CHAPTER

6

Plot

Often we use the terms **story** and **plot** as if they mean the same thing, but in literary interpretation their meanings are different. "Story" comes from the same Latin word that gives us "history." What is history? Even the soberest historians have sometimes felt that, in the memorable words of a member of the profession, "History is one damned thing after another." That is, history—and a story—is just a bunch of things that happened (or that we pretend happened, as in "Once upon a time . . .") one after the other ("and they lived happily ever after"). But when an author writes a short story, he or she designs a *structure* for it, an *organization* of events.

- This is the plot—the arrangement of episodes or doings or incidents or actions or happenings or whatever we wish to call them. The plot, again, is the cunning contrivance that is an organized whole.
- If you think of another sense of "plot," a secret plan or a scheme, you are close to the literary use of the term.

Thus, in the plot of a good story, everything hangs together, just as in a good criminal plot everything is well-coordinated: The getaway car is in place, a decoy distracts the bank guard at a crucial moment, and so forth, and the whole thing coheres. (The painter Edgar Degas had something of this sort in mind when he said that it takes as much cunning to paint a picture as to commit a crime.) Or, to return to the law-abiding world, we can recall a comparison suggested by the twentieth-century English writer Ivy Compton-Burnett: "A plot is like the bones of a person. . . the support of the whole."

Perhaps the best point of departure for understanding plot is the British novelist and short-story writer E. M. Forster's definition in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927). He states that in a good plot the episodes are connected by causality:

> We have defined a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. "The king died and then the queen died" is a story. "The king died and then the queen died of grief" is a plot. The time-sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it.

Notice how Forster goes on to develop and complicate his insight:

> Or again: "The queen died, no one knew why, until it was discovered that it was through grief at the death of the king." This is a plot with a

> mystery in it, a form capable of high development. It suspends the time-sequence, it moves as far away from the story as its limitations will allow. Consider the death of the queen. If it is in a story we say: "And then?" If it is in a plot we ask: "Why?" That is the fundamental difference between these two aspects of the novel.

Thus, if "The king died, and a week later the queen was killed by a drunk driver who was driving the wrong way down a one-way street," we would have one thing after another, a story but not a plot.

Most of the time, the plot of a short story proceeds chronologically, as Forster indicates: this happened first, and this happened next, and so on to the end. There may be **foreshadowing** along the way, where the author hints at or implies a turn or twist that the story will take. We also may encounter a **flashback,** which occurs when the author returns us to an incident or episode that preceded the events being recounted in the story. For this reason it often can be useful to set out the plot on a timeline so that we can perceive its structure visually. Such a visual aid can help us to see what happens and prompt us to analyze why it happens as it does—the motives, the causes that move the plot from here to there.

Sometimes, though, an author will choose not to present the plot of a story in chronological order. We might start in the middle (*in medias res* is the Latin phrase), with, say, the death of the king, then move backward to the marriage of the king and queen, and then move forward to the death of the queen. Or the plot might begin in the middle, move backward, forward, then backward again, and so on. The novelist Joseph Conrad, author of *Heart of Darkness* (1899), has a good term for this—he calls it "sifting," moving the plot back and forth like a miner prospecting by a stream, back and forth, back and forth, sifting as the gold comes into view.

In the *Poetics* (c. 330 BCE), the Greek philosopher Aristotle examines the plot of tragic drama, not of prose fiction, but his observations also highlight plot as a structure, as a principle for the organization of a literary work. He emphasizes that the beginning, middle, and end should be unified: "The whole, the structural union of the parts [must be] such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed." If the end of the plot is in some ways implicit in the beginning, and the narrative is, so to speak, the unfolding of the plot, does this mean that the reader can guess the end even at the beginning? Almost never. We can again quote E. M. Forster, who says that the incidents, the episodes, are "unexpected. This shock, followed by the feeling, 'Oh, that's all right,' is a sign that all is well with the plot: characters, to be real, ought to run smoothly, but a plot ought to cause surprise." We don't think this point can be overstated: A good plot surprises—but *not* because the author is free to write anything and everything. The plot must not only surprise but must also evoke the sense, "Oh, that's all right."

Some authors favor simple plots, whereas others prefer complex plots that require us to do careful work to figure out what happened. Even at the end, we might not be certain that we know. We then might be tempted to say that the story is confusing, and we might go so far as to say that it is badly written. But authors have their reasons for what they decide to do. The purpose of an intricate plot might be to show us that it sometimes is difficult to know what happened in a situation and why it did. The meaning and significance of this situation might be ambiguous, or indeterminate.

A short story is short: usually it focuses on a single plot. In this respect it differs from a play like Shakespeare's *King Lear,* which weaves together for comparison and contrast the main plot and the subplot—sometimes termed the primary and the secondary plots. Charles Dickens, Leo Tolstoy, and other novelists work on a wide-ranging, panoramic scale. In their books, we find multiple plots, a half-dozen or more. In Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852–1853) and in Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869) the authors present a number of intersecting plots. They design an elaborate structure that the author of a short story, whose space is limited, does not. A short story is perhaps closer to a lyric poem than to a novel: It usually aims at a single effect.

Authors enjoy telling stories; they take pleasure in leading us through a plot. The Canadian novelist and critic Robertson Davies (1913–1995) explains it this way:

> If you're a writer, a real writer, you're a descendant of those medieval storytellers who used to go into the square of a town and spread a little mat on the ground and sit on it and beat on a bowl and say, "if you give me a copper coin I will tell you a golden tale."

Here is a very short story told by a writer who often said he worked in the tradition of the old storyteller, sitting on a mat, that Robertson Davies speaks of.

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

W(illiam) Somerset Maugham (1874–1965), born in Paris but of English origin, grew up in England, where he was trained as a physician but never practiced medicine. Rather, he preferred to make his living as a novelist, playwright, and writer of short stories. The following story is in fact a speech uttered by a character, Death, in one of Maugham's plays, Sheppey *(1933).*

The Appointment in Samarra [1933

Death speaks: There was a merchant in Baghdad who sent his servant to market to buy provisions and in a little while the servant came back, white and trembling, and said, Master, just now when I was in the marketplace I was jostled by a woman in the crowd and when I turned I saw it was Death that jostled me. She looked at me and made a threatening gesture: now, lend me your horse, and I will ride away from the city and avoid my fate. I will go to Samarra and there Death will not find me. The merchant lent him his horse, and the servant mounted it, and he dug his spurs in its flanks and as fast as the horse could gallop he went. Then the merchant went down to the marketplace and he saw me standing in the crowd and he came to me and said, Why did you make a threatening gesture to my servant when you saw him this morning? That was not a threatening gesture, I said, it was only a start of surprise. I was astonished to see him in Baghdad, for I had an appointment with him tonight in Samarra.

The plot here is everything. Neither the merchant nor the servant has any
aracter" in the sense of a distinctive personality. We don't know if they are
ng or old, stupid or wise, easily angered, oversexed, or whatever. Our interest
ot in a clash of personalities shaped by differences in race or in economic
ss, nor is our interest in a profound relationship that goes beyond the bounds
economic class. All we know is that the servant acts reasonably, and his mas-
is generous enough to lend the servant a horse. Our interest is not in what
t of people are these but rather in what happens next. And when we get to
end of the story, we are surprised but we don't feel that the author has
ked us by pulling an ace out of his sleeve, and we do not say the ending is
robable. On the contrary, we feel that despite the nonsense of Death speak-
, it all makes sense. The end of the story is, so to speak, implicit in the begin-
g. The moral—the author's thesis, we might say—is not stated explicitly, and
haps we might quibble a little about whether there really is any moral here,
, if there is, how we might state it, but the gist surely is clear: Human beings
not elude death; it comes to us at an appointed time, whether appointed by
d, or by fate, or by biology or by chance. The first thing for you, as a reader, to
when you read a short story is to enjoy it. You are not obliged to like each
every story in this chapter or in this book as a whole—all of us have our
rites—but if you approach each story with an open mind, and with some
iosity, you will find yourself engaged by and interested in most of them. You
be "caught up in the plot."

A good plot captivates and intrigues us—which, again, reminds us that the
d "plot" also evokes sly maneuvering and conspiracy. When we read a story,
are something like a detective: We notice details, we wonder about their sig-
cance, we form expectations about what is going to happen next, we inter-
the meaning of words and actions and the motives of the characters, and so
Then on a second reading, or in an analytical essay, we might do even more
rous and thorough analytical thinking about how the author crafted this
: What is its structure? How do the pieces fit together?

inking About Plot

e are a few questions to think about:

- **The beginning:** What is the first thing that happens in the story, and in what time-period and setting?
- **The middle:** What happens next, and next, and after that? Be as specific as you can.
- What does the author do to create **suspense**?
- Does anything in the plot **surprise** you?
- Does the author present a **conflict, crisis,** or **climax** in the plot? What is the conflict? Where in the plot is the crisis? What is the climax of the plot—and its consequences? What is the **dénouement** (literally, the "unknotting") of the plot?
- Does the main **character** change a lot, or a little, or not at all as the plot unfolds?
- **The ending:** what happens as the author brings the story to its close? Is everything, or are at least some things, resolved and settled? Or not?

MARGARET ATWOOD

Born in 1939 in Ottawa, Canada, the poet, critic, novelist, and short-story writer Margaret Atwood now lives in Toronto. Her novels include The Edible Woman *(1969),* Surfacing *(1972), and* The Handmaid's Tale *(1985), and more recently,* The Penelopiad *(2005) and* The Year of the Flood *(2009).*

Happy Endings

[1983]

John and Mary meet.
What happens next?
If you want a happy ending, try A.

A

John and Mary fall in love and get married. They both have worthwhile and remunerative jobs which they find stimulating and challenging. They buy a charming house. Real estate values go up. Eventually, when they can afford live-in help, they have two children, to whom they are devoted. The children turn out well. John and Mary have a stimulating and challenging sex life and worthwhile friends. They go on fun vacations together. They retire. They both have hobbies which they find stimulating and challenging. Eventually they die. This is the end of the story.

B

Mary falls in love with John but John doesn't fall in love with Mary. He merely uses her body for selfish pleasure and ego gratification of a tepid kind. He comes to her apartment twice a week and she cooks him dinner, you'll notice that he doesn't even consider her worth the price of a dinner out, and after he's eaten the dinner he fucks her and after that he falls asleep, while she does the dishes so he won't think she's untidy, having all those dirty dishes lying around, and puts on fresh lipstick so she'll look good when he wakes up, but when he wakes up he doesn't even notice, he puts on his socks and his shorts and his pants and his shirt and his tie and his shoes, the reverse order from the one in which he took them off. He doesn't take off Mary's clothes, she takes them off herself, she acts as if she's dying for it every time, not because she likes sex exactly, she doesn't, but she wants John to think she does because if they do it often enough surely he'll get used to her, he'll come to depend on her and they will get married, but John goes out the door with hardly so much as a good-night and three days later he turns up at six o'clock and they do the whole thing over again.

Mary gets run-down. Crying is bad for your face, everyone knows that and so does Mary but she can't stop. People at work notice. Her friends tell her John is a rat, a pig, a dog, he isn't good enough for her, but she can't believe it. Inside John, she thinks, is another John who is much nicer. This other John will emerge like a butterfly from a cocoon, a Jack from a box, a pit from a prune, if the first John is only squeezed enough.

One evening John complains about the food. He has never complained about the food before. Mary is hurt.

Her friends tell her they've seen him in a restaurant with another woman, whose name is Madge. It's not even Madge that finally gets to Mary; it's the restaurant. John has never taken Mary to a restaurant. Mary collects all the sleeping pills and aspirins she can find, and takes them and half a bottle of sherry. You can see what kind of a woman she is by the fact that it's not even whiskey. She leaves a note for John. She hopes he'll discover her and get her to the hospital in time and repent and then they can get married, but this fails to happen and she dies.

John marries Madge and everything continues as in A.

C

John, who is an older man, falls in love with Mary, and Mary, who is only twenty-two, feels sorry for him because he's worried about his hair falling out. She sleeps with him even though she's not in love with him. She met him at work. She's in love with someone called James, who is twenty-two also and not yet ready to settle down.

John on the contrary settled down long ago: this is what is bothering him. John has a steady, respectable job and is getting ahead in his field, but Mary isn't impressed by him, she's impressed by James, who has a motorcycle and a fabulous record collection. But James is often away on his motorcycle, being free. Freedom isn't the same for girls, so in the meantime Mary spends Thursday evenings with John. Thursdays are the only days John can get away.

John is married to a woman called Madge and they have two children, a charming house which they bought just before the real estate values went up, and hobbies which they find stimulating and challenging, when they have the time. John tells Mary how important she is to him, but of course he can't leave his wife because a commitment is a commitment. He goes on about this more than is necessary and Mary finds it boring, but older men can keep it up longer so on the whole she has a fairly good time.

One day James breezes in on his motorcycle with some top-grade California hybrid and James and Mary get higher than you'd believe possible and they climb into bed. Everything becomes very underwater, but along comes John, who has a key to Mary's apartment. He finds them stoned and entwined. He's hardly in any position to be jealous, considering Madge, but nevertheless he's overcome with despair. Finally he's middle-aged, in two years he'll be bald as an egg and he can't stand it. He purchases a handgun, saying he needs it for target practice—this is the thin part of the plot, but it can be dealt with later—and shoots the two of them and himself.

Madge, after a suitable period of mourning, marries an understanding man called Fred and everything continues as in A, but under different names.

D

Fred and Madge have no problems. They get along exceptionally well and are good at working out any little difficulties that may arise. But their charming house is by the seashore and one day a giant tidal wave approaches. Real estate values go down. The rest of the story is about what caused the tidal wave and how they escape from it. They do, though thousands drown, but Fred and Madge are virtuous and lucky. Finally on high ground they clasp each other, wet and dripping and grateful, and continue as in A.

E

Yes, but Fred has a bad heart. The rest of the story is about how kind and understanding they both are until Fred dies. Then Madge devotes herself to charity work until the end of A. If you like, it can be "Madge," "cancer," "guilty and confused," and "bird watching."

F

If you think this is all too bourgeois, make John a revolutionary and Mary a counterespionage agent and see how far that gets you. Remember, this is Canada. You'll still end up with A, though in between you may get a lustful brawling saga of passionate involvement, a chronicle of our times, sort of.

You'll have to face it, the endings are the same however you slice it. Don't be deluded by any other endings, they're all fake, either deliberately fake, with malicious intent to deceive, or just motivated by excessive optimism if not by downright sentimentality.

The only authentic ending is the one provided here:

John and Mary die. John and Mary die. John and Mary die.

So much for endings. Beginnings are almost more fun. True connoisseurs, however, are known to favor the stretch in between, since it's the hardest to do anything with.

That's about all that can be said for plots, which anyway are just one thing after another, a what and a what and a what.

Now try How and Why.

YOUR TURN

1. Did the form of Atwood's story surprise you?
2. Does this story have a plot? Does it present and develop characters?
3. Describe your response to the final paragraphs, which focus on endings and beginnings. Which, in your view, is harder for a short-story writer, the beginning or the ending?
4. Some short stories are extremely short, while others are quite long. What do you think is the right length for a short story? Why do you think that? What kinds of arguments can you use to support your claim?
5. Please compose a part G for "Happy Endings."

KATE CHOPIN

For a biographical note, see page 67.

Désirée's Baby

As the day was pleasant, Madame Valmondé drove over to L'Abri to see Désirée and the baby.

It made her laugh to think of Désirée with a baby. Why, it seemed yesterday that Désirée was little more than a baby herself; when Mon

riding through the gateway of Valmondé had found her lying asleep in
e shadow of the big stone pillar.

The little one awoke in his arms and began to cry for "Dada." That was
much as she could do or say. Some people thought she might have strayed
ere of her own accord, for she was of the toddling age. The prevailing
lief was that she had been purposely left by a party of Texans, whose
nvas-covered wagon, late in the day, had crossed the ferry that Coton Maïs
pt, just below the plantation. In time Madame Valmondé abandoned every
eculation but the one that Désirée had been sent to her by a beneficent
ovidence to be the child of her affection, seeing that she was without
ild of the flesh. For the girl grew to be beautiful and gentle, affectionate and
ıcere,—the idol of Valmondé.

It was no wonder, when she stood one day against the stone pillar in
ıose shadow she had lain asleep, eighteen years before, that Armand
bigny riding by and seeing her there, had fallen in love with her. That was
e way all the Aubignys fell in love, as if struck by a pistol shot. The wonder
ıs that he had not loved her before; for he had known her since his father
ought him home from Paris, a boy of eight, after his mother died there.
e passion that awoke in him that day, when he saw her at the gate, swept
ng like an avalanche, or like a prairie fire, or like anything that drives
adlong over all obstacles.

Monsieur Valmondé grew practical and wanted things well considered:
at is, the girl's obscure origin. Armand looked into her eyes and did not
re. He was reminded that she was nameless. What did it matter about a
me when he could give her one of the oldest and proudest in Louisiana?
: ordered the *corbeille*[1] from Paris, and contained himself with what
tience he could until it arrived; then they were married.

Madame Valmondé had not seen Désirée and the baby for four weeks.
hen she reached L'Abri she shuddered at the first sight of it, as she always
l. It was a sad looking place, which for many years had not known the
ntle presence of a mistress, old Monsieur Aubigny having married and
ried his wife in France, and she having loved her own land too well ever
leave it. The roof came down steep and black like a cowl, reaching out be-
nd the wide galleries that encircled the yellow stuccoed house. Big,
lemn oaks grew close to it, and their thick-leaved, far-reaching branches
adowed it like a pall. Young Aubigny's rule was a strict one, too, and under
ıis negroes had forgotten how to be gay, as they had been during the old
ıster's easy-going and indulgent lifetime.

The young mother was recovering slowly, and lay full length, in her soft
ıite muslins and laces, upon a couch. The baby was beside her, upon her
n, where he had fallen asleep, at her breast. The yellow nurse woman sat
side a window fanning herself.

Madame Valmondé bent her portly figure over Désirée and kissed her,
lding her an instant tenderly in her arms. Then she turned to the child.

"This is not the baby!" she exclaimed, in startled tones. French was the
ıguage spoken at Valmondé in those days.

"I knew you would be astonished," laughed Désirée, "at the way he has
own. The little *cochon de lait!*[2] Look at his legs, mamma, and his hands

[1] wedding gift from the groom to the bride. [2] cochon de lait: suckling pig.

and finger-nails,—real finger-nails. Zandrine had to cut them this morning. Isn't it true, Zandrine?"

The woman bowed her turbaned head majestically, "*Mais si,*[3] Madame."

"And the way he cries," went on Désirée, "is deafening. Armand heard him the other day as far away as La Blanche's cabin."

Madame Valmondé had never removed her eyes from the child. She lifted it and walked with it over to the window that was lightest. She scanned the baby narrowly, then looked as searchingly at Zandrine, whose face was turned to gaze across the fields.

"Yes, the child has grown, has changed;" said Madame Valmondé, slowly, as she replaced it beside its mother. "What does Armand say?"

15 Désirée's face became suffused with a glow that was happiness itself.

"Oh, Armand is the proudest father in the parish, I believe, chiefly because it is a boy, to bear his name; though he says not,—that he would have loved a girl as well. But I know it isn't true. I know he says that to please me. And mamma," she added, drawing Madame Valmondé's head down to her, and speaking in a whisper, "he hasn't punished one of them—not one of them—since baby is born. Even Négrillon, who pretended to have burnt his leg that he might rest from work—he only laughed, and said Négrillon was a great scamp. Oh, mamma, I'm so happy; it frightens me."

What Désirée said was true. Marriage, and later the birth of his son, had softened Armand Aubigny's imperious and exacting nature greatly. This was what made the gentle Désirée so happy, for she loved him desperately. When he frowned she trembled, but loved him. When he smiled, she asked no greater blessing of God. But Armand's dark, handsome face had not often been disfigured by frowns since the day he fell in love with her.

When the baby was about three months old, Désirée awoke one day to the conviction that there was something in the air menacing her peace. It was at first too subtle to grasp. It had only been a disquieting suggestion; an air of mystery among the blacks; unexpected visits from far-off neighbors who could hardly account for their coming. Then a strange, an awful change in her husband's manner, which she dared not ask him to explain. When he spoke to her, it was with averted eyes, from which the old love-light seemed to have gone out. He absented himself from home; and when there, avoided her presence and that of her child, without excuse. And the very spirit of Satan seemed suddenly to take hold of him in his dealings with the slaves. Désirée was miserable enough to die.

She sat in her room, one hot afternoon, in her *peignoir*,[4] listlessly drawing through her fingers the strands of her long, silky brown hair that hung about her shoulders. The baby, half naked, lay asleep upon her own great mahogany bed, that was like a sumptuous throne, with its satin-lined half-canopy. One of La Blanche's little quadroon boys—half naked too—stood fanning the child slowly with a fan of peacock feathers. Désirée's eyes had been fixed absently and sadly upon the baby, while she was striving to penetrate the threatening mist that she felt closing about her. She looked from her child to the boy who stood beside him, and back again; over and over. "Ah!" It was a cry that she could not help; which she was not conscious of having uttered. The blood turned like ice in her veins, and a clammy moisture gathered upon her face.

[3] Yes indeed. [4] peignoir: loose long outer garment (French).

She tried to speak to the little quadroon boy; but no sound would come, at first. When he heard his name uttered, he looked up, and his mistress was pointing to the door. He laid aside the great, soft fan, and obediently stole away, over the polished floor, on his bare tiptoes.

She stayed motionless, with gaze riveted upon her child, and her face the picture of fright.

Presently her husband entered the room, and without noticing her, went to a table and began to search among some papers which covered it.

"Armand," she called to him, in a voice which must have stabbed him, if he was human. But he did not notice. "Armand," she said again. Then she rose and tottered towards him. "Armand," she panted once more, clutching his arm, "look at our child. What does it mean? Tell me."

He coldly but gently loosened her fingers from about his arm and thrust the hand away from him. "Tell me what it means!" she cried despairingly.

"It means," he answered lightly, "that the child is not white; it means that you are not white."

A quick conception of all that this accusation meant for her nerved her with unwonted courage to deny it. "It is a lie; it is not true, I am white! Look at my hair, it is brown; and my eyes are gray, Armand, you know they are gray. And my skin is fair," seizing his wrist. "Look at my hand; whiter than yours, Armand," she laughed hysterically.

"As white as La Blanche's," he returned cruelly; and went away leaving her alone with their child.

When she could hold a pen in her hand, she sent a despairing letter to Madame Valmondé.

"My mother, they tell me I am not white. Armand has told me I am not white. For God's sake tell them it is not true. You must know it is not true. I shall die. I must die. I cannot be so unhappy, and live."

The answer that came was as brief:

"My own Désirée: Come home to Valmondé; back to your mother who loves you. Come with your child."

When the letter reached Désirée she went with it to her husband's study, and laid it open upon the desk before which he sat. She was like a stone image: silent, white, motionless after she placed it there.

In silence he ran his cold eyes over the written words. He said nothing. "Shall I go, Armand?" she asked in tones sharp with agonized suspense.

"Yes, go."

"Do you want me to go?"

"Yes, I want you to go."

He thought Almighty God had dealt cruelly and unjustly with him; and felt, somehow, that he was paying Him back in kind when he stabbed thus into his wife's soul. Moreover he no longer loved her, because of the unconscious injury she had brought upon his home and his name.

She turned away like one stunned by a blow, and walked slowly towards the door, hoping he would call her back.

"Good-by, Armand," she moaned.

He did not answer her. That was his last blow at fate.

Désirée went in search of her child. Zandrine was pacing the sombre gallery with it. She took the little one from the nurse's arms with no word of explanation, and descending the steps, walked away, under the live-oak branches.

It was an October afternoon; the sun was just sinking. Out in the still fields the negroes were picking cotton.

Désirée had not changed the thin white garment nor the slippers which she wore. Her hair was uncovered and the sun's rays brought a golden gleam from its brown meshes. She did not take the broad, beaten road which led to the far-off plantation of Valmondé. She walked across a deserted field, where the stubble bruised her tender feet, so delicately shod, and tore her thin gown to shreds.

She disappeared among the reeds and willows that grew thick along the banks of the deep, sluggish bayou; and she did not come back again.

Some weeks later there was a curious scene enacted at L'Abri. In the centre of the smoothly swept back yard was a great bonfire. Armand Aubigny sat in the wide hallway that commanded a view of the spectacle; and it was he who dealt out to a half dozen negroes the material which kept this fire ablaze.

A graceful cradle of willow, with all its dainty furbishings, was laid upon the pyre, which had already been fed with the richness of a priceless *layette*.[5] Then there were silk gowns, and velvet and satin ones added to these; laces, too, and embroideries; bonnets and gloves; for the *corbeille* had been of rare quality.

The last thing to go was a tiny bundle of letters; innocent little scribblings that Désirée had sent to him during the days of their espousal. There was the remnant of one back in the drawer from which he took them. But it was not Désirée's; it was part of an old letter from his mother to his father. He read it. She was thanking God for the blessing of her husband's love:—

> "But, above all," she wrote, "night and day, I thank the good God for having so arranged our lives that our dear Armand will never know that his mother, who adores him, belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery."

YOUR TURN

1. Let's start with the ending. Readers find the ending powerful, but they differ in their interpretations of it. Do you think that when Armand reads the letter he learns something he had never suspected or, instead, something that he had sensed about himself all along? Find evidence in the text to support your view.
2. Describe Désirée's feelings toward Armand. Do you agree with the student who told us, "She makes him into a God"?
3. Chopin writes economically: each word counts, each phrase and sentence is significant. What is she revealing about Armand (and perhaps about the discovery he has made) when she writes, "And the very spirit of Satan seemed suddenly to take hold of him in his dealings with the slaves"?
4. Is this story primarily a character study, or is Chopin seeking to make larger points in it about race, slavery, and gender?

[5] **layette** collection of clothing for a newborn child.

CE WALKER

Walker was born in 1944 in Eatonton, Georgia, where her parents eked living as sharecroppers and dairy farmers; her mother also worked as a stic. (In a collection of essays, In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens *[1984], r celebrates women who, like her mother, passed on a "respect for the ilities [of life]—and the will to grasp them.") Walker attended Spelman e in Atlanta, and in 1965 she finished her undergraduate work at Sarah nce College near New York City. She then became active in the welfare movement in New York and in the voter registration movement in ia. Later she taught writing and literature in Mississippi, at Jackson College and Tougaloo College, and at Wellesley College, the University of chusetts, and Yale University.*

Walker has written essays, poetry, and fiction. Her best-known novel, The Purple *(1982), won a Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. She aid that her chief concern is "exploring the oppressions, the insanities, yalties, and the triumphs of black women."*

Everyday Use

[1973]

r your grandmama

will wait for her in the yard that Maggie and I made so clean and wavy yes-rday afternoon. A yard-like this is more comfortable than most people now. It is not just a yard. It is like an extended living room. When the hard ay is swept clean as a floor and the fine sand around the edges lined with ny, irregular grooves, anyone can come and sit and look up into the elm ee and wait for the breezes that never come inside the house.

Maggie will be nervous until after her sister goes: she will stand hope-ssly in corners, homely and ashamed of the burn scars down her arms and gs, eying her sister with a mixture of envy and awe. She thinks her sister as held life always in the palm of one hand, that "no" is a word the world ver learned to say to her.

ou've no doubt seen those TV shows where the child who has "made it" is nfronted, as a surprise, by her own mother and father, tottering in weakly om backstage. (A pleasant surprise, of course: What would they do if parent d child came on the show only to curse out and insult each other?) On TV other and child embrace and smile into each other's faces. Sometimes the other and father weep, the child wraps them in her arms and leans across e table to tell how she would not have made it without their help. I have en these programs.

Sometimes I dream a dream in which Dee and I are suddenly brought gether on a TV program of this sort. Out of a dark and soft-seated limou-ne I am ushered into a bright room filled with many people. There I eet a smiling, gray, sporty man like Johnny Carson[1] who shakes my hand and tells me what a fine girl I have. Then we are on the stage and Dee is embracing me with tears in her eyes. She pins on my dress a large orchid, even though she has told me once that she thinks orchids are tacky flowers.

In real life I am a large, big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands. In the winter I wear flannel nightgowns to bed and overalls during the day. I can kill and clean a hog as mercilessly as a man. My fat keeps me hot in zero weather. I can work outside all day, breaking ice to get water for washing; I can eat pork liver cooked over the open fire minutes after it comes steaming from the hog. One winter I knocked a bull calf straight in the brain between the eyes with a sledge hammer and had the meat hung up to chill before nightfall. But of course all this does not show on television. I am the way my daughter would want me to be: a hundred pounds lighter, my skin like an uncooked barley pancake. My hair glistens in the hot bright lights. Johnny Carson has much to do to keep up with my quick and witty tongue.

But that is a mistake. I know even before I wake up. Who ever knew a Johnson with a quick tongue? Who can even imagine me looking a strange white man in the eye? It seems to me I have talked to them always with one foot raised in flight, with my head turned in whichever way is farthest from them. Dee, though. She would always look anyone in the eye. Hesitation was no part of her nature.

"How do I look, Mama?" Maggie says, showing just enough of her thin body enveloped in pink skirt and red blouse for me to know she's there, almost hidden by the door.

"Come out into the yard," I say.

Have you ever seen a lame animal, perhaps a dog run over by some careless person rich enough to own a car, sidle up to someone who is ignorant enough to be kind to him? That is the way my Maggie walks. She has been like this, chin on chest, eyes on ground, feet in shuffle, ever since the fire that burned the other house to the ground.

Dee is lighter than Maggie, with nicer hair and a fuller figure. She's a woman now, though sometimes I forget. How long ago was it that the other house burned? Ten, twelve years? Sometimes I can still hear the flames and feel Maggie's arms sticking to me, her hair smoking and her dress falling off her in little black papery flakes. Her eyes seemed stretched open, blazed open by the flames reflected in them. And Dee. I see her standing off under the sweet gum tree she used to dig gum out of; a look of concentration on her face as she watched the last dingy gray board of the house fall in toward the red-hot brick chimney. Why don't you do a dance around the ashes? I'd wanted to ask her. She had hated the house that much.

I used to think she hated Maggie, too. But that was before we raised the money, the church and me, to send her to Augusta to school. She used to read to us without pity; forcing words, lies, other folks' habits, whole lives upon us two, sitting trapped and ignorant underneath her voice. She washed us in a river of make-believe, burned us with a lot of knowledge we didn't necessarily need to know. Pressed us to her with the serious way she read, to shove us away at just the moment, like dimwits, we seemed about to understand.

Dee wanted nice things. A yellow organdy dress to wear to her graduation from high school; black pumps to match a green suit she'd made from

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1. **ny Carson** a popular TV comedian, best known as host of the long-running *The t Show Starring Johnny Carson* (1962–1992).

an old suit somebody gave me. She was determined to stare down any disaster in her efforts. Her eyelids would not flicker for minutes at a time. Often I fought off the temptation to shake her. At sixteen she had a style of her own: and knew what style was.

I never had an education myself. After second grade the school was closed down. Don't ask me why: in 1927 colored asked fewer questions than they do now. Sometimes Maggie reads to me. She stumbles along good-naturedly but can't see well. She knows she is not bright. Like good looks and money, quickness passed her by. She will marry John Thomas (who has mossy teeth in an earnest face) and then I'll be free to sit here and I guess just sing church songs to myself. Although I never was a good singer. Never could carry a tune. I was always better at a man's job. I used to love to milk till I was hooked in the side in '49. Cows are soothing and slow and don't bother you, unless you try to milk them the wrong way.

I have deliberately turned my back on the house. It is three rooms, just like the one that burned, except the roof is tin; they don't make shingle roofs any more. There are no real windows, just some holes cut in the sides, like the portholes in a ship, but not round and not square, with rawhide holding the shutters up on the outside. This house is in a pasture, too, like the other one. No doubt when Dee sees it she will want to tear it down. She wrote me once that no matter where we "choose" to live, she will manage to come see us. But she will never bring her friends. Maggie and I thought about this and Maggie asked me, "Mama, when did Dee ever *have* any friends?"

She had a few. Furtive boys in pink shirts hanging about on washday after school. Nervous girls who never laughed. Impressed with her they worshiped the well-turned phrase, the cute shape, the scalding humor that erupted like bubbles in lye. She read to them.

When she was courting Jimmy T she didn't have much time to pay to us, but turned all her faultfinding power on him. He *flew* to marry a cheap city girl from a family of ignorant flashy people. She hardly had time to recompose herself.

When she comes I will meet—but there they are!

Maggie attempts to make a dash for the house, in her shuffling way, but I stay her with my hand. "Come back here," I say. And she stops and tries to dig a well in the sand with her toe.

It is hard to see them clearly through the strong sun. But even the first glimpse of leg out of the car tells me it is Dee. Her feet were always neat-looking, as if God himself had shaped them with a certain style. From the other side of the car comes a short, stocky man. Hair is all over his head a foot long and hanging from his chin like a kinky mule tail. I hear Maggie suck in her breath. "Uhnnnh," is what it sounds like. Like when you see the wriggling end of a snake just in front of your foot on the road. "Uhnnnh."

Dee next. A dress down to the ground, in this hot weather. A dress so loud it hurts my eyes. There are yellows and oranges enough to throw back the light of the sun. I feel my whole face warming from the heat waves it throws out. Earrings gold, too, and hanging down to her shoulders. Bracelets dangling and making noises when she moves her arm up to shake the folds of the dress out of her armpits. The dress is loose and flows, and as she

stands straight up like the wool on a sheep. It is black as night and around the edges are two long pigtails that rope about like small lizards disappearing behind her ears.

"Wa-su-zo-Tean-o!" she says, coming on in that gliding way the dress makes her move. The short stocky fellow with the hair to his navel is all grinning and he follows up with "Asalamalakim, my mother and sister!" He moves to hug Maggie but she falls back, right up against the back of my chair. I feel her trembling there and when I look up I see the perspiration falling off her chin.

"Don't get up," says Dee. Since I am stout it takes something of a push. You can see me trying to move a second or two before I make it. She turns, showing white heels through her sandals, and goes back to the car. Out she peeks next with a Polaroid. She stoops down quickly and lines up picture after picture of me sitting there in front of the house with Maggie cowering behind me. She never takes a shot without making sure the house is included. When a cow comes nibbling around the edge of the yard she snaps it and me and Maggie *and* the house. Then she puts the Polaroid in the back seat of the car, and comes up and kisses me on the forehead.

Meanwhile Asalamalakim is going through the motions with Maggie's hand. Maggie's hand is as limp as a fish, and probably as cold, despite the sweat, and she keeps trying to pull it back. It looks like Asalamalakim wants to shake hands but wants to do it fancy. Or maybe he don't know how people shake hands. Anyhow, he soon gives up on Maggie.

"Well," I say. "Dee."

"No, Mama," she says. "Not 'Dee,' Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo!"

"What happened to 'Dee'?" I wanted to know.

"She's dead," Wangero said. "I couldn't bear it any longer, being named after the people who oppress me."

"You know as well as me you was named after your aunt Dicie," I said. Dicie is my sister. She named Dee. We called her "Big Dee" after Dee was born.

"But who was *she* named after?" asked Wangero.

"I guess after Grandma Dee," I said.

"And who was she named after?" asked Wangero.

"Her mother," I said, and saw Wangero was getting tired. "That's about as far back as I can trace it," I said. Though, in fact, I probably could have carried it back beyond the Civil War through the branches.

"Well," said Asalamalakim, "there you are."

"Uhnnnh," I heard Maggie say.

"There I was not," I said, "before 'Dicie' cropped up in our family, so why should I try to trace it that far back?"

He just stood there grinning, looking down on me like somebody inspecting a Model A car. Every once in a while he and Wangero sent eye signals over my head.

"How do you pronounce this name?" I asked.

"You don't have to call me by it if you don't want to," said Wangero.

"Why shouldn't I?" I asked. "If that's what you want us to call you, we'll call you."

"I know it might sound awkward at first," said Wangero.

"I'll get used to it," I said. "Ream it out again."

Well, soon we got the name out of the way. Asalamalakim had a name twice as long and three times as hard. After I tripped over it two or three