfortune through no particular fault if his own. The novel plot of *The Old Man and the Sea* might be categorized in this type.
3. The tragic plot. In this plot, the protagonist has a misfortune that lead him or her to the tragic condition, i.e. death. This kind of plot might found in drama such as *Oedipus the King, Antigone, Othello, Romeo dan Juliet.*
4. The Punitive plot.In this plot the character is punished due to his or her evil action. The novel might be categorized composed in this plot is *Doctor Faust.*
5. The sentimental plot. This is the plot in which the character changes in fortune for the better. In this plot, the character survives the thread of misfortune and comes out all right at the end. The final effect of this plot is joyous at the sight of virtue receiving reward. The good example of this plot is in *Tom Jones.* In this novel sentiment is crossed by laughter.
6. Admiration plot. In this plot the character’s change in fortune for the better which is caused some effects. Here the characters gains primary honor and reputation; the reader will admire him. The character’s hopes are fulfilled, as in sentimental plot. However, the reader’s respond is respect and admiration. Thegood example is *Tom Sawyer.*
7. Plot of Character
8. The Maturing Plot. In this plot, the character develops his/her behavior which at the end of the story gains a better behavior. In other words, the character that has a bad behavior is experiencing a maturation process and at the end s/he gains the better condition.
9. The reform plot. This is similar to maturing plot; the protagonist change for a better life. He is doing wrong and he knows it. His weakness, however, causes him to be away from what he considers to be the proper behavior. The reader feels impatience with this process. The character does some mistakes. This is different from maturing plot in which the reader pity the protagonist, in this plot this feeling is lacking.
10. The Testing Plot. In this plot, the character has a dilemma. He is sympathetic, strong, and purposeful character and pressured by dilemmas. He has to choose, between loosing his nerve and taking the bribe. The reader feels that he must give up and save his neck. He is being tested in this plot; every choice has its consequence. The Good example of this plot is Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea.*
11. The Degeneration plot. In this lot, the character, at the beginning is very sympathetic character. He is full of ambition. Then he has a problem of choosing between picking up his ambition, or giving up. He is confused, and finally chooses the second choice. The good example of this plot is found in Chekov’s Ivanov *and* The Seagull.
12. Plots of Thought
13. The Education Plot. This a plot in which the protagonist is processing a change for a better conception, beliefs and attitude. However, this plot does not continue to show the beneficial of the change. This can be found Leo Tolstoy”s Death of Ivan Illich.
14. The Revelation Plot. In this plot, the character changes. However, unlike the previous explained plots, character in this plot is changing from ignoring the essential facts of his situation to recognizing. In other words, the character this is process of the character to find the truth before coming to the decision. Story composed in this lot is *The Green Fly* by a Hungarian author, Kalman Milkszath.
15. The affective plot. In this plot, the character change involves the feeling, pleasant or unpleasant, happy or unhappiness.
16. The Disillusion plot. The character in this plot changes from positive to negative. He loses his faith or positive behavior or attitude after being subjected to loss, thread, or trial.

**The Structure of Plot**

Previously it has been explained that plot is the arrangement of events in novel or short story. However, it should be understood that the events were arranged in cause and effect; therefore, it must structurally constructed. Generally, plot is structured in the beginning, the middle, and the end. This is elaborated in the following sequence:

1. Exposition. In this sequence, the author exposes the main character, their background, characteristics, and everything that is considerably important information which will lead the reader to the next sequence.
2. Complication. This is the beginning of the conflict between characters. The protagonist and antagonist start to raise conflict.
3. Crisis. This is the turning point which separates what has gone and what will come after. In this stage, the character decides an act to resolve the conflict. The consequences of the decision result in the climax level.
4. Climax. This is the high point in action. The conflict reaches the climax level and becomes inevitable. In this is this point, the character must take an action which will determine the resolution of this story. In *The Old Man and the Sea,* the climax is when the main character is struggling to bring the bid fish that he has caught. He must struggle against the other fishes that eat his fish.
5. The resolution. This is the conclusion of the story. In *The Old Man and The Sea,* the resolution is when the old man finally arrived at the beach with the skeleton of his fish. His big fish has been eaten by the other fishes. The people now changed their vision to him. They admire at his bravery and strength to sail alone.

The structure of the plot is clear in the following figure:

Climax

Figure 1. The Structure of Plot

Complication

Resolution

Crisis

Exposition

CHARACTER AND CHARACTERIZATION

Character might be defined as the agent of story. It might be human or non-human. We can categorize character based on the development and the role. In terms of development, character might be categorized of flat and round character. In terms of role, we have protagonist and antagonist.

 Flat character is a simple character in the sense that it only develops a dimension of his life. However, in reality, we can hardly this type of person; human is a very complex creature which cannot be understood in one side of his life.

Round character is more complex; it is multi dimensions. Take Gatsby, the character in Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby.* He is known as rich man, who always makes party in his house. However, he is a multi-dimension person. In the past, he was a poor soldier; even he could not buy his own cloth. He was in love with a girl namely Daisy. However, since he was a poor man, Daisy married a very rich man. This leads Gatsby to have a dream of being a rich man. He does a lot of illegal business and then becomes a rich; his dream comes true. This is a very complex development of a character namely Gatsby.

Another example is Hemingway’s character in his novel *The Sun Also Rises.* This is about some expatriates who are lost spiritually due to the war. The main character, Jake, is a suffering man. He used to participate in war and was injured in his groan and so cannot marry. However, this is not only his experience; his travelling through Europe indicates that he is a multi-dimensional man.

Protagonist is the central character. The theme developed in a story is presente through the development of this character. In other words, the story is about this character. Thus, the theme develope through a story is about protagonist. Thus, when a story is about the ambition of being rich, as in *The Great Gatsby,* the protagonist will do a lot of thing in order to be richAntagonist is the character who is against the protagonist. Usually, the conflict developed in a story is between the protagonist and antagonist. In The Great gatsby, the conflict is between the protagonist Gatsby Daisy’s husband, Tom Buchanan.

Both characters in term of character’s development and role is clear in the following figure:

In Terms of Character’s Development

B

In Terms of

Character’s Role

C

Figure 2: The Kind of Character

When we are reading a story, we dealt with a character, i.e. what he does. When reading a story, we are making characterization. We do some activities when doing characterization:

1. Judgment. This is when we a character is doing an immoral thing, such as spill a drink, talk too loudly, and make inappropriate or rude remark.
2. Drawing conclusion, for instance when reading a story of a man and woman who are involved in a very close conversation, you will conclude that they have a very close relationship..
3. Discovering something, like when you find why someone acts certain thing. (Card, 1988: 4)

In short, character is the agent of story, i.e. human or non-human that plays role in a story. In doing characterization, we are dealt with what the character doing, what the character looks like.

The Method of Presenting character

In presenting character, an author might apply some methods. Here are some of them:

1. Discursive method

In this method, the author explains the aspects of character directly. Read the following taken from Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea.*

“He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish. In the first forty days a boy had been with him. But after forty days without a fish the boy’s parents had told him that the old man was now definitely and finally salao, which is the worst form of unlucky, and the boy had gone at their orders in another boat which caught three good fish the first week. It made the boy sad to see the old man come in each day with his skiff empty and he always went down to help him carry either the coiled lines or the gaff and harpoon and the sail that was furled around the mast. The sail was patched with flour sacks and, furled, it looked like the flag of permanent defeat.

The old man was thin and gaunt with deep wrinkles in the back of his neck. The brown blotches of the benevolent skin cancer the sun brings from its reflection on the tropic sea were on his cheeks. The blotches ran well down the sides of his face and his hands had the deep-creased scars from handling heavy fish on the cords. But none of these scars were fresh. They were as old as erosions in a fishless desert.”

 Notice how the author describes the main character. He explains the old man’s activity, what he does, how he fishes unsuccessfully, how the society views him as an unlucky man, his physical appearance, and his relationship with a boy. Hemingway presents his character through discursive method.

1. Through Dialogue

Dialogue can be found in novel and short story, not only in drama. In novel, it is used to present the communication between characters. However, it is also used to present the character. The reader can infer the type of character by noticing the character’s words. What the character says, his diction, reveal what he thinks, his behavior, and his attitude toward something. Notice the following dialogue taken from the same novel:

 “Santiago,” the boy said to him as they climbed the bank from

where the skiff was hauled up. “I could go with you again. We’ve

made some money.”

The old man had taught the boy to fish and the boy loved him.

“No,” the old man said. “You’re with a lucky boat. Stay with them.”

“But remember how you went eighty-seven days without fish

and then we caught big ones every day for three weeks.”

“I remember,” the old man said. “I know you did not leave me

because you doubted.”

“It was papa made me leave. I am a boy and I must obey him.”

“I know,” the old man said. “It is quite normal.”

“He hasn’t much faith.”

“No,” the old man said. “But we have. Haven’t we?”

“Yes,” the boy said. “Can I offer you a beer on the Terrace and

then we’ll take the stuff home.”

“Why not?” the old man said. “Between fishermen.”

The dialogue is between the old man and the boy, the old man’s only friend. This reveals the boy’s attitude toward the old man. The boy never thinks that Santiago is an unlucky man, that he wants to go with Santiago to the sea. But the old man does not allows him. Notice the boy’s words, “I could go with you again. We’ve made some money,”, “But remember how you went eighty-seven days without fish and then we caught big ones every day for three weeks.”. Notice also how he criticizes his father’s attitude toward the old man, “He hasn’t much faith.”

To conclude this session, dialogue is a method of presenting character on of novel or short story. Noticing the words spoken by the character, we can infer their characterization, their behavior, and their attitude toward something.

1. Toward another character’s Words.

Not only in a prose is fiction, in reality it quite normal when somebody talks about another person, i.e. judging, persecuting, gossiping, etc. In the above dialogue, the boy is talking about his father, his disagreement with his father’s father attitude to the old man.

The other example is from *The Sun Also Rises* by the same author:

Robert Cohen was once middleweight boxing champion of Princeton. Do not think that I am very much impressed by that as a boxing title, but it meant a lot to Cohn. He cared nothing for boxing, in fact he disliked it, but he learned it painfully and thoughtfully to counteract the feeding of inferiority and shyness he had felt on being treated as a Jew at Princeton. There was a certain inner comfort in knowing he could knock down anybody who was snooty to him, although, being shy and a thoroughly nice boy, he never fought except in the gym.

The main character of this novel is the first person *I,* who presents the other character namely Robert Cohen. Robert Cohen, as explain by this character, is a Jew at Princeton who learned to box in order to knock down everybody who was so snooty to him. This first person character does not talk about himself, but another one namely Robert Cohen.

1. Through Setting

Setting refers to the background of the story, both time and space. This can be used to infer the kind of character. For instance, the setting of sleeping room, the owner of clean and neat sleeping might be different from the owner of the dirty and mass sleeping rom.

1. Through the Character’s Words

What a character says may reveal his characteriztion. In *The Old Man and the Sea,* Santiago often talks to himself when he is alone in the middle of the night:

“I wish the boy was here,” he said aloud and settled himself against the rounded planks of the bow and felt the strength of the great fish through the line he held across his shoulders moving steadily toward whatever he had chosen.

 Notice his words, “I wish the boy here.”

This indicates that the old man is lonely, that he needs the other people to help him.

**Motivate**

 Observing people act and talks in reality, we often ask questions to ourselves, such as, “Why do they behave like that?” Or, “What makes him/her says those words, do that, etc?” When asking these questions, when are curious about the motive.

Everybody has his own motive in doing something. The guy at the party who spills a drink and talks loudly and rudely might have motive of drawing attention, or to release their depression due to certain problem.

Characters in a novel or short story are actually the representation of real people. Their words and act must be based on certain motive. Daisy’s motive of marrying Tom Buchanan instead of Gatsby is richness rather than love. When Gatsby comes as a rich man, even richer than his husband, then she tries to develop a relationship with Gatsby. In *The Old Man and the Sea,* the motive of the old man to sail and to catch fish is for self-actualization, i.e. he is not a *salao* or unlucky old man as the people think of him.

What is the character’s motive of doing certain act? It might be economy, a dream of being rich, love, revenge, self-actualization, religious motive, etc. Gatsby’s motive of being rich is to win Daisy’s heart and so it is motive of love. Santiago’s motive of struggle to catch big fish in the middle of the sea is self-actualization.

How to know the motive? Again, we should refer to the method of presenting character by which we can do the characterization. In *The Sun Also Rises*, we can conclude that Cohen’s motive of doing boxing is to knock down anybody who is snooty to him. Or, we should read the story from the beginning until the end. At the end we can conclude what makes the character act certain thing.

**Scene or Setting**

It is explained previously that setting is an element of prose which can be used to determine the type of character. Event in a story, as in reality, of course takes place and time. The questions that often rise are when, where, who, and how? Setting is much more dealt with the questions when and where. The question now what is setting? Kuiper (2012:8) explains that setting is the environment that determines the fictional character’s makeup behavioral and personal dynamic. In other words, it is the milieu in which determines the character’s development through the story.

Why setting determines the character’s development? Normally, character develops in society condition; it is clear in Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises.* The character of this novel, Jake who was suffering due to the war in America travels in Europe. In Spain he watches the bullfight. It is informed that he participated in the war and got wounded in his groin. This makes him miss his manhood that leads him to the inability to marry his girlfriend, Brett. This makes him frustrate and travel and drink a lot and watch bullfight in Spain.

Setting can be inferred as the background of a story, which can be time or space. In *The Old Man and the Sea,* the setting is in beach area in Cuba, in which the old man lives. In *The Great Gatsby,* the setting is New York, a place in USA, in 1950s when American had the so-called American dream, i.e. a dream of being rich.

The social setting can inform us some important thing. It informs us the social condition of the society, their economy, religion, culture, and any other things. Understanding the character’s behavior will be better if we explore this condition. Why does the old man want to catch big fish? Why does Gatsby want to be rich? These questions can be answered well by exploring the social setting of the stories.

In short, setting is the background of the story. It determines the character’s development, and becomes one of methods of character presentation.

**Point of View**

Point of view is a technique of telling story. It can be the first person or the third person. The author who applies the first person point of view use the first person singular *I.* It does not mean that it is himself; however, it is a technique of telling story. In this point of view I is the narrator and involved in the story. Read again the quotation taken from Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises.* I is the character who is playing important role in the story, and at the same time he is one of characters.

Notice the following example taken from Marshall’s *Bad Thing*:

Ted came and found me a little after seven. I was behind the bar, assisting with a backlog of beer orders for the patrons out on deck while they waited to be seated. The Pelican’s seasonal drinks stationis tiny, an area in front of an opening in the wall through to theoutside, and Mazy and I were moving around it with the grace oftwo old farts trying to reverse mobile homes into the same parking space. There’s barely room for one, let alone two, but though Mazyis cute and cool and has as many piercings and tattoos as any youngperson could wish for, she’s a little slow when it comes to grindingout margaritas and cold Budweisers and Diet Cokes, extra ice, nolime. I don’t know what it is about the ocean, and sand, but it makespeople want margaritas. Even in Oregon, in September.

Is the first person always the major character? No, it is not always. Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* applies the first person, but it is not the main character. The main character is Gatsby, whose acting is told by the I.

The second technique is the third person. In this point of view, the narrator is absent in the whole story since the story of about the third person. The character is recognized by his or her name, or by the singular personal pronounces he or she. The good example is Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea.* The third person involved in this story is the Old Man, while the narrator is absent in the story.

 From what point of view does the author tells the story? This can be answered by reading the novel or short story itself. Notice whether or not the narrator I is involved in the story, or whether the author present the third person as the character. This is a good way of recognizing the point of view as the narrative technique.

Theme

 Theme is the the idea of a story. It is first reason of an author to write (Robert & Jacobs, 1987: 318). When an author is planning to write, he has an idea to be comunicated communicated. When reading a story, we often have some questions, such as what is the story about? Or what does the story mean? This question refers to the idea or theme of a story. Finding theme, we should read the whole story, from the beginning to the end.

 Unlike theme of article which is stated directly, theme in story is stated indirectly. An author will exploit the aspects of story to present his theme. In other words, every aspect of story, plot, action, character, symbol, dialogue is arranged to establish theme. What the character does, what he says, etc. are the symbol of theme. Thus, when the old man is sailing alone and catching a big fish successfully, is the symbol of man’s struggle to gain a success. Gatsby’s action of doing illegal business is meant to present the idea of the dream to be rich.

 How to find theme? It is discussed previously that all the elements of story are meant to established theme. Hence, we can find theme by exploring all of the elements. We must be able to relate the elements to each another.

 Based on above paragraph, here are some keys. First, theme stated directly by the narrator. Narrator is the person who narrates the story, or the author’s unnamed speaker. In some stories, we often find the narrator who states the theme or tells the reader the idea of the story.

 Second, theme stated by character. Character, first person of the third person, expresses his feeling idea. The Old Man often says “Every day is a new day.” This is meant that he hope a success, a new success. This is also the symbol of spirit of being successful despite his old age.

 Third, theme stated through figurative language. The author often applies figurative language to present some important ideas. This is applied by the author in order to draw the reader’s attention, or to bring impression to the reader of its importance. The reader then will recognize it as an important statement of the theme.

 However, the complete theme is represented by the work itself. It has been discussed previously that all the elements are the presentation of the theme. Thus, we can still recognize the theme or idea by reading the entire story although it is not stated directly. In other words, theme is often stated directly; it is implied the story itself. Thus, we have to read the entire story in order to recognize the theme.

 Take, *The Old Man and the Sea* as an example. Santiago’s statement that every day is a new day may symbolize the hope. However, it is not an adequate recognition of the theme. When we read that the people underestimate him at the beginning, finally come to the end of the story in which he finally catch the big fish successfully, but brings it unsuccessfully to the beach, and the people admire his braver and ability to catch the fish, we then can infer that the theme is the hope of success in gaining self-actualization. Santiago’s adventure in the middle of the sea symbolizes the struggle for self-actualization.

Tone

 Tone is the author’ attitude that reveals in the story. The attitude might be symphatic, anger, ironyetc. A reader hopes that the tone come across to the reader.The attitude is reflected by the story as a whole. The reader should be aware the elements of story, i.e. character, plot, setting, and the language use. Consider the novel *The Old Man and The Sea.* All the elements of the prose applied in this novel reveals Hemingway’s attitude to his main character, Santiago. The boy’s attitude toward Santiago, the people’s attitude to him at the beginning and the end of the story, the old man’s words when talking alone in the middle of the sea, all reveal the author’s attitude.

 What is the importance of recognizing the tone? It is to grasp the theme of the story, the message. By recognizing Hemingway’s tone in *The Old Man and the Sea* we can recognize that he wants to tell us the vitality of man, the need of being recognized as hero.

 To conclude, tone is an important aspect of prose fiction which is revealed by the story as a whole. It is reflected by the elements of prose and readers need to recognize it to find the theme.

***Chinua Achebe***

THE SACRIFICIAL EGG

Julius Obi sat gazing at his typewriter. The fat Chief Clerk, his boss, was snoring at his table. Outside, the gatekeeper in his green uniform was sleeping at his post. You couldn't blame him; no customer had passed through the gate for nearly a week. There was an empty basket on the giant weighing machine. A few palm-kernels lay desolately in the dust around the machine. Only the flies remained in strength.

Julius went to the window that overlooked the great market on the bank of the River Niger. This market, though still called Nkwo, had long spilled over into Eke, Oye, and Afo with the coming of civilization and the growth of the town into a big palm-oil port. In spite of this encroachment, however, it was still busiest on its original Nkwo day, because the deity who had presided over it from antiquity still cast her spell only on her own day—let men in their greed spill over themselves. It was said that she appeared in the form of an old woman in the centre of the market just before cock-crow and waved her magic fan in the four directions of the earth—in front of her, behind her, to the right and to the left—to draw to the market men and women from distant places. And they came bringing the produce of their lands—palm-oil and kernels, kola nuts, cassava,mats, baskets and earthenware pots; and took home many-coloured cloths, smoked fish, iron pots and plates. These were the forest peoples. The other half of the world who lived by the great rivers came down also—by canoe, bringing yams and fish. Sometimes it was a big canoe with a dozen or more people in it; sometimes it was a lone fisherman and his wife in a small vessel from the swiftflowing Anambara. They moored their canoe on the bank and sold their fish, after much haggling. The woman then walked up the steep banks of the river to the heart of the market to buy salt and oil and, if the sales had been very good, even a length of cloth. And for her children at home she bought bean cakes and mai-mai which the Igara women cooked. As evening approached, they took up their paddles again and paddled away, the water shimmering in the sunset and their canoe becoming smaller and smaller in the distance until it was just a dark crescent on the water's face and two dark bodies swaying forwards and backwards in it. Umuru then was the meeting place of the forest people who were called Igbo and the alien riverain folk whom the Igbo called Olu and beyond whom the world stretched in indefiniteness.

Julius Obi was not a native of Umuru. He had come like countless others from some bush village inland. Having passed his Standard Six in a mission school he had come to Umuru to work as a clerk in the offices of the all-powerful European trading company which bought palm-kernels at its own price and sold cloth and metalware, also at its own price. The offices were situated beside the famous market so that in his first two or three weeks Julius had to learn to work within its huge enveloping hum. Sometimes when the Chief Clerk was away he walked to the window and looked down on the vast anthill activity. Most of these people were not there yesterday, he thought, and yet the market had been just as full. There must be many, many people in the world to be able to fill the market day after day like this. Of course they say not all who came to the great market were real people. Janet's mother, Ma, had said so.

"Some of the beautiful young women you see squeezing through the crowds are not people like you or me but mammy-wota who have their town in the depths of the river," she said. "You can always tell them, because they are beautiful with a beauty that is too perfect and too cold. You catch a glimpse of her with the tail of your eye, then you blink and look properly, but she has already vanished in the crowd."

Julius thought about these things as he now stood at the window looking down on the silent, empty market. Who would have believed that the great boisterous market could ever be quenched like this? But such was the strength of Kitikpa, the incarnate power of smallpox. Only he could drive away all those people and leave the market to the flies.

When Umuru was a little village, there was an age-grade who swept its market-square every Nkwo day. But progress had turned it into a busy, sprawling, crowded and dirty river port, a no-man's-land where strangers outnumbered by far the sons of the soil, who could do nothing about it except shake their heads at this gross perversion of their prayer. For indeed they had prayed—who will blame them—for their town to grow and prosper. And it had grown. But there is good growth and there is bad growth. The belly does not bulge out only with food and drink; it might be the abominable disease which would end by sending its sufferer out of the house even before he was fully dead.

The strangers who came to Umuru came for trade and money, not in search of duties to perform, for they had those in plenty back home in their village which was real home.

And as if this did not suffice, the young sons and daughters of Umuru soil, encouraged by schools and churches were behaving no better than the strangers. They neglected all their old tasks and kept only the revelries. Such was the state of the town when Kitikpa came to see it and to demand the sacrifice the inhabitants owed the gods of the soil. He came in confident knowledge of the terror he held over the people. He was an evil deity, and boasted it. Lest he be offended those he killed were not killed but decorated, and no one dared weep for them. He put an end to the coming and going between neighbours and between villages. They said, "Kitikpa is in that village," and immediately it was cut off by its neighbours.

Julius was sad and worried because it was almost a week since he had seen Janet, the girl he was going to marry. Ma had explained to him very gently that he should no longer go to see them "until this thing is over, by the power of Jehovah." (Ma was a very devout Christian convert and one reason why she approved of Julius for her only daughter was that he sang in the choir of the CMS church.)

"You must keep to your rooms," she had said in hushed tones, for Kitikpa strictly forbade any noise or boisterousness. "You never know whom you might meet on the streets. That family has got it." She lowered her voice even more and pointed surreptitiously at the house across the road whose doorway was barred with a yellow palm-frond. "He has decorated one of them already and the rest were moved away today in a big government lorry."

Janet walked a short way with Julius and stopped; so he stopped too. They seemed to have nothing to say to each other yet they lingered on. Then she said goodnight and he said goodnight. And they shook hands, which was very odd, as though parting for the night were something new and grave.

He did not go straight home, because he wanted desperately to cling, even alone, to this strange parting. Being educated he was not afraid of whom he might meet, so he went to the bank of the river and just walked up and down it. He must have been there a long time because he was still there when the wooden gong of the night-mask sounded. He immediately set out for home, half-walking and half-running, for night-masks were not a matter of superstition; they were real. They chose the night for their revelry because like the bat's their ugliness was great.

In his hurry he stepped on something that broke with a slight liquid explosion. He stopped and peeped down at the footpath. The moon was not up yet but there was a faint light in the sky which showed that it would not be long delayed. In this half-light he saw that he had stepped on an egg offered in sacrifice. Someone oppressed by misfortune had brought the offering to the crossroads in the dusk. And he had stepped on it. There were the usual young palm-fronds around it. But Julius saw it differently as a house where the terrible artist was at work. He wiped the sole of his foot on the sandy path and hurried away, carrying another vague worry in his mind. But hurrying was no use now; the fleet-footed mask was already abroad. Perhaps it was impelled to hurry by

the threatening imminence of the moon. Its voice rose high and clear in the still night air like a flaming sword. It was yet a long way away, but Julius knew that distances vanished before it. So he made straight for the cocoyam farm beside the road and threw himself on his belly, in the shelter of the broad leaves. He had hardly done this when he heard the rattling staff of the spirit and a thundering stream of esoteric speech. He shook all over. The sounds came bearing down on him, almost pressing his face into the moist earth. And now he could hear the footsteps. It was as if twenty evil men were running together. Panic sweat broke all over him and he was nearly impelled to get up and run. Fortunately he kept a firm hold on himself . . . In no time at all the commotion in the air and on the earth—the thunder and torrential rain, the earthquake and flood—passed and disappeared in the distance on the other side of the road. The next morning, at the office the Chief Clerk, a son of the soil spoke bitterly about last night's provocation of Kitikpa by the headstrong youngsters who had launched the noisy fleet-footed mask in defiance of their elders, who knew that Kitikpa would be enraged, and then . . .

The trouble was that the disobedient youths had never yet experienced the power of Kitikpa themselves; they had only heard of it. But soon they would learn.

As Julius stood at the window looking out on the emptied market he lived through the terror of that night again. It was barely a week ago but already it seemed like another life, separated from the present by a vast emptiness. This emptiness deepened with every passing day. On this side of it stood Julius, and on the other Ma and Janet whom the dread artist decorated.

Before I Loved You

Carolyn Lewis

*What do you make of that?* That’s what I wanted to ask you when I saw two women on the Downs today. Everything they wore was black: their plump legs were squeezed into

leggings and they both wore polo-necked sweaters and a tabard tunic. Even their shoes were black. They were throwing chunks of bread to a flock of birds and, as the women threw the bread, the birds jostled and fought, trying to catch each piece before it hit the ground. It looked such an odd picture to me: the sky full of black-winged screaming birds, and the two women dressed in black, silently feeding them.

Where did the women come from? Was that a uniform they wore? One of the women, had thick, blonde streaks in her hair and wore a lot of make-up: glittery blue eye shadow, lips glistened with a scarlet gloss. The birds’ beaks were wide open, searching for the bread, their raucous shrieks splitting the air and the women’s mouth gaped open, mirroring the beaks of the birds as they hurled the bread into the skies.

When all the bread was gone the women walked slowly in silence back to their car. They strapped themselves in, their heads almost touching as they bent over seat belts. Then they drove off, a dull, grey cloud of exhaust fumes trailing behind, like a tired flag.

What do you make of that? I wanted to ask you, to hear what your answer would be. Then we’d have talked about what the women did and why were they so silent? We’d make up stories about them. Where did they live and in what sort of houses? We’d have fantasised about affairs, joked about steamed-up windows and passionate embraces on the back seats of family saloons. There would be empty Coke cans on the dashboard, crisp packets in the glove compartment. We’d have invented lives for those women, the bird women up on the Downs. That’s what we would have done.

I still *talk* to you. Wherever I go the conversations rattle around in my head. You *came* with me on the Downs; we looked at the changing colours of the leaves, we watched the joggers, grinned as they puffed their way past us. I hear your voice in my head the whole time. When I sat in the dentist’s chair, are you ok? Did that hurt? You are with me when I went shopping, because I could ask you things, things like What about fish for tea? You were there when I tried clothes on in the changing rooms of posh department stores, peering out from behind curtains, the ones with the gaps at the side, what do you think of this? Do I need a bigger size? You are always with me, but only in my head.

It started the first day I met you, when your hand stretched out to touch mine.

“Hello,” you said and then you smiled, the lines around your eyes deepening and hinting at something. Your smile came with me, I took it wherever I went, carrying it in my head, on the bus home, lying in bed, tucking it underneath my pillow.

I imagined you at home at night, living in a flat,drinking beer from cans and never, ever, did I see you with another girl. What do you do on Saturday nights? Where do you go? Can I come with you? Having you inside my head made me brave, bold, asking questions because there was no fear of rejection. I began to tell you all about my life at home, my mum, my dad, the fights I had with my sister. She borrows my clothes and steals my friends. She couldn’t steal you, you were mine and nobody knew about

you. You always understood, you were my ally, my secret friend.

I spent my days watching you, watching your long strides through the corridors. I heard the creak of your leather jacket as you stretched up to push the hair out of your eyes. Your hair needs cutting, or do you like it that long? All through those long working day at my first job, a newspaper office full of stories of courtroom battles football matches, golden wedding anniversaries and murders, I watched you and told you all about my dreams. Things I had never mentioned to anyone before. You listened to me, listened to all the words I carried with me.

Our working days were frantic, exhilarating and fraught. Working alongside you, phones rang incessantly, shouted arguments ricocheted around the room. Whenever I passed you, rushing from one desk to another, papers flying, my heels clicking on the floor, I wanted your approval, I needed your approval. How am I doing? What do you think of this?

Don’t you see, I thought I already knew you.

Then, tentatively, gently and so softly you began smiling at me. A look from you across the room made the day sunny. I could smile at you too and then I began to know you. We laughed together, we exchanged glances when a new story broke, we shared confidences and then we really did begin to talk. When you were inside my head my words had bounced, they sparkled, they were light, precise and so clever and I grew afraid that *outside*, away from my secret world, you’d find my words dull, heavy and slow. I wanted to keep you inside. You were safe there, I was safe there, I was strong.

But then, working on a murder story, a front page drama harrowing in every detail, quite suddenly you asked,

“Fancy a drink?”

My voice, quiet and hesitant: `Yes, please.’ I’d thought my inner conversations with you had taught me all there was to know. But, locked inside my head was only a tiny part of you. We began to discover each other and you talked, really talked, to me. Your words were clear and strong, they encouraged me, taught me to think and argue, they gave me confidence and strength. When you were inside, locked away in my head, all that time I *talked* to you, my words had been sharpened, now they were like swords, shiny, steel-edged. I cut through arguments, slashed away at my fear and nervousness. With you I could shine. My confidence soared.

*You spoke to me of travelling. Africa, America, driving through France, the* Swiss Alps, and your words brought the world into my head. When you spoke, I could *see* everything, smell the sea, touch the flowers. I could taste the local wine and feel the heat.

“Come with me, I want you to see these places with me.” Before you, the world was what I could see or touch. With you I could go anywhere. You said it all the time,

“There’s nothing to stop you.” Nothing did stop me and I moved into your strong, confident world.

“Look at this, look at the view,” I said all the time, all the time we travelled together, forgetting that you had seen it before. What I meant to say was, look at it now, with me.

You were right, you’d been right all along. I could do it. talked wherever we went, sitting up late in a smoky French bar, walking back to our hotel through night-dulled skies. Driving over mountain passes, tramping through snowfilled fields. We sailed past the Statue of Liberty, my gaze holding yours as the ferryboat moved alongside.

We invented lives for the people we saw around us; the couples sitting in uneasy silence, the women whose faces were slick with unaccustomed make-up, the solitary man in a busy restaurant, fingers tugging and turning at a worn wedding band. Newly together, happiness freshly minted, arrogance born from our delight, we gave new lives to those around us. We proffered happiness to others, changed lives, giving hope and excitement, making a difference. We were together, invincible, unique. No one has ever felt like this – how could they? We fitted together, two halves of a magical being. We invested some of our magic, we could afford to, we had so much.

Before I loved you, you’d been my ally, my secret friend. Now that I loved you, you gave me even more, more strength, more courage. Working together, our days were heady and full. Our careers grew, my confidence, long lost and stunted became strong. I was assigned to cover major news stories and my opinion was sought, my views were listened to. I echoed your words, *I can do this.* My name appeared in print, I was praised for my work, my professionalism, my skill.

Watch me! Like a child calling out for parental approval, I still needed your mantle of protection. What do you think of this? Does this work? Tell me! Am I any good?

Your words assured me. They nurtured and strengthened me and then, slowly, for the first time in my life, I began to recognise my own strength. You’d known all the time what I could do. “Just do it,” you counselled, “don’t ask, just do it.” And I did. Weeks travelled so fast, my life changed as fast as I changed. But not you. Why could I not see that you remained the same?

Tell me what to do. My newly honed confidence had been noticed and I was approached. A prominent newspaper, spoken about in reverential whispers, dangled titles and money: features editor, chief reporter, take your pick.

What shall I do? Tell me what to do. You were solid, an island as I began the storm. I moved around you, crashing, whirling, demanding. Tell me!

`Do what you want to do - stay here or go.’

`If I go, will you come with me? Come with me!’

You shook your head, your long blond hair tumbling around your face, hiding your eyes. No, you choose. Make your own decisions. I can’t help you with this one.

Before I loved you my choices were hollow. My world was small, contained and narrow. But now? But now I wavered, my new strength seeping, leaving me. Help me, tell me what to do. You held me, your arms around my shoulders. I felt your warmth, your love. `Believe in yourself, make this decision on your own. Choose what’s right for you.’

Whilst you were hidden in my head, locked inside me, you shared my dreams, you’d listened with love and compassion but you didn’t listen now. You were tired of my tears and arguments, my sulking silences and demands. I grew angry, stamping like a petulant child, my anger growing in its intensity. You’d let me down, you wouldn’t help me any more. I had to do this on my own. I would do it on my own. I didn’t need you, they wanted me not you.

“I don’t need you.” The words hung in the air, they shimmered over our heads like violent heat, warping feelings and what I wanted to say to you. I wanted to whisper, I’m sorry. I needed to retrieve what I’d lost, what had been damaged. You knew that, your face with its lopsided smile, the long hair flying around, the understanding in your eyes. You knew. All that time that you were locked inside my head, all that time before I loved you, all those times when I talked to you. You were talking to me now. I heard the unspoken dialogue, the silent words. You knew. You knew what I wanted to say, but you wouldn’t let me say it. You left me with that.

You left me at the station, a strained goodbye, eyes not meeting, a hurried embrace. We both knew but you wouldn’t let me voice it. I’m sorry, let me put it right.

Those whispered words were finally drowned by the scream of the train. Leaving you.

My new life was busy, shiny-bright with promises. New friends, new stories, a new life in a world crowding into the spaces where you used to be. I filled those spaces and I was sought after, lauded, I was in demand. Look at me, see what I can do now. But you couldn’t see me, you weren’t there. You weren’t anywhere, not locked inside my head because you’d gone from there too. I couldn’t find you.

I don’t need you! I’d shouted, yelled those words at you. But I did need you. My new world was brittle, new friendships shallow, glitter blinded me. I didn’t see the hollows underneath. Their lights shone, beacons for me to follow. Promises of success, excitement, fast heady lives. Empty lives. There was nothing there, nothing underneath.

Where are you?

I tried to reach you, to phone, to talk to you. You’d gone. I’m sorry, please talk to me. I was wrong and I made a mistake. I watched others at parties, in restaurants, smiling when eyes met mine. I sent you messages, secret codes, hidden away again, locked inside my head. You didn’t hear me, the words echoed, my new life echoed too. There were only hollow sounds. I’ve made a mistake. I’m sorry.

I came back to find you. Where are you? Travelling back, listening to the rhythmic wheels of the train, sitting still, eyes closed, words tumbling in my head. Where are you?

I go to the places we knew. Your flat is empty and cold, the Downs are bleak, dead leaves rattle at my feet. The newsroom is noisy, energetic, desks are crowded and the phones ring out constantly but I can’t see you. I don’t hear the creak of your leather jacket, I don’t see you striding to greet me. I can’t see you. Where are you?

I close my eyes again, squeezing the lids tight, banishing light from my inside my head, leaving only room for you. Can you hear me?

 I choose words, testing, discarding. I need words that will reach you, find you.

Can you hear me? Where are you?

Source: Rachel Loosmore: Sexy Shorts for Lovers: A collection of short stories

Guiding questions

The following questions are guiding to comprehend the story.

1. What is the main character of this story?
2. What is the point of view of this story?
3. What happened to the main character?
4. What is meant by the words *With you I could shine* ?
5. Is this story happe neding or sad ending?

Maria Concepcion

Katherine Anne Porter

Maria Concepcion walked carefully, keeping to the middle of the white dusty road, where the maguey thorns and the treacherous curved spines of organ cactus had not gathered so profusely. She would have enjoyed resting for a moment in the dark shade by the roadside, but she had no time to waste drawing cactus needles from her feet. Juan and his chief would be waiting for their food in the damp trenches of the buried city.

She carried about a dozen living fowls slung over her right shoulder, their feet fastened together. Half of them fell upon the flat of her back, the balance dangled uneasily over her breast. They wriggled their benumbed and swollen legs against her neck, they twisted their stupefied eyes and peered into her face inquiringly. She did not see them or think of them. Her left arm was tired with the weight of the food basket, and she was hungry after her long morning’s work.

Her straight back outlined itself strongly under her clean bright blue cotton rebozo. Instinctive serenity softened her black eyes, shaped like almonds, set far apart, and tilted a bit endwise. She walked with the free, natural, guarded ease of the primitive

woman carrying an unborn child. The shape of her body was easy, the swelling life was not a distortion, but the right inevitable proportions of a woman. She was entirely contented. Her husband was at work and she was on her way to market to sell her fowls.

Her small house sat half-way up a shallow hill, under a clump of pepper-trees, a wall of organ cactus enclosing it on the side nearest to the road. Now she came down into the valley, divided by the narrow spring, and crossed a bridge of loose stones near the hut where Maria Rosa the beekeeper lived with her old godmother, Lupe the medicine woman. Maria Concepcion had no faith in the charred owl bones, the singed rabbit fur, the cat entrails, the messes and ointments sold by Lupe to the ailing of the village. She was a good Christian, and drank simple herb teas for headache and stomachache, or bought her remedies bottled, with printed directions that she could not read, at the drugstore near the city market, where she went almost daily. But she often bought a jar of honey from young Maria Rosa, a pretty, shy child only fifteen years old.

Maria Concepcion and her husband, Juan Villegas, were each a little past their eighteenth year. She had a good reputation with the neighbors as an energetic religious woman who could drive a bargain to the end. It was commonly known that if she wished to buy a new rebozo for herself or a shirt for Juan, she could bring

out a sack of hard silver coins for the purpose.

She had paid for the license, nearly a year ago, the potent bit of stamped paper which permits people to be married in the church. She had given money to the priest before she and Juan walked together up to the altar the Monday after Holy Week. It had been the adventure of the villagers to go, three Sundays one after another, to hear the banns called by the priest for Juan de Dios Villegas and Maria Concepcion Manriquez, who were actually getting married in the church, instead of behind it, which was the usual custom, less expensive, and as binding as any other ceremony. But Maria Concepcion was always as proud as if she owned a hacienda.

She paused on the bridge and dabbled her feet in the water, her eyes resting themselves from the sun-rays in a fixed gaze to the far-off mountains, deeply blue under their hanging drift of clouds. It came to her that she would like a fresh crust of honey. The delicious aroma of bees, their slow thrilling hum, awakened a pleasant desire for a flake of sweetness in her mouth.

“If I do not eat it now, I shall mark my child,” she thought, peering through the crevices in the thick hedge of cactus that sheered up nakedly, like bared knife blades set protectingly around the small clearing. The place was so silent she doubted if Maria Rosa and Lupe were at home.

The leaning jacal of dried rush-withes and corn sheaves, boundto tall saplings thrust into the earth, roofed with yellowed maguey leaves flattened and overlapping like shingles, hunched drowsy and fragrant in the warmth of noonday. The hives, similarly made, were scattered towards the back of the clearing, like small mounds of clean vegetable refuse. Over each mound there hung a dusty golden shimmer of bees.

A light gay scream of laughter rose from behind the hut; a man’s short laugh joined in. “Ah, hahahaha!” went the voices together high and low, like a song.

“So Maria Rosa has a man!” Maria Concepcion stopped short, smiling, shifted her burden slightly, and bent forward shading her eyes to see more clearly through the spaces of the hedge.

Maria Rosa ran, dodging between beehives, parting two stunted jasmine bushes as she came, lifting her knees in swift leaps, looking over her shoulder and laughing in a quivering, excited way. A heavy jar, swung to her wrist by the handle, knocked against her thighs as she ran. Her toes pushed up sudden spurts of dust, her half-raveled braids showered around her shoulders in long crinkled wisps.

Juan Villegas ran after her, also laughing strangely, his teeth set, both rows gleaming behind the small soft black beard growing sparsely on his lips, his chin, leaving his brown cheeks girlsmooth. When he seized her, he clenched so hard her chemise gave way and ripped from her shoulder. She stopped laughing at this, pushed him away and stood silent, trying to pull up the torn sleeve with one hand. Her pointed chin and dark red mouth moved in an uncertain way, as if she wished to laugh again; her long black lashes flickered with the quick-moving lights in her hidden eyes.

Maria Concepcion did not stir nor breathe for some seconds. Her forehead was cold, and yet boiling water seemed to be pouring slowly along her spine. An unaccountable pain was in her knees, as if they were broken. She was afraid Juan and Maria Rosa would feel her eyes fixed upon them and would find her there, unable to move, spying upon them. But they did not pass beyond the enclosure, nor even glance towards the gap in the wall opening upon the road.

Juan lifted one of Maria Rosa’s loosened braids and slapped her neck with it playfully. She smiled softly, consentingly. Together they moved back through the hives of honey-comb. Maria Rosa balanced her jar on one hip and swung her long full petticoats with every step. Juan flourished his wide hat back and forth, walking proudly as a game-cock.

Maria Concepcion came out of the heavy cloud which enwrapped her head and bound her throat, and found herself walking onward, keeping the road without knowing it, feeling her way delicately, her ears strumming as if all Maria Rosa’s bees had hived in them. Her careful sense of duty kept her moving toward the buried city where Juan’s chief, the American archaeologist, was taking his midday rest, waiting for his food.

Juan and Maria Rosa! She burned all over now, as if a layer of tiny fig-cactus bristles, as cruel as spun glass, had crawled under her skin. She wished to sit down quietly and wait for her death, but not until she had cut the throats of her man and that girl who were laughing and kissing under the cornstalks. Once when she was a young girl she had come back from market to find her jacal burned to a pile of ash and her few silver coins gone. A dark empty feeling had filled her; she kept moving about the place, not believing her eyes, expecting it all to take shape again before her. But it was gone, and though she knew an enemy had done it, she could not find out who it was, and could only curse and threaten the air. Now here was a worse thing, but she knew her enemy. Maria Rosa, that sinful girl, shameless! She heard herself saying a harsh, true word about Maria Rosa, saying it aloud as if she expected someone to agree with her: “Yes, she is a whore! She has no right to live.”

At this moment the gray untidy head of Givens appeared over the edges of the newest trench he had caused to be dug in his field of excavations. The long deep crevasses, in which a man mighttand without being seen, lay crisscrossed like orderly gashes of a giant scalpel. Nearly all of the men of the community worked for Givens, helping him to uncover the lost city of their ancestors. They worked all the year through and prospered, digging every day for those small clay heads and bits of pottery and fragments of painted walls for which there was no good use on earth, being all broken and encrusted with clay. They themselves could make better ones, perfectly stout and new, which they took to town and peddled to foreigners for real money. But the unearthly delight of the chief in finding these worn-out things was an endless puzzle. He would fairly roar for joy at times, waving a shattered pot or a human skull above his head, shouting for his photographer to come and make a picture of this!

Now he emerged, and his young enthusiast’s eyes welcomed Maria Concepcion from his old-man face, covered with hard wrinkles and burned to the color of red earth. “I hope you’ve brought me a nice fat one.” He selected a fowl from the bunch dangling nearest him as Maria Concepcion, wordless, leaned over the trench. “Dress it for me, there’s a good girl. I’ll broil it.”

Maria Concepcion took the fowl by the head, and silently, swiftly drew her knife across its throat, twisting the head off with the casual firmness she might use with the top of a beet.

“Good God, woman, you do have nerve,” said Givens, watching her. “I can’t do that. It gives me the creeps.” “My home country is Guadalajara,” explained Maria Concepcion, without bravado, as she picked and gutted the fowl.

She stood and regarded Givens condescendingly, that diverting white man who had no woman of his own to cook for him, and moreover appeared not to feel any loss of dignity in preparing his own food. He squatted now, eyes squinted, nose wrinkled to avoid the smoke, turning the roasting fowl busily on a stick. A mysterious man, undoubtedly rich, and Juan’s chief, therefore to be respected, to be placated.

“The tortillas are fresh and hot, senor,” she murmured gently.

“With your permission I will now go to market.”

“Yes, yes, run along; bring me another of these tomorrow.”

Givens turned his head to look at her again. Her grand manner sometimes reminded him of royalty in exile. He noticed her unnatural paleness. “The sun is too hot, eh?” he asked.

“Yes, sir. Pardon me, but Juan will be here soon?”

“He ought to be here now. Leave his food. The others will eat it.”

She moved away; the blue of her rebozo became a dancing spot in the heat waves that rose from the gray-red soil. Givens liked his Indians best when he could feel a fatherly indulgence for their primitive childish ways. He told comic stories of Juan’s escapades, of how often he had saved him, in the past five years, from going to jail, and even from being shot, for his varied and always unexpected misdeeds.

“I am never a minute too soon to get him out of one pickle or another,” he would say. “Well, he’s a good worker, and I know how to manage him.”

After Juan was married, he used to twit him, with exactly the right shade of condescension, on his many infidelities to Maria Concepcion. “She’ll catch you yet, and God help you!” he wasfond of saying, and Juan would laugh with immense pleasure.

It did not occur to Maria Concepcion to tell Juan she had found him out. During the day her anger against him died, and her anger against Maria Rosa grew. She kept saying to herself, “When I was a young girl like Maria Rosa, if a man had caught hold of me so, I would have broken my jar over his head.” She forgot completely that she had not resisted even so much as Maria Rosa, on the day that Juan had first taken hold of her. Besides she had married him afterwards in the church, and that was a very different thing.

Juan did not come home that night, but went away to war and Maria Rosa went with him. Juan had a rifle at his shoulder and two pistols at his belt. Maria Rosa wore a rifle also, slung on her back along with the blankets and the cooking pots. They joined the nearest detachment of troops in the field, and Maria Rosa marched ahead with the battalion of experienced women of war, which went over the crops like locusts, gathering provisions for the army. She cooked with them, and ate with them what was left after the men had eaten. After battles she went out on the field with the others to salvage clothing and ammunition and guns from the slain before they should begin to swell in the heat. Sometimes they would encounter the women from the other army, and a second battle as grim as the first would take place.

There was no particular scandal in the village. People shrugged, grinned. It was far better that they were gone. The neighbors went around saying that Maria Rosa was safer in the army than she would be in the same village with Maria Concepcion.

Maria Concepcion did not weep when Juan left her; and when the baby was born, and died within four days, she did not weep.

“She is mere stone,” said old Lupe, who went over and offered charms to preserve the baby.

“May you rot in hell with your charms,” said Maria Concepcion. If she had not gone so regularly to church, lighting candles before the saints, kneeling with her arms spread in the form of a cross for hours at a time, and receiving holy communion every month, there might have been talk of her being devil-possessed, her face was so hanged and blind-looking. But this was impossible when, after all, she had been married by the priest. It must be, they reasoned, that she was being punished for her pride. They decided that this was the true cause for everything: she was altogether too proud. So they pitied her.

During the year that Juan and Maria Rosa were gone Maria Concepcion sold her fowls and looked after her garden and her sack of hard coins grew. Lupe had no talent for bees, and the hives did not prosper. She began to blame Maria Rosa for running away, and to praise Maria Concepcion for her behavior. She used to see Maria Concepcion at the market or at church, and she always said that no one could tell by looking at her now that she was a woman who had such a heavy grief.

“I pray God everything goes well with Maria Concepcion from this out,” she would say, “for she has had her share of trouble.”

When some idle person repeated this to the deserted woman, she went down to Lupe’s house and stood within the clearing and called to the medicine woman, who sat in her doorway stirring a mess of her infallible cure for sores: “Keep your prayers to yourself, Lupe, or offer them for others who need them. I will ask God for what I want in this world.”

“And will you get it, you think, Maria Concepcion?” asked Lupe, tittering cruelly and smelling the wooden mixing spoon.

“Did you pray for what you have now?”

Afterward everyone noticed that Maria Concepcion went oftener to church, and even seldomer to the village to talk with the other women as thev sat alone the curb, nursing their babies and eating

But Maria Concepcion lived alone. She was gaunt, as if something were gnawing her away inside, her eyes were sunken, and she would not speak a word if she could help it. She worked harder than ever, and her butchering knife was scarcely ever out of her hand.

Juan and Maria Rosa, disgusted with military life, came home one day without asking permission of anyone. The field of war had unrolled itself, a long scroll of vexations, until the end had frayed out within twenty miles of Juan’s village. So he and Maria Rosa, now lean as a wolf, burdened with a child daily expected, set out with no farewells to the regiment and walked home.

They arrived one morning about daybreak. Juan was picked up on sight by a group of military police from the small barracks on the edge of town, and taken to prison, where the officer in charge told him with impersonal cheerfulness that he would add one to a catch of ten waiting to be shot as deserters the next morning.

Maria Rosa, screaming and falling on her face in the road, was taken under the armpits by two guards and helped briskly to her jacal, now sadly run down. She was received with professional importance by Lupe, who helped the baby to be born at once.

Limping with foot soreness, a layer of dust concealing his fine new clothes got mysteriously from somewhere, Juan appeared before the captain at the barracks. The captain recognized him as head digger for his good friend Givens, and dispatched a note to Givens saying: “I am holding the person of Juan Villegas awaiting

your further disposition.”

When Givens showed up Juan was delivered to him with the urgent request that nothing be made public about so humane and sensible an operation on the part of military authority.

Juan walked out of the rather stifling atmosphere of the drumhead court, a definite air of swagger about him. His hat, of unreasonable dimensions and embroidered with silver thread, hung over one eyebrow, secured at the back by a cord of silver dripping with bright blue tassels. His shirt was of a checkerboard pattern in green and black, his white cotton trousers were bound by a belt of yellow leather tooled in red. His feet were bare, full of stone bruises, and sadly ragged as to toenails. He removed his cigarette from the corner of his full-lipped wide mouth. He removed the splendid hat. His black dusty hair, pressed moistly to his forehead, sprang up suddenly in a cloudy thatch on his crown. He bowed to the officer, who appeared to be gazing at a vacuum. He swung his arm wide in a free circle upsoaring towards the prison window, where forlorn heads poked over the window sill, hot eyes following after the lucky departing one. Two or three of the heads nodded, and a half dozen hands were flipped at him in an effort to imitate his own casual and heady manner.

Juan kept up this insufferable pantomime until they rounded the first clump of fig-cactus. Then he seized Givens’ hand and burst into oratory. “Blessed be the day your servant Juan Villegas first came under your eyes. From this day my life is yours without condition, ten thousand thanks with all my heart!”

“For God’s sake stop playing the fool,” said Givens irritably.

“Some day I’m going to be five minutes too late.”

“Well, it is nothing much to be shot, my chief—certainly you know I was not afraid—but to be shot in a drove of deserters, against a cold wall, just in the moment of my home-coming, by order of that . . .”

Glittering epithets tumbled over one another like explosions of a rocket. All the scandalous analogies from the animal and vegetable worlds were applied in a vivid, unique and personal way to the life, loves, and family history of the officer who had just set him free. When he had quite cursed himself dry, and his nerves were soothed, he added: “With your permission, my chief!”

“What will Maria Concepcion say to all this?” asked Givens.

“You are very informal, Juan, for a man who was married in the

church.”

Juan put on his hat.

“Oh, Maria Concepcion! That’s nothing. Look, my chief, to be married in the church is a great misfortune for a man. After that he is not himself any more. How can that woman complain when I do not drink even at fiestas enough to be really drunk? I do not beat her; never, never. We were always at peace. I say to her, Come here, and she comes straight. I say, Go there, and she goes quickly. Yet sometimes I looked at her and thought, Now I am married to that woman in the church, and I felt a sinking inside, as if something were lying heavy on my stomach. With Maria Rosa it is all different. She is not silent; she talks. When she talks too much, I slap her and say, Silence, thou simpleton! And she weeps. She is just a girl with whom I do as I please. You know how she used to keep those clean little bees in their hives? She is like their honey to me. I swear it. I would not harm Maria Concepcion because I am married to her in the church; but also, my chief, I will not leave Maria Rosa, because she pleases me more than any other woman.”

“Let me tell you, Juan, things haven’t been going as well as you think. You be careful. Some day Maria Concepcion will just take your head off with that carving knife of hers. You keep that in mind.”

Juan’s expression was the proper blend of masculine triumph and sentimental melancholy. It was pleasant to see himself in the role of hero to two such desirable women. He had just escaped from the threat of a disagreeable end. His clothes were new and handsome, and they had cost him just nothing. Maria Rosa had collected them for him here and there after battles. He was walking in the early sunshine, smelling the good smells of ripening cactus-figs, peaches, and melons, of pungent berries dangling from the pepper-trees, and the smoke of his cigarette under his nose. He was on his way to civilian life with his patient chief. His situation was ineffably perfect, and he swallowed it whole.

“My chief,” he addressed Givens handsomely, as one man of the world to another, “women are good things, but not at this moment. With your permission, I will now go to the village and eat. My God, ***how*** I shall eat! Tomorrow morning very early I will come to the buried city and work like seven men. Let us forget Maria Concepcion and Maria Rosa. Each one in her place. I will manage them when the time comes.”

News of Juan’s adventure soon got abroad, and Juan found many friends about him during the morning. They frankly commended his way of leaving the army. It was in itself the act of a hero. The new hero ate a great deal and drank somewhat, the occasion being better than a feast-day. It was almost noon before he returned to visit Maria Rosa.

He found her sitting on a clean straw mat, rubbing fat on her three-hour-old son. Before this felicitous vision Juan’s emotions so twisted him that he returned to the village and invited every man in the “Death and Resurrection” pulque shop to drink with him.

Having thus taken leave of his balance, he started back to Maria Rosa, and found himself unaccountably in his own house, attempting to beat Maria Concepcion by way of reestablishing himself in his legal household.

Maria Concepcion, knowing all the events of that unhappy day, was not in a yielding mood, and refused to be beaten. She did not scream nor implore; she stood her ground and resisted; she even struck at him. Juan, amazed, hardly knowing what he did, stepped back and gazed at her inquiringly through a leisurely whirling film which seemed to have lodged behind his eyes. Certainly he had not even thought of touching her. Oh, well, no harm done. He gave up, turned away, half-asleep on his feet. He dropped amiably in a shadowed corner and began to snore.

Maria Concepcion, seeing that he was quiet, began to bind the legs of her fowls. It was market-day and she was late. She fumbled and tangled the bits of cord in her haste, and set off across the plowed fields instead of taking the accustomed road. She ran with a crazy panic in her head, her stumbling legs. Now and then she would stop and look about her, trying to place herself, then go on a few steps, until she realized that she was not going towards the market.

At once she came to her senses completely, recognized the thing that troubled her so terribly, was certain of what she wanted. She sat down quietly under a sheltering thorny bush and gave herself over to her long devouring sorrow. The thing which had for so long squeezed her whole body into a tight dumb knot of suffering suddenly broke with shocking violence. She jerked with the involuntary recoil of one who receives a blow, and the sweat poured from her skin as if the wounds of her whole life were shedding their salt ichor. Drawing her rebozo over her head, she bowed her forehead on her updrawn knees, and sat there in deadly silence and immobility. From time to time she lifted her head where the sweat formed steadily and poured down her face, drenching the front of her chemise, and her mouth had the shape of crying, but there were no tears and no sound. All her being was a dark confused memory of grief burning in her at night, of deadly baffled anger eating at her by day, until her very tongue tasted bitter, and her feet were as heavy as if she were mired in the muddy roads during the time of rains.

After a great while she stood up and threw the rebozo off her face, and set out walking again. Juan awakened slowly, with long yawns and grumblings, alternated with short relapses into sleep full of visions and clamors. A blur of orange light seared his eyeballs when he tried to unseal his lids. There came from somewhere a low voice weeping without tears, saying meaningless phrases over and over. He began to listen. He tugged at the leash of his stupor, he strained to grasp those words which terrified him even though he could not quite hear them. Then he came awake with frightening suddenness, sitting up and staring at the long sharpened streak of light piercing the corn-husk walls from the level disappearing sun. Maria Concepcion stood in the doorway, looming colossally tall to his betrayed eyes. She was talking quickly, and calling his name. Then he saw her clearly.

“God’s name!” said Juan, frozen to the marrow, “here I am facing my death!” for the long knife she wore habitually at her belt was in her hand. But instead, she threw it away, clear from her, and got down on her knees, crawling toward him as he had seen her crawl many times toward the shrine at Guadalupe Villa. He watched her approach with such horror that the hair of his head seemed to be lifting itself away from him. Falling forward upon her face, she huddled over him, hps moving in a ghostly whisper. Her words became clear, and Juan understood them all.

For a second he could not move nor speak. Then he took her head between both his hands, and supported her in this way, saying swiftly, anxiously reassuring, almost in a babble:

“Oh, thou poor creature! Oh, madwoman! Oh, my Maria Concepcion, unfortunate! Listen. . . . Don’t be afraid. Listen to me! I will hide thee away, I thy own man will protect thee! Quiet! Not a sound!”

Trying to collect himself, he held her and cursed under his breath for a few moments in the gathering darkness. Maria Concepcion bent over, face almost on the ground, her feet folded under her, as if she would hide behind him. For the first time in his life Juan was aware of danger. This was danger. Maria Concepcion would be dragged away between two gendarmes, with him following helpless and unarmed, to spend the rest of her days in Belen Prison, maybe. Danger! The night swarmed with threats. He stood up and dragged her up with him. She was silent and perfectly rigid, holding to him with resistless strength, her hands stiffened on his arms.

“Get me the knife,” he told her in a whisper. She obeyed, her feet slipping along the hard earth floor, her shoulders straight, her arms close to her side. He lighted a candle. Maria Concepcion held the knife out to him. It was stained and dark even to the

handle with drying blood. He frowned at her harshly, noting the same stains on her chemise and hands.

“Take off thy clothes and wash thy hands,” he ordered. He washed the knife carefully, and threw the water wide of the doorway. She watched him and did likewise with the bowl in which she had bathed.

“Light the brasero and cook food for me,” he told her in the same peremptory tone. He took her garments and went out. When he returned, she was wearing an old soiled dress, and was fanning the fire in the charcoal burner. Seating himself cross-legged near her, he stared at her as reature unknown to him, who bewildered him utterly, for whom theat a cre was no possible explanation. She did not turn her head, but kept silent and still, except for the movements of her strong hands fanning the blaze which cast sparks and small jets of white smoke, flaring and dying rhythmically with the motion of the fan, fighting her face and darkening it by turns.

Juan’s voice barely disturbed the silence: “Listen t» me carefully, and tell me the truth, and when the gendarmes come here for us, thou shalt have nothing to fear. But there will be something for us to settle between us afterward.”

The light from the charcoal burner shone in her eyes; a yellow phosphorescence glimmered behind the dark iris. “For me everything is settled now,” she answered, in a tone so tender, so grave, so heavy with suffering, that Juan felt his vitals contract. He wished to repent openly, not as a man, but as a very small child. He could not fathom her, nor himself, nor the mysterious fortunes of life grown so instantly confused where all had seemed so gay and simple. He felt too that she had become invaluable, a woman without equal among a million women, and he could not tell why. He drew an enormous sigh that rattled in his chest.

“Yes, yes, it is all settled. I shall not go away again. We must

stay here together.”

Whispering, he questioned her and she answered whispering, and he instructed her over and over until she had her lesson by heart. The hostile darkness of the night encroached upon them, flowing over the narrow threshold, invading their hearts. It brought with it sighs and murmurs, the pad of secretive feet in the near-by road, the sharp staccato whimper of wind through the cactus leaves. All these familiar, once friendly cadences were now invested with sinister terrors; a dread, formless and uncontrollable, took hold of them both.

“Light another candle,” said Juan, loudly, in too resolute, too sharp a tone. “Let us eat now.”

They sat facing each other and ate from the same dish, after their old habit. Neither tasted what they ate. With food half-way to his mouth, Juan listened. The sound of voices rose, spread, widened at the turn of the road along the cactus wall. A spray of lantern light shot through the hedge, a single voice slashed the blackness, ripped the fragile layer of silence suspended above the hut.

“Juan Villegas!”

“Pass, friends!” Juan roared back cheerfully.

They stood in the doorway, simple cautious gendarmes from the village, mixed-bloods themselves with Indian sympathies, well known to all the community. They flashed their lanterns almost apologetically upon the pleasant, harmless scene of a man eating supper with his wife.

“Pardon, brother,” said the leader. “Someone has killed the woman Maria Rosa, and we must question her neighbors and friends.” He paused, and added with an attempt at severity, “Naturally!” “Naturally,” agreed Juan. “You know that I was a good friend of Maria Rosa. This is bad news.”

They all went away together, the men walking in a group, Maria Concepcion following a few steps in the rear, near Juan. No one spoke.

The two points of candlelight at Maria Rosa’s head fluttered uneasily; the shadows shifted and dodged on the stained darkened walls. To Maria Concepcion everything in the smothering enclosing room shared an evil restlessness. The watchful faces of those

called as witnesses, the faces of old friends, were made alien by the look of speculation in their eyes. The ridges of the rose-colored rebozo thrown over the body varied continually, as though the thing it covered was not perfectly in repose. Her eyes swerved over the body in the open painted coffin, from the candle tips at the head to the feet, jutting up thinly, the small scarred soles protruding, freshly washed, a mass of crooked, half-healed wounds, thornpricks and cuts of sharp stones. Her gaze went back

to the candle flame, to Juan’s eyes warning her, to the gendarmes talking among themselves. Her eyes would not be controlled.

With a leap that shook her her gaze settled upon the face of Maria Rosa. Instantly her blood ran smoothly again: there was nothing to fear. Even the restless light could not give a look of life to that fixed countenance. She was dead. Maria Concepcion

felt her muscles give way softly; her heart began beating steadily without effort. She knew no more rancor against that pitiable thing, lying indifferently in its blue coffin under the fine silk rebozo. The mouth drooped sharply at the corners in a grimace of

weeping arrested half-way. The brows were distressed; the dead flesh could not cast off the shape of its last terror. It was all finished. Maria Rosa had eaten too much honey and had had too much love. Now she must sit in hell, crying over her sins and her hard death forever and ever.

Old Lupe’s cackling voice arose. She had spent the morning helping Maria Rosa, and it had been hard work. The child had spat blood the moment it was born, a bad sign. She thought then that bad luck would come to the house. Well, about sunset she was in the yard at the back of the house grinding tomatoes and peppers. She had left mother and babe asleep. She heard a strange noise in the house, a choking and smothered calling, like someone wailing in sleep. Well, such a thing is only natural. But there followed a light, quick, thudding sound—

“Like the blows of a fist?” interrupted an officer.

“No, not at all like such a thing.”

“How do you know?”

“I am well acquainted with that sound, friends,” retorted Lupe.

“This was something else.” \*

She was at a loss to describe it exactly. A moment later, there came the sound of pebbles rolling and slipping under feet; then she knew someone had been there and was running away.

“Why did you wait so long before going to see?”

“I am old and hard in the joints,” said Lupe. “I cannot run after people. I walked as fast as I could to the cactus hedge, for it is only by this way that anyone can enter. There was no one in the road, sir, no one. Three cows, with a dog driving them; nothing else. When I got to Maria Rosa, she was lying all tangled up, and from her neck to her middle she was full of knife-holes. It was a sight to move the Blessed Image Himself! Her eyes were—“

“Never mind. Who came oftenest to her house before she went away? Did you know her enemies?” Lupe’s face congealed, closed. Her spongy skin drew into a network of secretive wrinkles. She turned withdrawn and expressionless eyes upon the gendarmes.

“I am an old woman. I do not see well. I cannot hurry on my feet. I know no enemy of Maria Rosa. I did not see anyone leave the clearing.”

“You did not hear splashing in the spring near the bridge?”

“No, sir.”

“Why, then, do our dogs follow a scent there and lose it?”

“God only knows, my friend. I am an old wo—“

“Yes. How did the footfalls sound?”

“Like the tread of an evil spirit!” Lupe broke forth in a swellingoracular tone that startled them. The Indians stirred uneasily, glanced at the dead, then at Lupe. They half expected her to produce the evil spirit among them at once.

The gendarme began to lose his temper.

“No, poor unfortunate; I mean, were they heavy or light? The footsteps of a man or of a woman? Was the person shod or barefoot?”

A glance at the listening circle assured Lupe of their thrilled attention. She enjoyed the dangerous importance of her situation. She could have ruined that Maria Concepcion with a word, but it was even sweeter to make fools of these gendarmes who went about spying on honest people. She raised her voice again. What she had not seen she could not describe, thank God! No one could harm her because her knees were stiff and she could not run even to seize a murderer. As for knowing the difference between footfalls, shod or bare, man or woman, nay, between devil and human, who ever heard of such madness?

“My eyes are not ears, gentlemen,” she ended grandly, “but upon my heart I swear those footsteps fell as the tread of the spirit of evil!”

“Imbecile!” yapped the leader in a shrill voice. “Take her away, one of you! Now, Juan Villegas, tell me—“

Juan told his story patiently, several times over. He had returned to his wife that day. She had gone to market as usual. He had helped her prepare her fowls. She had returned about midafternoon, they had talked, she had cooked, they had eaten, nothing was amiss. Then the gendarmes came with the news about Maria Rosa. That was all. Yes, Maria Rosa had run away with him, but there had been no bad blood between him and his wife on this account, nor between his wife and Maria Rosa. Everybody knew that his wife was a quiet woman.

Maria Concepcion heard her own voice answering without a break. It was true at first she was troubled when her husband went away, but after that she had not worried about him. It was the way of men, she believed. She was a church-married woman and knew her place. Well, he had come home at last. She had gone to market, but had come back early, because now she had her man to cook for. That was all.

Other voices broke in. A toothless old man said: “She is a woman of good reputation among us, and Maria Rosa was not.” A smiling young mother, Anita, baby at breast, said: “If no one thinks so, how can you accuse her? It was the loss of her child and not of her husband that changed her so.” Another: “Maria Rosa had a strange life, apart from us. How do we know who might have come from another place to do her evil?” And old Soledad spoke up boldly: “When I saw Maria Concepcion in the market today, I said, ‘Good luck to you, Maria Concepcion, this is a happy day for you!’ “ and she gave Maria Concepcion a long easy stare, and the smile of a born wise-woman. Maria Concepcion suddenly felt herself guarded, surrounded, upborne by her faithful friends. They were around her, speaking for her, defending her, the forces of life were ranged invincibly with her against the beaten dead. Maria Rosa had thrown away her share of strength in them, she lay forfeited among them. MariaConcepcion looked from one to the other of the circling, intent faces. Their eyes gave back reassurance, understanding, a secret and mighty sympathy.

The gendarmes were at a loss. They, too, felt that sheltering wall cast impenetrably around her. They were certain she had done it, and yet they could not accuse her. Nobody could be accused; there was not a shred of true evidence. They shrugged their shoulders and snapped their fingers and shuffled their feet.Well, then, good night to everybody. Many pardons for having intruded. Good health!

A small bundle lying against the wall at the head of the coffin squirmed like an eel. A wail, a mere sliver of sound, issued. Maria Concepcion took the son of Maria Rosa in her arms.

“He is mine,” she said clearly, “I will take him with me.”

No one assented in words, but an approving nod, a bare breath of complete agreement, stirred among them as they made way for her.

Maria Concepcion, carrying the child, followed Juan from the clearing. The hut was left with its lighted candles and a crowd of old women who would sit up all night, drinking coffee and smoking and telling ghost stories.

Juan’s exaltation had burned out. There was not an ember of excitement left in him. He was tired. The perilous adventure was over. Maria Rosa had vanished, to come no more forever. Their days of marching, of eating, of quarreling and making love between battles, were all over. Tomorrow he would go back to dull and endless labor, he must descend into the trenches of the buried city as Maria Rosa must go into her grave. He felt his veins fill up with bitterness, with black unendurable melancholy. Oh, Jesus! What bad luck overtakes a man!

Well, there was no way out of it now. For the moment he craved only to sleep. He was so drowsy he could scarcely guide his feet. The occasional light touch of the woman at his elbow was as unreal, as ghostly as the brushing of a leaf against his face. He did not know why he had fought to save her, and now he forgot her. There was nothing in him except a vast blind hurt like a covered wound.

He entered the jacal, and without waiting to light a candle, threw off his clothing, sitting just within the door. He moved with lagging, half-awake hands, to strip his body of its heavy finery. With a long groaning sigh of relief he fell straight back on the floor, almost instantly asleep, his arms flung up and outward. Maria Concepcion, a small clay jar in her hand, approached the gentle little mother goat tethered to a sapling, which gave and yielded as she pulled at the rope's end after the farthest reaches of grass about her. The kid, tied up a few feet away, rose bleating, its feathery fleece shivering in the fresh wind. Sitting on her heels, holding his tether, she allowed him to suckle a few moments. Afterward—all her movements very deliberate and even —she drew a supply of milk for the child. She sat against the wall of her house, near the doorway. The child, fed and asleep, was cradled in the hollow of her crossed legs. The silence overfilled the world, the skies flowed down evenly to the rim of the valley, the stealthy moon crept slantwise to the shelter of the mountains. She felt soft and warm all over; she dreamed that the newly born child was her own, and she was resting deliciously.

Maria Concepcion could hear Juan's breathing. The sound vapored from the low doorway, calmly; the house seemed to be resting after a burdensome day. She breathed, too, very slowly and quietly, each inspiration saturating her with repose. The child's light, faint breath was a mere shadowy moth of sound in the silver air. The night, the earth under her, seemed to swell and recede together with a limitless, unhurried, benign breathing. She drooped and closed her eyes, feeling the slow rise and fall within her own body. She did not know what it was, but it eased her all through. Even as she was falling asleep, head bowed over the child, she was still aware of a strange, wakeful happiness.

Source: The Collected Stories of **Katherine Anne Porter**

Questions:

1. Who is Maria Conception? What is her characteristics? Who is Maria Rosa? Who is you symphatetic with?
2. In what type of society does Maria Conception live?
3. What is the conflict in this story? Who are involved in the conflict? Why does Maria Conception kill Rosa? What is the society’s opinion of Maria Conception’s act of killing Maria Rosa?
4. What kind of plot is applied in this story?
5. What do you think the theme of this story?

THE DIAMOND NECKLACE

Guy de Maupassant

The girl was one of those pretty and charming young creatures who sometimes are born, as if by a slip of fate, into a family of clerks. she had no dowry, no expectations, no way of being known, understood, loved, married by any rich and distinguished man; so she let herself be married to a little clerk of the minister of Public Instruction.

She dressed plainly because she could not dress well, but she was unhappy as if she had really fallen from a higher station; since with women there is neither caste nor rank, for beauty grace and charm take the place of family and birth. Natural ingenuity, instinct for what is elegant, a supple mind are their sole hierarchy, and often make of women of the people the equals of the very greatest ladies.

Mathilde suffered ceaselessly, feeling herself born to enjoy all delicacies and all Luxuries. She was distressed at the poverty of her dwelling, at the bareness of the walls, at the shabby chairs, the ugliness of the curtains. All those things, of which another woman of her rank would never even have been conscious, tortured her and made her angry. The sight of the little Breton peasant who did her humble housework aroused.in her despairing regrets and bewildering dreams. She thought of silent antechambers hung with Oriental tapestry, illuirined by tall bronze candelabra, and of two great footmen in knee brelches who sleep in the big armchairs, made drowsy by the oppressive heat of the stove. She thought of silent antechambers hung with Oriental tapestry reception halls hung with ancient silkn of the dainty cabinets containini priceless curiosities and of the little coquettish perfumed reception rooms made for ctratting at five o'clock with intimate friends, with men famous and sought after, whom all women emy and whose attention they all desire.

When she sat down to dinner, before the round table covered with a tablecloth in use three days, opposite her husband, who uncovered the soup tureen and declared with a delighted air "Ah, the good soup! I don't know anything better than that," she thought of dainty dinners, of shining silverware, of tapestry that peopled the walls with ancient personages and with strange birds flying in the midst of a fairy forest; and she thought of delicious dishes served on marvellous plates and of the whispered gallantries to which you listen with a sphinxlike smile while you are eating the pink meat of a trout or the wings of a quail.

She had no gowns, no jewels, nothing. fuid she loved nothing but that. She felt

made for that. She would have liked so much to pleasen to be envied, to be charming, to be sought after.

She had a friend, a former schoolmate at the convent, who was rich, and whom she did not like to go to see any more because she felt so sad when she came home.

But one evening her husband reached home with a triumphant air and holding a large envelope in his hand. "There" said he, "there is something for you."She tore the paper quickly and drew out a printed card which bore these words:

The Minister of Public Instruction and Madame Georges Ramponneau

request the honor of M. and Madame Loisel's company at the palace of

the Ministry on Monday evening, January 18th.

Instead of being delighted, as her husband had hoped, she threw the invitationon the table crossly, muttering:

“What do you wish me to do with that?”

''Why, my dear, I thought you would be glad. you never go out, and this is such a fine opportunity. I had great trouble to get it. Every one wants to go; it is very select, and they are not gving many invitations to clerks. The whole offfcial world will be there."

She looked at him with an irritated glance and said impatiently:

"And what do you wish me to put on my back?"

He had not thought of that. He stammered:

“Why, the gown you go to the theatre in. It looks very well to me."

He stopped, distracted, seeing that his wife was weeping. Two great tears ran slowly from the corners of her eyes toward the corners of her mouth.

“What's the matter? What's the matter?'he answered.

By a violent effort she conquered her grief and replied in a calm voice, while she wiped her wet cheeks:

"Nothing. only I have no gown, and, therefore, I can't go to this ball. Give your card to some colleague whose wife is better equipped than I am.”

He was in despair. He resumed:

"Come, let us see, Mathilde, How much would it cost, a suitable gown, which

you could use on other occasions-something very simple?"

She reflected several secondsn making her calculations and wondering also what sum she could ask without drawing on herself an immediate refusal and a frightened exclamation fiom the economical clerk. Finally she replied hesitating:

I don't know exactly, but I think I could manage it with four hundred francs."

He grew a little pale, because he was laying aside just that amount to buy a gun and treat himself to a little shooting next summer on the plain of Nanterre, dth

several friends who went to shoot larks there of a Sunday.

But he said:

“Very well. I will give you four hundred francs. And try to have a pretty gown."

The day of the ball drew near and Madame Loisel seemed sad, uneasy, anxious. Her frock was ready, however. Her husband said to her one evening:

“What is the matter? Come, you have seemed very queer these last three days."

And she answered:

“It annoys me not to have a single piece of jewelry, not a single ornament, nothing to put on. I shall look poverty-stricken. t would almost rather not go at all.

“You might wear natural flowers," said her husband. “They're very stylish at this time of year. For ten francs you can get two or three magnificent roses.”

She was not convinced.

"No; there's nothing more humiliating than to look poor among other women who are rich.”

'How stupid you are!" her husband cried. "Go look up your friend, Madame Forestier, and ask her to lend you some jewels. You're intimite enough with her to do that." She uttered a cry of joy:

“True! I never thought of it.”

The next day she went to her friend and told her of her distress.

Madame Forestier went to a wardrobe with a mirror, took out alargejewel box, brought it back, opened it and said to Madame Loisel:

"Choose, my dear.

She saw first some bracelets, then a pearl necklace, then a Venetian gold cross set with precious stones, of admirable workmanship. She tried on the ornaments before the mirror, hesitated and could not make up her mind to part with them, to give them back. She kept asking:

"Haven't you any more?"

'Why, yes. Look further; I don't know what you like."

Suddenly she discovered, in a black satin box, a superb diamond necklace, and her heart throbbed with an immoderate desire, Her hands trembled as she took it. She fastened it round her throat, outside her high-necked waisto and was lost in ecstasy at her reflection in the mirror.

Then she asked hesitating, filled with anxious doubt:

'Will you lend me this, only this?"

“Why, yes, certainly."

She threw her arms round her friend's neck, kissed her passionately, then fled with her treasure.

The night of the ball arrived. Madame Loisel was a great success. She was prettier than any other woman present, elegant, graceful, smiling and wild with joy. All the men looked at her, asked her name, sought to be introduced. All the attaches of the Cabinet wished to waltz with her. She was remarked by the minister himself.

She danced with rapture, with passion, intoxicated by pleasure, forgetting all in the triumph of her beauty, in the glory of her success, in a sort of cloud of happiness comprised of all this homage, admiration, these awakened desires and of that sense of triumph which is so sweet to woman's heart.

She left the ball about four o'clock in the morning. Her husband had been sleeping since midnight in a little deserted anteroom with three other gentlemen whose wives were enjoying the ball. He threw over her shoulders the wraps he had brought, the modest wraps of common life, the poverty of which contrasted with the elegance of the ball dress.

She felt this and wished to escape so as not to be remarked by the other women, who were enveloping themselves in costly furs.

Loisel held her back, saying: 'Wait a bit. You will catch cold outside. I will call

a cab,"

But she did not listen to him and rapidly descended the stairs. When reached the street they could not find a carriage and began to look for shouting after the cabmen passing at a distance.

They went toward the Seine in despairn shivering with cold. At last they found on the quay one of those ancient night cabs which, as though they were ashamed to show their shabbiness during the day, are never seen round Paris until after dark.

It took them to their dwelling in the Rue des Martins, and sadly they mounted the stairs to their flat. All was ended for her. As to him, he reflected that he must be at the ministry at ten o'clock that morning.

She removed her wraps before the glass so as to see herself once more in all her glory. But suddenly she uttered a cry. She no longer had the necklace around her neck!

'What is the matter with you?" demanded her husband, already half undressed. She turned distractedly toward him.

"I have--I haveI've lost Madame Forestier's necklace," she cried.

He stood up, bewildered.

'What!-how? Impossible ! "

They looked among the folds of her skirt of her cloak, in her pockets everywhere, but did not find it.

“You're sure you had it on when you left the ball?" he asked.

'Yes, I felt it in the vestibule of the minister's house."

“But if you had lost it in the street we should have heard it fall. It must be in

the cab."

'Yes, probably. Did you take his number?”

\*No. And you-didn't you notice it?"

“No”

They looked, thunderstruck, at each other. At last Loisel put on his clothes. "I shall go back on foot," said he, "over the whole route, to see whether I can find it."

He went out. She sat waiting on a chair in her ball dress, without strength to go to bed, overwhelmed, without any fire, without a thought.

Her husband returned about seven o'clock. He had found nothing.

He went to police headquarters, to the newspaper offices to offer a reward; he

went to the cab companies--everywhere, in fact, whither he was urged by the

least spark of hope.

She waited all day, in the same condition of mad fear before this terrible calamity.

Loisel returned at night with a hollowo pale face. He had discovered nothing.

'You must write to your friend," said he, "that you have broken the clasp of her

necklace and that you are having it mended. That will give us time to turn round."

She wrote at his dictation. At the end of a week they had lost all hope. Loisel, who had aged five years, declared:

'We must consider how to replace that ornament."

The next day they took the box that had contained it and went to the jeweler whose name was found within. He consulted his books.

"It was not I madame, who sold that necklace; I must simply have furnished the case."

Then they went from jeweler to jewelero searching for a necklace like the other,

trying to recall it, both sick with chagrin and grief.

They found, in a shop at the Palais Royal, a string of diamonds that seemed to them exactly like the one they had lost. It was worth forty thousand francs. They could have it for thirty-six.

So they begged the jeweler not to sell it for three days yet. And they made a bargain that he should buy it back for thirty-four thousand francs, in case they should find the lost necklace before the end of February.

Loisel possessed eighteen thousand francs which his father had left him. He would borrow the rest.

He did borrow, asking a thousand francs of one, five hundred of another, five louis here, three louis there. He gave notes, took up ruinous obligations, dealt with usurers and all the race of lenders. He compromised all the rest of his life, risked signing a note without even knowing whether he could meet it; and, frightened by the trouble yet to come, by the black misery that was about to fall upon him, by the prospect of all the physical privations and moral tortures'that he was to suffer, he went to get the new necklace, layrng upon the jeweler's counter thirty-six thousand francs.

When Madame Loisel took back the necklace Madame Forestier said to her with

a chilly manner:

“You should have returned it sooner; I might have needed it."

She did not open the case, as her friend had so much feared. If she had detected the substitution, what would she have thought, what would she have said? Would she not have taken Madame Loisel for a thief?

Thereafter Madame Loisel knew the horrible existence of the needy. She bore her part, howwer, with sudden heroism. That dreadful debt must be paid. She would pay it. They dismissed their servant; they changed their lodgings; they rented a gafiet under the roof.

She came to know what heavy housework meant and the odious cares of the kitchen. She washed the dishes, using her dainty fingers and rosy nails on greasy pots and pans. She washed the soiled linen, the shirts and the dishcloths, which she dried upon a line; she carried the slops down to the street every morning and carried up the water, stopping for breath at every landing. And dressed like a woman of the people, she went to the fruiterer, the grocer, the butcher, a basket on her arm, bargaining, meeting with impertinence, defending her miserable money, sou by sou.

Every month they had to meet some notes, renew others, obtain more time. Her husband worked evenings, making up a tradesman's accounts, and late at night he often copied manuscript for five sous a page.

This life lasted ten years.

At the end of ten years they had paid everything, everything, with the rates of usury and the accumulations of the compound interest.

Madame Loisel looked old now. She had become the woman of impoverished

households-strong and hard and rough. With frowsy hair, skirts askew and red hands, she talked loud while washing the floor with great swishes of water. But sometimesn when her husband was at the office, she sat down near the window and she thought of that gay evening of long ago, of that ball where she had been so beautiful and so admired.

What would have happened if she had not lost that necklace? Who knows? Who knows? How strange and changeful is life! How small a thing is needed to make or ruin us!

But one Sunday, having gone to take a walk in the Champs Elysees to refresh herself after the labors of the week, she suddenly perceived a woman who was leading a child. It was Madame Forestier, still young, still beautiful, still charming.

Madame Loisel felt moved. Should she speak to her? Yes, certainly. And now that she had paid, she would tell her all about it. Why not?

She went up.

"Goodday, Jeanne."

The other, astonished to be familiarly addressed by this plain good-wife, did not recognize her at all and stammered:

"But-madame!-I do not know-You must have mistaken."

No. I am Mathilde loisel."

Her friend uttered a cry.

"Oh, my poor Mathilde! How you are changed!"

'Yes, I have had a pretty hard life, since I last saw you, and great poverty,-and that because of you!"

"Of me! How so?"

 "Do you remember that diamond necklace you lent me to wear at the ministerial ball?"

“Yes. Well?"

“Well, I lost it."

“What do you mean? You brought it back.”

"I brought you back another exactly like it. And it has taken us ten years to pay for it. You can understand that it was not easy for us, for us who had nothing. At last it is ended, and I am very glad."

Madame Forestier had stopped.

“You say that you bought a necklace of diamonds to replace mine?"

“Yes. You never noticed it, then! They were very similar.” And she smiled with a joy that was at once proud and ingenuous.

Madame Forestier, deeply moved, took her hands.

“Oh, my poor Mathilde! Why, my necklace was paste! It was worth at most only five hundred francs!"

Source: The Entire Original maupassan Shotr Stories by Guy de Mapassant

Answer the following questions:

1. What type of is Mathilde? What is her social status?
2. What is is her response after seing invitation from ministry in which her husband work? Why?
3. What is the couple’s motive of borrowing the diamond necklace?
4. How does the diamond necklace influence to Mathilde in the party? Does she enjoy the party? What is the visitors’ reaction to her performance in the party? Do they admire her?
5. What happened to the diamond necklace? Why do Mathilde and her husband try to get the diamond necklace with the same shape?
6. What kind of necklace that Mathilde borrows from her friend?

*Pam Houston*

The Best Girlfriend

You Never Had

**FROM** *Other Voices*

**A PERFECT DAY** in the city always starts like this: my friend Leo picks me up and we go to a breakfast place called Rick and Ann's where they make red flannel hash out of beets and bacon, and then we cross the Bay Bridge to the gardens of the Palace of the Fine Arts to sit in the wet grass and read poems out loud and talk about love. The fountains are thick with black swans imported from Siberia, and if it is a fine day and a weekend there will be wedding parties, almost entirely Asian. The grooms wear smart gray pinstripe suits and the women are in beaded gowns so beautiful they make your teeth hurt just to look at them.

The roman towers of the palace facade rise above us, more yellow than orange in the strengthening midday light. Leo has told me how the towers were built for the 1915 Panama Pacific Exhibition out of plaster and papier-mache, and even though times were hard the city raised the money to keep them, to cast them in concrete so they would never go away.

Leo is an architect, and his relationship to all the most beautiful buildings in this city is astonishing given his age, only five years older than 1 . 1 make my living as a photographer; since art school I've been doing magazine work and living from grant to grant.

The house Leo built for himself is like a fairy tale, all towers and angles, and the last wild peacock in Berkeley lives on his street. I live in the Oakland hills in a tiny house on a street so windy you can't drive more than ten miles per hour. I rented it because the ad said this: "Small house in the trees with a garden and a fireplace. Dogs welcome, of course." I am dogless for the moment, but it's not my natural condition. You never know when I might get overwhelmed by a desire to go to the pound.

It's a warm blue Saturday in November, and there are five Asian weddings under way at the Palace of the Fine Arts. The wedding parties' outfits do not match but are complementary, as if they have been ordered especially, one for each arch of the golden facade.

Leo reads me a poem about a salt marsh at dawn while I set up my old Leica. I always get the best stuff when nobody's paying me to shoot. Like the time I caught a bride waltzing with one of the caterers behind the hedgerow, his chef's cap bent to touch the top of her veil.

Then I read Leo a poem about longing in Syracuse. This is how we have always spoken to each other, Leo and I, and it would be the most romantic thing this century except that Leo is in love with Guinevere. Guinevere is a Buddhist weaver who lives in a clapboard house on Belvedere Island. She makes cloth on a loom she brought back from Tibet. Although her tapestries and wall hangings have made her a small fortune, she refuses to use the air conditioner in her Audi, even when she's driving across the Sacramento Valley. Air conditioning, she says, is just one of the things she does not allow herself.

That Guinevere seems not to know Leo is alive causes him no particular disappointment, and that she forgets — each time she meets him — that she has met him several times before only adds to what he calls her charming basket of imperfections. The only Buddha I could love, he says, is one who is capable of forgetfulness and sin.

Guinevere is in love with a man in New York City who told her in a letter that the only thing better than three thousand miles between him and the object of his desire would be if she had a terminal illness. "I could really get behind a relationship with a woman who had only six months to live" was what he wrote. She showed me the words as if to make sure they existed, though something in her tone made me think

she was proud.

The only person I know of who's in love with Leo (besides me, a little) is a gay man named Raphael who falls in love with one straight man after another and then buys each one a whole new collection of CDs. They come, Leo says, as if from the Columbia House Record Club, once a month like clockwork, in a plain cardboard wrapper, no return address and no name. They are by artists most people have never heard of, like the Nields and Boris Grebeshnikov; there are Andean folksongs and hip-hop and beat.

Across the swan-bearing lake a wedding has just reached its completion. The groom is managing to look utterly solemn and completely delirious with joy at the same time. Leo and I watch the kiss, and I snap the shutter just as the kiss ends and the wedding party bursts into applause.

"Sucker," Leo says.

"Oh, right," I say. "Like you wouldn't trade your life for his right this minute."

"I don't know anything about his life," Leo says.

"You know he remembered to do all the things you forgot."

"I think I prefer it," Leo says, "when you reserve that particular lecture for yourself." He points back across the lake, where the bride has just leaped into her maid of honor's arms, and I snap the shutter again. "Or for one of your commitment-phobic boyfriends," Leo adds.

"I guess the truth is, I can't blame them," I say. "I mean, if I saw me coming down the street with all my stuff hanging out, I'm not so sure I'd pick myself up and go trailing after."

"Of course you would," Leo says. "And it's because you would, and because the chance of that happening is so slim, and because you hold out hope anyway that it might... that's what makes you a great photographer."

"Greatness is nice," I tell him. "I want contact. I want someone's warm breath on my face." I say it as if it's a dare, which we both know it isn't. The flower girl across the lake is throwing handfuls of rose petals straight up in the air.

I came to this city near the ocean over a year ago because I recently spent a long time under the dark naked water of the Colorado River and I took it as a sign that the river wanted me away. I had taken so many pictures by then of the chaos of heaved-up rock and petrified sand and endless sky that I'd lost my balance and fallen into them. I couldn't keep separate anymore what was the land and what was me.

There was a man there named Josh who didn't want nearly enough from me, and a woman called Thea who wanted way too much, and I was sandwiched between them, one of those weaker rock layers like limestone that disappears under pressure or turns into something shapeless like oil.

I thought there might be an order to the city: straight lines, shiny surfaces, and right angles that would give myself back to me, take my work somewhere different, maybe to a safer place. Solitude was a straight line too, and I believed it was what I wanted, so I packed whatever I could get into my pickup, left behind everything I couldn't carry, including two pairs of skis, a whole darkroom full of photo

equipment, and the mountains I'd sworn again and again I couldn't live

without.

I pointed myself west down the endless two lanes of Highway 50 —*The Loneliest Road in America* say the signs that rise out of the desert on either side of it — all the way across Utah and Nevada to this white shining city on the bay.

I got drunk on the city at first, the way some people do on vodka, the way it lays itself out as if in a nest of madronas and eucalyptus, the way it sparkles brighter even than the sparkling water that surrounds it, the way the Golden Gate reaches out of it, like fingers, toward the wild wide ocean that lies beyond.

I loved the smell of fresh blueberry muffins at the Oakland Grill down on Third and Franklin, the train whistle sounding right outside the front door, and tattooed men of all colors unloading crates of cauliflower, broccoli, and peas.

Those first weeks I'd walk the streets for hours, shooting more film in a day than I could afford in a week, all those lives in such dangerous and unnatural proximity, all those stories my camera could tell.

I'd walk even the nastiest part, the blood pumping through my veins as hard as when I first saw the Rocky Mountains so many years ago. One night in the Tenderloin I rounded a corner and met a guy in a wheelchair head on, who aimed himself at me and covered me with urine. Baptized, I said to my horrified friends the next day, anointed with the nectar of the city gods.

Right off the bat I met a man named Gordon, and we'd drive down to the Oakland docks in the evening and look out at the twenty-story hydraulic boat lifts, which I said looked like a battalion of Doberman pinschers protecting the harbor from anyone who might invade. Gordon's real name was Salvador, and he came from poor people, strawberry pickers in the Central Valley, two of his brothers stillborn from Malathion poisoning. He left the valley and moved to the city when he was too young by law to drive the truck he stole from his father's field boss.

He left it double-parked in front of the Castro Theater, talked a family in the Mission into trading work for floor space, changed his name to Gordon, changed his age from fifteen to twenty, and applied for a grant to study South American literature at San Francisco State. He had his Ph.D. before he turned twenty, a tenure-track teaching job at Berkeley by twenty-one. When he won his first teaching award, his mother was in the audience; when their eyes met, she nodded her approval, but when he looked for her afterward, she was nowhere to be found.

"Can you believe it?" he said when he told the story, his voice such a mixture of pride and disappointment that I didn't know which was more unbelievable, that she had come or that she had gone.

"If one more woman I used to date turns into a lesbian," Leo says, "I'm moving to Minneapolis."

The wedding receptions are well under way, and laughter bubbles toward us across the lagoon.

"It's possible to take that as a compliment," I say, "if you want to bend your mind that way."

"I don't," he says.

"Maybe it's just a choice a woman makes," I say, "when she feels she has exhausted all her other options."

"Oh yeah, like you start out being a person," Leo says, "and then you decide to become a car."

"Sometimes I think it's either that or Alaska," I say. "The odds there,

better than ten to one."

I remember a bumper sticker I saw once in Haines, Alaska, near the place where the ferries depart for the lower forty-eight: *Baby,* it said, *when you leave here you 11 be ugly again.*

"In Alaska," I say, "I've actually had men fall at my feet."

"I bet a few men have fallen at your feet down here," he says, and I try to look him in the eye to see how he means it, but he keeps them fixed on the poetry book.

He says, "Aren't I the best girlfriend you never had?" The last woman Leo called the love of his life only let him see her twice a week for three years. She was a cardiologist who lived in the Marina who said she spent all day with broken hearts and she had no intention of filling her time off with her own. At the start of the fourth year, Leo asked her to raise the number of dates to three times a week, and she immediately broke things off.

Leo went up on the bridge after that. This was before they put the phones in, the ones that go straight to the counselors. It was a sunny day and the tide was going out, making whitecaps as far as he could see into the Pacific. After a while he came down, not because he felt better but because of the way the numbers fell out. There had been 250 so far that year. Had the number been 4 or 199 or even 274, he says he might have

done it, but he wasn't willing to go down officially with a number as meaningless as 251.

A woman sitting on the grass near us starts telling Leo how much he looks like her business partner, but there's an edge to her voice I can't identify, an insistence that means she's in love with the guy, or she's crazy, or she's just murdered him this morning and she has come to the Palace of the Fine Arts to await her impending arrest.

"The great thing about Californians," Leo says when the woman has finally gotten up to leave, "is that they think it's perfectly okay to exhibit all their neuroses in public as long as they apologize for them first."

Leo grew up like I did on the East Coast, eating Birdseye frozen vegetables and Swanson's deep-dish meat pies on TV trays next to our parents and their third martinis, watching *What's My Line?* and *To Tell the Truth* on television, and talking about anything on earth except what was wrong.

"Is there anyone you could fall in love with besides Guinevere?" I ask Leo, after he's read a poem about tarantulas and digger wasps.

"There's a pretty woman at work," he says. "She calls herself the Diva."

"Leo," I say, "write this down. I think it's a good policy to avoid any

woman who uses an article in her name."

There are policemen at the palace grounds today handing out information about how we can protect ourselves from an epidemic of carjackings that has been taking place in the city for the last five months. The crime begins, the flyer tells us, with the criminal bumping the victim's car from behind. When the victim gets out of the car to exchange information, the criminal hits her — and it's generally a woman — over the head with a heavy object, leaves her on the sidewalk, steals her car, and drives away.

The flyer says we are supposed to keep our windows rolled up when the other driver approaches, keep the doors locked, and say through the glass, "I'm *afraid. I'm not getting out. Please follow me to the nearest*

*convenience store."* It says under no circumstances should we ever let the criminal drive us to crime scene number two.

"You couldn't do it, could you?" Leo asks, and slaps my arm like a wise guy.

"What do you think they mean," I say, "by crime scene number two?"

"You're evading the question because you know the answer too well,"

He says. "You're the only person I know who'd get your throat slit sooner than admit you're afraid."

"You know," I say to Leo, to change the subject, "you don't act much like a person who wants kids more than anything."

"Yeah, and you don't act like a person who wants to be married with swans."

"I'd do it," I say. "Right now. Step into that wedding dress, no questions asked."

"Lucy," Leo says, "seriously, do you have any idea how many steps there are between you and that wedding dress?"

"No," I say. "Tell me."

"Fifty-five," he says. "At least fifty-five."

Before Gordon I had always dated the strong silent types, I think, so I could invent anything I wanted to go on in their heads. Gordon and I talked about words and the kind of pictures you could make so that you didn't need them, and I thought what I always thought in the first ten minutes: that after years and years of wild pitches, I'd for once in my life thrown a strike.

It took me less than half a baseball season to discover my oversight: Gordon had a jealous streak as vicious as a heat-seeking missile, and he could make a problem out of a paper bag. We were asked to leave two restaurants in one week alone, and it got to the point, fast, where if the waitperson wasn't female, I'd ask if we could go somewhere else or have another table.

Car mechanics, piano tuners, dry cleaners, toll takers — in Gordon's mind they were all out to bed me, and I was out to make them want to. A honey pot, he'd called me once, and he said he and all other men in the Bay Area were a love-crazed swarm of bees.

When I told Guinevere how I'd fallen for Gordon, she said, "You only get a few chances to feel your life all the way through. Before — you know — you become unwilling."

I told her the things I was afraid to tell Leo: how the look on Gordon's face turned from passion to anger, how he yelled at me in a store so loud one time that the manager slipped me a note that said he would pray for me, how each night I would stand in the street while he revved up his engine and scream *Please, Gordon, please, Gordon, don't drive away.*

"At one time in my life I had breast implants just to please a man," she said. "Now I won't even take off my bracelets before bed."

Guinevere keeps a bowl of cards on her breakfast table between the sugar and the coffee. They are called angel cards and she bought them at the New Age store. Each card has a word printed on it, *sisterhood* or *creativity* or *romance,* and there's a tiny angel with her body in a position that is supposed to illustrate the word.

That morning I picked *balance,* with a little angel perched in the center of a teeter-totter, and when Guinevere reached in for her own word she sighed in disgust. Without looking at the word again, without showing it to me, she put the card in the trash can and reached to pick another.

I went to the trash can and found it. The word was *surrender,* and the angel was looking upward, with her arms outstretched.

"I hate that," she said, her mouth slightly twisted. "Last week I had to throw away *submit."*

Guinevere brought me a cookie and a big box of Kleenex. She said that choices can't be good or bad. There is only the event and the lessons learned from it. She corrected my pronunciation gently and constantly: the *Bu* in *Buddha,* she said, is like the *pu* in *pudding* and not like the *boo* in *ghost.*

When I was twenty-five years old, I took home to my parents a boy named Jeffrey I thought I wanted to marry. He was everything I believed my father wanted. He had an MBA from Harvard. He had patches on the elbows of his sportcoats. He played golf on a course that only allowed men.

We spent the weekend drinking the wine and eating the pate Jeffrey's mother had sent him from her *fermette* in the southwest of France. Jeffrey let my father show him decades' worth of tennis trophies. He played the piano while my mother sang her old torch songs.

I waited until I had a minute alone with my father. "Papa," I said — it was what I always called him — "how do you like Jeffrey?"

"Lucille," he said, "I haven't ever liked any of your boyfriends, and I don't expect I ever will. So why don't you save us both the embarrassment and not ask again?"

After that I went back to dating mechanics and river guides. My mother kept Jeffrey's picture on the mantel till she died.

The first time I was mugged in the city, I'd been to the late show all alone at the Castro Theatre. It's one of those magnificent old moviehouses with a huge marquee that lights up the sky like a carnival, a ceiling that looks like it belongs in a Spanish cathedral, heavy red velvet curtains laced with threads that sparkle gold, and a real live organist

who disappears into the floor when the previews begin.

I liked to linger there after the movie finished, watch the credits and the artificial stars in the ceiling. That Tuesday I was the last person to step out of the theater into a chilly and deserted night.

I had one foot off the curb when the man approached me, a little too close for comfort even then.

"Do you have any change you can spare?" he said.

The truth was, I didn't. I had scraped the bottom of my purse to put together enough quarters, nickels, and dimes to get into the movie, and the guy behind the glass had let me in thirty-three cents short.

I said I was sorry and headed for the parking lot. I knew he was behind me, but I didn't turn around. I should have gotten my keys out before I left the theater, I thought. Shouldn't have stayed to see every credit roll.

About ten steps from my car I felt a firm jab in the middle of my rib cage.

"I bet you'd feel differently," the man said, "if I had a gun in my hand."

"I might feel differently," I said, whirling around with more force than I intended, "but I still wouldn't have any money."

He flinched, changed the angle of his body, just slightly back and away. And when he did, when his eyes dropped from mine to his hand holding whatever it was in his jacket pocket, I was reminded of a time I almost walked into a female grizzly with a nearly grown cub. How we had stood there posturing, how she had glanced down at her cub just that way, giving me the opportunity to let her know she didn't need to kill me. We could both go on our way.

"Look," I said. "I've had a really emotional day, okay?" As I talked, I dug into my purse and grabbed my set of keys, a kind of weapon in their own right. "And I think you ought to just let me get in the car and go home."

While he considered this, I took the last steps to my car and got in. I didn't look in the rearview mirror until I was on the freeway.

By mid-afternoon Leo and I have seen one too many happy couples get married, and we drive over the Golden Gate to Tiburon to a restaurant called Guymos where we drink margaritas made with Patron tequila and eat ceviche appetizers and look out on Angel Island and the city —whitest of all from this perspective, rising like a mirage out of the blue-green bay.

We watch the ferry dock, unload the suburbanites, then load them up again for the twice-hourly trip to the city. We are jealous of their starched shirts and brown loafers, how their clothes seem a testament to the balance in their lives.

The fog rolls over and down the lanyard side of Mount Tamalpais, and the city moves in and out of it, glistening like Galilee one moment, then gray and dreamy like a ghost of itself the next, and then gone, like a thought bubble, like somebody's good idea.

"Last night," I say, "I was walking alone down Telegraph Avenue. I was in a mood, you know. Gordon and I had a fight about John Lennon."

"Was he for or against?" Leo says.

"Against," I say, "but it doesn't matter. Anyway, I was scowling, maybe crying a little, moving along pretty fast, and I step over this homeless guy with his crutches and his little can and he says, 'I don't even want any money from you, I'd just like *you* to smile.'"

"So did you?" Leo says.

"I did," I say. "I not only smiled, but I laughed too, and then I went back and gave him all the money in my wallet, which was only eighteen dollars, but still. I told him to be sure and use that line again."

"I love you," Leo says, and takes both of my hands in his. "I mean, in the good way."

When I was four years old and with my parents in Palm Beach, Florida, I pulled a seven-hundred-pound cement urn off its pedestal and onto my legs, crushing both femurs. All the other urns on Worth Avenue had shrubs in them trimmed into the shapes of animals, and this one, from my three-foot point of view, appeared to be empty.

When they asked me why I had tried to pull myself up and into the urn, I said I thought it had fish inside it and I wanted to see them, though whether I had imagined actual fish or just tiny shrubs carved into the shape of fish, I can't any longer say.

The urn was empty, of course, and waiting to be repaired, which is why it toppled over onto me. My father rolled it off with some of that superhuman strength you always hear about and picked me up — I was screaming bloody murder — and held me until the ambulance came.

The next six weeks were the best of my childhood. I was hospitalized the entire time, surrounded by doctors who brought me presents, nurses who read me stories, candy stripers who came to my room and played games.

My parents, when they came to visit, were always happy to see me and usually sober.

I spent the remaining years of my childhood fantasizing about illnesses and accidents that I hoped would send me to the hospital again.

One day last month Gordon asked me to go backpacking at Point Reyes National Seashore, to prove to me, he said, that he could take an interest in my life. I hadn't slept outside one single night since I came to the city, he said, and I must miss the feel of hard ground underneath me, must miss the smell of my tent in the rain.

Gordon borrowed a backpack, got the permit, freed the weekend, studied the maps. I was teaching a darkroom workshop in Corte Madera on Saturday. Gordon would pick me up at four when the workshop

ended; we'd have just enough time to drive up the coast to Point Reyes Station and walk for an hour into the first camp. A long second day would take us to the beach, the point with the lighthouse, and back to the car with no time again to spare before dark.

I had learned by then how to spot trouble coming, and that morning I waited in the car with Gordon while first one man, way too young for me, and then another, way too old, entered the warehouse where my workshop was going to be held.

I got out of the car without seeing the surfer, tall and blond and a little breathtaking, portfolio under the arm that usually held the board. I kept my eyes away from his, but his handshake found me anyway. When he held the big door open, I went on through. I could hear the screech of tires behind me through what felt like a ton of metal.

That Gordon was there when the workshop ended at 4:02 surprised me a little. Then I got in the Pathfinder and saw only one backpack. He drove up the coast to Point Reyes without speaking. Stinson, Bolinas, Dogtown, and Olema. The white herons in Tomales Bay had their heads tucked under their arms.

He stopped at the trailhead, got out, threw my pack into the dune grass, opened my door, and tried with his eyes to pry me from my seat. "I guess this means you're not coming with me," I said, imagining how we could do it with one pack, tenacious in my hope that the day could be saved.

What you're thinking right now is why didn't I do it, get out of that car without making eye contact, swing my pack on my back, and head off down the trail? And when I tell you what I did do, which was to crawl all the way to the back of the Pathfinder, holding on to the cargo net as if a tornado were coming, and let go with one ear-splitting, head-pounding scream after another till Gordon got back in the car, till we got back down the coast, back on the 580, back over the bridge, and back to Gordon's apartment, till he told me if I was quiet, he'd let me stay, you would wonder how a person, even if she had done it, could ever in a million years admit to such a thing.

Then I could tell you about the sixteen totaled cars in my first fifteen winters. The Christmas Eve my father and I rolled a Plymouth Fury from median to guardrail and back four full times with nine complete revolutions, how they had to cut us out with chainsaws, how my father, limber from the Seagram's, got away unhurt. I could tell you about the neighbor girl who stole me away one time at the sound of my parents shouting, how she refused to give me back to them even when the police came with a warrant, how her ten-year-old hand must have looked holding my three-year-old one, how in the end it became a funny story that both sets of parents loved to tell. I could duplicate for you the hollow sound an empty bottle makes when it hits Formica and the stove is left on and the pan's started smoking and there's a button that says off

but no way to reach.

I could tell you the lie I told myself with Gordon. That anybody is better than nobody. And you will know exactly why I stayed in the back of that Pathfinder, unless you are lucky, and then you will not.

"Did I ever tell you about the time I got mugged?" Leo asks me, and we both know he has but it's his favorite story.

"I'd like it," I say, "if you'd tell it again."

Before Leo built his house on the street with the peacocks, he lived in the city between North Beach and the piers. He got mugged one night, stepping out of his car fumbling for his house keys; the man had a gun and sneaked up from behind.

What Leo had in his wallet was thirteen dollars, and when he offered the money he thought the man would kill him on the spot.

"You got a cash card," the man said. "Let's find a machine."

"Hey," I say when he gets to this part, "that means you went to crime scene number two."

The part I hate most is how he took Leo's glasses. He said he would drive, but as it turned out he didn't know stick shifts, and the clutch burned and smoked all the way up Nob Hill.

"My name's Bill," the man said, and Leo thought since they were getting so friendly, he'd offer to work the clutch and the gearshift to save what was left of his car. It wasn't until Leo got close to him, straddling the gearbox and balanced against Bill's shoulder, that he smelled the blood under Bill's jacket and knew that he'd been shot.

They drove like that to the Marina Safeway, Bill's eyes on the road and his hands on the steering wheel, Leo working the clutch and the shifter according to feel.

At the cash machine Leo looked for help but couldn't get anyone's eyes to meet his, with Bill and his gun pressed so close to his side.

*They all think we're a couple,* he thought, and laughter bubbled up inside him. He told Bill a lie about a hundred-dollar ATM limit, pushed the buttons, handed over the money.

They drove back to Leo's that same Siamese way, and when they got there Bill thanked Leo, shook his hand, asked one more favor before he took off.

"I'm going to give you a phone number," Bill said. "My girlfriend in Sacramento. I want you to call her and tell her I made it all right."

"Sure," Leo said, folding the paper.

"I want you to swear to God."

"Sure," Leo said, "I'll call her."

Bill put the end of the gun around Leo's belly button. "Say it, motherfucker, say, 'I swear to God.'"

"I swear to God," Leo said, and Bill walked away.

Back in his apartment, Leo turned on Letterman. When the shaking stopped, he called the police.

"Not much we can do about it," the woman at the end of the line told him. "We could come dust your car for fingerprints, but it would make a hell of a mess."

Two hours later Leo looked in a phone book and called a Catholic priest.

"No," the priest said, "you don't have to call her. You swore to God under extreme circumstances, brought down upon you by a godless man."

"I don't think that's the right answer," I had said when I first heard the story, and I say it again, on cue, today. The first time we had talked about the nature of godlessness, and how if a situation requires swearing to God, it is by definition extreme.

But today I am thinking not of Bill or even of Leo's dilemma, but of the girlfriend in Sacramento, her lover shot, bleeding, and hijacking architects and still remembering to think of her.

And I wonder what it was about her that made her stay with a man who ran from the law for a living, and if he made it home to her that night, if she stood near him in the kitchen dressing his wounds. I wonder how she saw herself, as what part of the story, and how much she had invested in how it would end.

"I'm so deeply afraid," Gordon had said on the docks our first night together, "that I am nothing but weak and worthless. So I take the people close to me and try to break them, so they become as weak and worthless as me." I want to know the reason I could hear and didn't hear what he was saying, the reason that I thought the story could end differently for me.

Things ended between Gordon and me in a bar in Jack London Square one night when we were watching the 49ers play the Broncos. It was Joe Montana's last year in San Francisco; rumors of the Kansas City acquisition had already begun. It was a close game late in the season; the Broncos had done what they were famous for in those days, jumped out to a twenty-point lead and then lost it incrementally as the quarters went by.

The game came right down to the two-minute warning, Elway and Montana trading scoring drives so elegant it was as if they had shaken hands on it before the game. A minute twenty-seven left, ball on the Niners' twenty-two: Joe Montana had plenty of time and one last chance to shine.

"Don't tell me you're a Bronco fan," a guy on the other side of me, a late arrival, said.

"It's a tough job," I said, not taking my eyes off the TV set. For about the hundredth time that evening the camera was off the action and on a tearful, worried, or ecstatic Jennifer Montana, one lovely and protective hand around each of her two beautiful blond little girls. "Geez," I said, when the camera came back to the action several seconds too late, "you'd think Joe Montana was the only football player

in America who had a wife."

The guy next to me laughed a short choppy laugh. Joe took his team seventy-eight yards in seven plays for the win.

On the way to his Pathfinder, Gordon said, "That's what I hate about you sports fans. You create a hero like Joe Montana just so you have somebody to knock down."

"I don't have anything against Joe Montana," I said. "I think he throws the ball like an angel. I simply prefer watching him to watching his wife."

"I saw who you preferred watching," Gordon said as we arrived at the car and he slammed inside.

"Gordon," I said, "I don't even know what that man looked like."

The moon was fat and full over the parts of Oakland no one dares to

go to late at night, and I knew as I looked for a face in it that it didn't

matter a bit what I said.

Gordon liked to drive the meanest streets when he was feeling meanest, and he was ranting about my shaking my tail feathers and keeping my pants zipped, and all I could think to do was remind him I was wearing a skirt.

He squealed the brakes at the end of my driveway, and I got out and moved toward the dark entryway.

"Aren't you going to invite me in?" he asked. And I thought about the months full of nights just like this one when I asked his forgiveness, when I begged him to stay.

"I want you to make your own decision," I said over my shoulder, and he threw the car in second, gunned the engine, and screeched away.

First came the messages taped to my door, the words cut out from ten different typefaces, held down with so many layers of tape they had the texture of decoupage. Then came the slit tires, the Karo Syrup in my gas tank, my box set of Dylan's *Biography* in a puddle at the foot of my drive. One day I opened an envelope from a magazine I'd shot for to find my paycheck ripped into a hundred pieces and then put back in the envelope, back in the box.

Leo and I trade margaritas for late-afternoon lattes, and still the fog won't lift all the way.

"What I imagine," I say, "is coming home one night and Gordon

emerging from between the sidewalk and the shadows, a Magnum .357 in his hand, and my last thought being, 'Well, you should have figured that this was the next logical thing.'"

"I don't know why you need to be so tough about it," Leo says. "Can't you let the police or somebody know?"

I say, "This is not a good city to be dogless in." Leo puts his arm around me; I can tell by the way he does it he thinks he has to.

"Do you wish sometimes," I say, "that you could just disappear like that city?"

"I can," Leo says. "I do. What I wish more is that when I wanted to, I could stay."

The ferry docks again in front of us, and we sit quietly until the whistles are finished and the boat has once again taken off.

"Are you ever afraid," I say to Leo, "that there are so many things you need swirling around inside you that they will just overtake you, smother you, suffocate you till you die?" "I don't think so," Leo says.

"I don't mean sex," I say, "or even love exactly — just all that want that won't let go of you, that even if you changed everything right now it's too late already to ever be full."

Leo keeps his eyes fixed on the city, which is back out again, the Coit Tower reaching and leaning slightly like a stack of pepperoni pizza pies. "Until only a few years ago, I used to break into a stranger's house every six months like clockwork," he says. "Is that something like what you mean?"

"Exactly," I say. A band of fog sweeps down, faster than the others, and takes away the city, even the site of Leo's mugging, even the apartment where Gordon now stays.

When I was eighteen years old, I met my parents in Phoenix, Arizona, to watch Penn State play USC in the Fiesta Bowl. I'd driven from Ohio, they'd flown from Pennsylvania, and the three of us — for the first time ever — shared my car.

My father wanted me to drive them through the wealthy suburbs, places with names like Carefree and Cave Creek. He'd been drinking earlier in the day than usual, they both had, and he got it into his head that he wanted to see the world's highest fountain shoot three hundred gallons of water per minute into the parched and evaporative desert air.

We were halfway through Cave Creek, almost to the fountain, when the cop pulled me over.

"I'm sorry to bother you," he said, "but I've been tailing you for four or five minutes, and I have to tell you, I really don't know where to

start."

The cop's nameplate said Martin "Mad Dog" Jenkins. My father let out a sigh that hung in the car like a fog. "Well, first," Officer Jenkins said, "I clocked you going 43 in a 25. Then you rolled through not one but two stop signs without coming to a safe and complete stop, and you made a right-hand turn into the center lane."

"Jesus Christ," my father said.

"You've got one taillight out," Officer Jenkins said, "and either your turn signals are burned out too, or you are electing not to use them."

"Are you hearing this?" my father said to the air.

"May I see your license and registration?"

"I left my license in Ohio," I said.

The car was silent.

"Give me a minute, then," Officer Jenkins said, "and I'll call it in."

"What I don't know," my father said, "is how a person with so little sense of responsibility gets a driver's license in this country to begin with." He flicked the air vent open and closed, open and closed. "I mean, you gotta wonder if she should even be let out of the house in the morning."

"Why don't you just say it, Robert," my mother said. "Say what you mean. Say *Daughter, I hate you."* Her voice started shaking. "Everybody sees it. Everybody knows it. Why don't you say it out loud?"

"Ms. O'Rourke?" Officer Jenkins was back at the window. "Let's hear it," my mother went on. *"Officer, I hate my daughter."* The cop's eyes flicked for a moment into the back seat.

"According to the information I received, Ms. O'Rourke," Officer Jenkins said, "you are required to wear corrective lenses."

"That's right," I said.

"And you are wearing contacts now?" There was something like hope in his voice.

"No, sir."

"She can't even lie?" my father asked. "About one little thing?"

"Okay now, on three," my mother said. *"Daughter, I wish you had*

*never been born."*

"Ms. O'Rourke," Officer Jenkins said, "I'm just going to give you a

warning today." My father bit off the end of a laugh.

"Thank you very much," I said.

"I hate to say this, Ms. O'Rourke," the cop said, "but there's nothing I could do to you that's going to feel like punishment." He held out his hand for me to shake. "You drive safely now," he said, and he was gone.

When the Fiesta Bowl was over, my parents and I drove back up to Carefree to attend a New Year's Eve party given by a gay man my mother knew who belonged to the wine club called the Royal Order of the Grape. My father wasn't happy about it, but he was silent. I just wanted to watch the ball come down on TV like I had every year of my childhood with the babysitter, but the men at the party were showing home movie after home movie of the club's indoctrination ceremony, while every so often two or three partygoers would get taken to the cellar to look at the bottles and taste.

When my father tried to light a cigarette, he got whisked outside faster than I had ever seen him move. I was too young to be taken to the cellar, too old to be doted on, so after another half-hour of being ignored I went outside to join my father.

The lights of Phoenix sparkled every color below us in the dark.

"Lucille," he said, "when you get to be my age, don't ever spend New

Year's Eve in a house where they won't let you smoke."

"Okay," I said.

"Your mother," he said, as he always did.

"I know," I said, even though I didn't.

"We just don't get love right, this family, b u t . . . " He paused, and the sky above Phoenix exploded into color, umbrellas of red and green and yellow. I'd never seen fireworks before, from the top.

"Come in, come in, for the New Year's toast!" Our host was calling us from the door. I wanted more than anything for my father to finish his sentence, but he stabbed out his cigarette, got up, and walked inside. I've finished it for him a hundred times, but never to my satisfaction.

We pay the bill and Leo informs me that he has the temporary use of a twenty-seven-foot sailboat in Sausalito that belongs to a man he hardly knows. The fog has lifted enough for us to see the place where the sun should be, and it's brighter yet out by the Golden Gate, and we take the little boat out and aim for the brightness, the way a real couple might on a Saturday afternoon.

It's a squirrelly boat, designed to make fast moves in a light wind, and Leo gives me the tiller two hundred yards before we pass under the dark shadow of the bridge. I am just getting the feel of it when Leo looks over his shoulder and says, "It appears we are in a race," and I look too, and there is a boat bearing down on us, twice our size, ten times, Leo tells me, our boat's value.

"Maybe you should take it then," I say.

"You're doing fine," he says. "Just set your mind on what's out there and run for it."

At first all I can think about is Leo sitting up on top of the bridge running numbers in his head, and a story Gordon told me where two guys meet up there on the walkway and find out they are both survivors of a previous jump.

Then I let my mind roll out past the cliffs and the breakers, past the Marin headlands and all the navigation buoys, out to some place where the swells swallow up the coastline and Hawaii is the only thing between me and forever, and what are the odds of hitting it if I just head for the horizon and never change my course?

I can hear the big boat's bow breaking right behind us, and I set my mind even harder on a universe with nothing in it except deep blue water.

"You scared him," Leo says. "He's coming about."

The big boat turns away from us, back toward the harbor, just as the giant shadow of the bridge crosses our bow. Leo jumps up and gives me an America's Cup hug. Above us the great orange span of the thing is trembling, just slightly, in the wind.

We sail on out to the edge of the headlands, where the swells get big enough to make us both a little sick and it's finally Leo who takes the tiller from my hand and turns the boat around. It's sunny as Bermuda out here, and I'm still so high from the boat race that I can tell myself there's really nothing to be afraid of. Like sometimes when you go to a movie and you get so lost in the story that when you're walking

out of the theater you can't remember anything at all about your own life.

You might forget, for example, that you live in a city where people have so many choices they throw words away, or so few they will bleed in your car for a hundred dollars. You might forget eleven or maybe twelve of the sixteen-in-a-row totaled cars. You might forget that you never expected to be alone at thirty-two or that a crazy man might be waiting for you with a gun when you get home tonight or that all the people you know — without exception — have their hearts all wrapped around someone who won't ever love them back.

"I'm scared," I say to Leo, and this time his eyes come to meet mine. The fog is sitting in the center of the bay as if it's over a big pot of soup and we're about to enter it.

"I can't help you," Leo says, and squints his eyes against the mist in the air.

When I was two years old my father took me down to the beach in New Jersey, carried me into the surf until the waves were crashing onto his chest, and then threw me in like a dog, to see, I suppose, whether I would sink or float.

My mother, who was from high in the Rocky Mountains, where all the water was too cold for swimming, and who had been told since birth never to get her face wet (she took only baths, never showers), got so hysterical by the water's edge that lifeguards from two different stands leapt to my rescue.

There was no need, however. By the time they arrived at my father's side I had passed the flotation test, had swum as hard and fast as my untried limbs would carry me, and my father had me up on his shoulders, smiling and smug and a little surprised.

I make Leo drive back by the Palace of the Fine Arts on the way home, though the Richmond Bridge is faster. The fog has moved in there too, and the last of the brides are worrying their hairdos while the grooms help them into big dark cars that will whisk them away to the honeymoon suite at the Four Seasons, or to the airport to board planes bound for Tokyo or Rio.

Leo stays in the car while I walk back to the pond. The sidewalk is littered with rose petals and that artificial rice that dissolves in the rain. Even the swans have paired off and are swimming that way, the feathers of their inside wings barely touching, their long necks bent slightly toward each other, the tips of their beaks almost closing the M.

I take the swans' picture, and a picture of the rose petals bleeding onto the sidewalk. I step up under the tallest of the arches and bow to my imaginary husband. He takes my hand and we turn to the minister, who bows to us, and we bow again.

"I'm scared," I say again, but this time it comes out stronger, almost like singing, as though it might be the first step — in fifty-five or a thousand — toward something like a real life, the very first step toward something that will last.

Source: STORIES *of the Century* John Updike • **EDITOR** Katrina Kenison **• COEDITOR**

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