

SESSION 3

**Readings:** Guy de Maupassant, “Two Friends”  
O. Henry, “The Furnished Room”  
H. H. Munro (SAKI), “The Disappearance of Crispina  
Umberleigh”  
James Joyce, “Eveline”  
Shirley Jackson, “Call Me Ishmael”  
Alice Munro, “Voices”



**Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893) was a French writer, most famous for his short stories, a number of which take place during the Franco-Prussian War of the 1870s.**

**Guy de Maupassant, “Two Friends”**

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*Two Friends is a melancholic story about loyalty in which Sauvage and Morissot share far more than a passion for fishing during wartime.*

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Besieged Paris was in the throes of famine. Even the sparrows on the roofs and the rats in the sewers were growing scarce. People were eating anything they could get.

As Monsieur Morissot, watchmaker by profession and idler for the nonce, was strolling along the boulevard one bright January morning, his hands in his trousers pockets and stomach empty, he suddenly came face to face with an acquaintance-- Monsieur Sauvage, a fishing chum.

Before the war broke out Morissot had been in the habit, every Sunday morning, of setting forth with a bamboo rod in his hand and a tin box on his back. He took the Argenteuil train, got out at Colombes, and walked thence to the Ile Marante. The moment he arrived at this place of his dreams he began fishing, and fished till nightfall.

Every Sunday he met in this very spot Monsieur Sauvage, a stout, jolly, little man, a draper [seller of cloth and dry goods] in the Rue Notre Dame de Lorette, and also an ardent fisherman. They often spent half the day side by side, rod in hand and feet dangling over the water, and a warm friendship had sprung up between the two.

Some days they did not speak; at other times they chatted; but they understood each other perfectly without the aid of words, having similar tastes and feelings.

In the spring, about ten o'clock in the morning, when the early sun caused a light mist to float on the water and gently warmed the backs of the two enthusiastic anglers, Morissot would occasionally remark to his neighbor:

"My, but it's pleasant here."

To which the other would reply:

"I can't imagine anything better!"

And these few words sufficed to make them understand and appreciate each other.

In the autumn, toward the close of day, when the setting sun shed a blood-red glow over the western sky, and the reflection of the crimson clouds tinged the whole river with red, brought a glow to the faces of the two friends, and gilded the trees, whose leaves were already turning at the first chill touch of winter, Monsieur Sauvage would sometimes smile at Morissot, and say:

"What a glorious spectacle!"

And Morissot would answer, without taking his eyes from his float:

"This is much better than the boulevard, isn't it?"

As soon as they recognized each other they shook hands cordially, affected at the thought of meeting under such changed circumstances.

Monsieur Sauvage, with a sigh, murmured:

"These are sad times!"

Morissot shook his head mournfully.

"And such weather! This is the first fine day of the year."

The sky was, in fact, of a bright, cloudless blue.

They walked along, side by side, reflective and sad.

"And to think of the fishing!" said Morissot. "What good times we used to have!"

"When shall we be able to fish again?" asked Monsieur Sauvage.

They entered a small cafe and took an absinthe together, then resumed their walk along the pavement.

Morissot stopped suddenly.

"Shall we have another absinthe?" he said.

"If you like," agreed Monsieur Sauvage.

And they entered another wine shop.

They were quite unsteady when they came out, owing to the effect of the alcohol on their empty stomachs. It was a fine, mild day, and a gentle breeze fanned their faces.

The fresh air completed the effect of the alcohol on Monsieur Sauvage. He stopped suddenly, saying:

"Suppose we go there?"

"Where?"

"Fishing."

"But where?"

"Why, to the old place. The French outposts are close to Colombes. I know Colonel Dumoulin, and we shall easily get leave to pass."

Morissot trembled with desire.

"Very well. I agree."

And they separated, to fetch their rods and lines.

An hour later they were walking side by side on the highroad. Presently they reached the villa occupied by the colonel. He smiled at their request, and granted it. They resumed their walk, furnished with a password.

Soon they left the outposts behind them, made their way through deserted Colombes, and found themselves on the outskirts of the small vineyards which border the Seine. It was about eleven o'clock.

Before them lay the village of Argenteuil, apparently lifeless. The heights of Orgement and Sannois dominated the landscape. The great plain, extending as far as Nanterre, was empty, quite empty—a waste of dun-colored soil and bare cherry trees.

Monsieur Sauvage, pointing to the heights, murmured:

"The Prussians are up yonder!"

And the sight of the deserted country filled the two friends with vague misgivings.

The Prussians! They had never seen them as yet, but they had felt their presence in the neighborhood of Paris for months past—ruining France, pillaging, massacring, starving them. And a kind of superstitious terror mingled with the hatred they already felt toward this unknown, victorious nation.

"Suppose we were to meet any of them?" said Morissot.

"We'd offer them some fish," replied Monsieur Sauvage, with that Parisian light-heartedness which nothing can wholly quench.

Still, they hesitated to show themselves in the open country, overawed by the utter silence which reigned around them.

At last Monsieur Sauvage said boldly:

"Come, we'll make a start; only let us be careful!"

And they made their way through one of the vineyards, bent double, creeping along beneath the cover afforded by the vines, with eye and ear alert.

A strip of bare ground remained to be crossed before they could gain the river bank. They ran across this, and, as soon as they were at the water's edge, concealed themselves among the dry reeds.

Morissot placed his ear to the ground, to ascertain, if possible, whether footsteps were coming their way. He heard nothing. They seemed to be utterly alone.

Their confidence was restored, and they began to fish.

Before them the deserted Ile Marante hid them from the farther shore. The little restaurant was closed, and looked as if it had been deserted for years.

Monsieur Sauvage caught the first gudgeon, Monsieur Morissot the second, and almost every moment one or other raised his line with a little, glittering, silvery fish wriggling at the end; they were having excellent sport.

They slipped their catch gently into a close-meshed bag lying at their feet; they were filled with joy--the joy of once more indulging in a pastime of which they had long been deprived.

The sun poured its rays on their backs; they no longer heard anything or thought of anything. They ignored the rest of the world; they were fishing.

But suddenly a rumbling sound, which seemed to come from the bowels of the earth, shook the ground beneath them: the cannons were resuming their thunder.

Morissot turned his head and could see toward the left, beyond the banks of the river, the formidable outline of Mont-Valerien, from whose summit arose a white puff of smoke.

The next instant a second puff followed the first, and in a few moments a fresh detonation made the earth tremble.

Others followed, and minute by minute the mountain gave forth its deadly breath and a white puff of smoke, which rose slowly into the peaceful heaven and floated above the summit of the cliff.

Monsieur Sauvage shrugged his shoulders.

"They are at it again!" he said.

Morissot, who was anxiously watching his float bobbing up and down, was suddenly seized with the angry impatience of a peaceful man toward the madmen who were firing thus, and remarked indignantly:

"What fools they are to kill one another like that!"

"They're worse than animals," replied Monsieur Sauvage.

And Morissot, who had just caught a bleak [a fish of the carp family], declared:

"And to think that it will be just the same so long as there are governments!"

To consider:

1. What is the setting of "Two Friends"?
2. How does the backdrop figure in the narrative?
3. What is the major "event" of the story?
4. How can one interpret the ending?

**O. Henry is the pen name of William Sydney Porter (1862-1910), an American writer arguably the best-known creator of short stories.**

**O. Henry, "The Furnished Room"**

"The Furnished Room" was published in O. Henry's collection, *The Four Million* (1906).

Restless, shifting, fugacious as time itself is a certain vast bulk of the population of the red brick district of the lower West Side. Homeless, they have a hundred homes. They flit from furnished room to furnished room, transients forever--transients in abode, transients in heart and mind. They sing "Home, Sweet Home" in ragtime; they carry their lares et penates [household belongings; the Latin refers

to the Roman deities said to protect the home] in a bandbox; their vine is entwined about a picture hat; a rubber plant is their fig tree.

Hence the houses of this district, having had a thousand dwellers, should have a thousand tales to tell, mostly dull ones, no doubt; but it would be strange if there could not be found a ghost or two in the wake of all these vagrant guests.

One evening after dark a young man prowled among these crumbling red mansions, ringing their bells. At the twelfth he rested his lean hand-baggage upon the step and wiped the dust from his hatband and forehead. The bell sounded faint and far away in some remote, hollow depths.

To the door of this, the twelfth house whose bell he had rung, came a housekeeper who made him think of an unwholesome, surfeited worm that had eaten its nut to a hollow shell and now sought to fill the vacancy with edible lodgers.

He asked if there was a room to let.

"Come in," said the housekeeper. Her voice came from her throat; her throat seemed lined with fur. "I have the third floor back, vacant since a week back. Should you wish to look at it?"

The young man followed her up the stairs. A faint light from no particular source mitigated the shadows of the halls. They trod noiselessly upon a stair carpet that its own loom would have forsworn. It seemed to have become vegetable; to have degenerated in that rank, sunless air to lush lichen or spreading moss that grew in patches to the staircase and was viscid under the foot like organic matter. At each turn of the stairs were vacant niches in the wall. Perhaps plants had once been set within them. If so they had died in that foul and tainted air. It may be that statues of the saints had stood there, but it was not difficult to conceive that imps and devils had dragged them forth in the darkness and down to the unholy depths of some furnished pit below.

"This is the room," said the housekeeper, from her furry throat. "It's a nice room. It ain't often vacant. I had some most elegant people in it last summer--no trouble at all, and paid in advance to the minute. The water's at the end of the hall. Sprowls and Mooney kept it three months. They done a vaudeville sketch. Miss B'retta Sprowls--you may have heard of her--Oh, that was just the stage names --right there over the dresser is where the marriage certificate hung, framed. The gas is here, and you see there is plenty of closet room. It's a room everybody likes. It never stays idle long."

"Do you have many theatrical people rooming here?" asked the young man.

"They comes and goes. A good proportion of my lodgers is connected with the theatres. Yes, sir, this is the theatrical district. Actor people never stays long anywhere. I get my share. Yes, they comes and they goes."

He engaged the room, paying for a week in advance. He was tired, he said, and would take possession at once. He counted out the money. The room had been made ready, she said, even to towels and water. As the housekeeper moved away he put, for the thousandth time, the question that he carried at the end of his tongue.

"A young girl--Miss Vashner--Miss Eloise Vashner--do you remember such a one among your lodgers? She would be singing on the stage, most likely. A fair girl, of medium height and slender, with reddish, gold hair and a dark mole near her left eyebrow."

"No, I don't remember the name. Them stage people has names they change as often as their rooms. They comes and they goes. No, I don't call that one to mind."

No. Always no. Five months of ceaseless interrogation and the inevitable negative. So much time spent by day in questioning managers, agents, schools and choruses; by night among the audiences of theatres from all-star casts down to music halls so low that he dreaded to find what he most hoped for. He who had loved her best had tried to find her. He was sure that since her disappearance from home this great, water-girt city held her somewhere, but it was like a monstrous quicksand, shifting its particles constantly, with no foundation, its upper granules of to-day buried tomorrow in ooze and slime.

The furnished room received its latest guest with a first glow of pseudo-hospitality, a hectic, haggard, perfunctory welcome like the specious smile of a demirep. The sophisticated comfort came in reflected gleams from the decayed furniture, the ragged brocade upholstery of a couch and two chairs, a footwide cheap pier glass between the two windows, from one or two gilt picture frames and a brass bedstead in a corner.

The guest reclined, inert, upon a chair, while the room, confused in speech as though it were an apartment in Babel, tried to discourse to him of its divers tenantry.

A polychromatic rug like some brilliant-flowered rectangular, tropical islet lay

surrounded by a billowy sea of soiled matting. Upon the gay-papered wall were those pictures that pursue the homeless one from house to house--*The Huguenot Lovers, The First Quarrel, The Wedding Breakfast, Psyche at the Fountain*. The mantel's chastely severe outline was ingloriously veiled behind some pert drapery drawn rakishly askew like the sashes of the Amazonian ballet. Upon it was some desolate flotsam [wreckage] cast aside by the room's marooned when a lucky sail had borne them to a fresh port--a trifling vase or two, pictures of actresses, a medicine bottle, some stray cards out of a deck.

One by one, as the characters of a cryptograph [secret code] become explicit, the little signs left by the furnished room's procession of guests developed a significance. The threadbare space in the rug in front of the dresser told that lovely woman had marched in the throng. Tiny fingerprints on the wall spoke of little prisoners trying to feel their way to sun and air. A splattered stain, raying like the shadow of a bursting bomb, witnessed where a hurled glass or bottle had splintered with its contents against the wall. Across the pier glass had been scrawled with a diamond in staggering letters the name "Marie." It seemed that the succession of dwellers in the furnished room had turned in fury--perhaps tempted beyond forbearance by its garish coldness--and wreaked upon it their passions. The furniture was chipped and bruised; the couch, distorted by bursting springs, seemed a horrible monster that had been slain during the stress of some grotesque convulsion. Some more potent upheaval had cloven a great slice from the marble mantel. Each plank in the floor owned its particular cant and shriek as from a separate and individual agony. It seemed incredible that all this malice and injury had been wrought upon the room by those who had called it for a time their home; and yet it may have been the cheated home instinct surviving blindly, the resentful rage at false household gods that had kindled their wrath. A hut that is our own we can sweep and adorn and cherish.

The young tenant in the chair allowed these thoughts to file, soft-shod, through his mind, while there drifted into the room furnished sounds and furnished scents. He heard in one room a tittering and incontinent, slack laughter; in others the monologue of a scold, the rattling of dice, a lullaby, and one crying dully; above him a banjo tinkled with spirit. Doors banged somewhere; the elevated trains roared intermittently; a cat yowled miserably upon a back fence. And he breathed the breath of the house--a dank savour rather than a smell --a cold, musty effluvium as from underground vaults mingled with the reeking exhalations of linoleum and mildewed and rotten woodwork.

Then, suddenly, as he rested there, the room was filled with the strong, sweet

odour of mignonette [type of plant with fragrant flowers]. It came as upon a single buffet of wind with such sureness and fragrance and emphasis that it almost seemed a living visitant. And the man cried aloud: "What, dear?" as if he had been called, and sprang up and faced about. The rich odour clung to him and wrapped him around. He reached out his arms for it, all his senses for the time confused and commingled. How could one be peremptorily called by an odour? Surely it must have been a sound. But, was it not the sound that had touched, that had caressed him?

"She has been in this room," he cried, and he sprang to wrest from it a token, for he knew he would recognize the smallest thing that had belonged to her or that she had touched. This enveloping scent of mignonette, the odour that she had loved and made her own--whence came it?

The room had been but carelessly set in order. Scattered upon the flimsy dresser scarf were half a dozen hairpins--those discreet, indistinguishable friends of womankind, feminine of gender, infinite of mood and uncommunicative of tense. These he ignored, conscious of their triumphant lack of identity. Ransacking the drawers of the dresser he came upon a discarded, tiny, ragged handkerchief. He pressed it to his face. It was racy and insolent with heliotrope; he hurled it to the floor. In another drawer he found odd buttons, a theatre programme, a pawnbroker's card, two lost marshmallows, a book on the divination of dreams. In the last was a woman's black satin hair bow, which halted him, poised between ice and fire. But the black satin hairbow also is femininity's demure, impersonal, common ornament, and tells no tales.

And then he traversed the room like a hound on the scent, skimming the walls, considering the corners of the bulging matting on his hands and knees, rummaging mantel and tables, the curtains and hangings, the drunken cabinet in the corner, for a visible sign, unable to perceive that she was there beside, around, against, within, above him, clinging to him, wooing him, calling him so poignantly through the finer senses that even his grosser ones became cognisant of the call. Once again he answered loudly: "Yes, dear!" and turned, wild-eyed, to gaze on vacancy, for he could not yet discern form and colour and love and outstretched arms in the odour of mignonette. Oh, God! whence that odour, and since when have odours had a voice to call? Thus he groped.

He burrowed in crevices and corners, and found corks and cigarettes. These he passed in passive contempt. But once he found in a fold of the matting a half-smoked cigar, and this he ground beneath his heel with a green and trenchant oath.

He sifted the room from end to end. He found dreary and ignoble small records of many a peripatetic tenant; but of her whom he sought, and who may have lodged there, and whose spirit seemed to hover there, he found no trace.

And then he thought of the housekeeper.

He ran from the haunted room downstairs and to a door that showed a crack of light. She came out to his knock. He smothered his excitement as best he could.

"Will you tell me, madam," he besought her, "who occupied the room I have before I came?"

"Yes, sir. I can tell you again. 'Twas Sprowls and Mooney, as I said. Miss B'retta Sprowls it was in the theatres, but Missis Mooney she was. My house is well known for respectability. The marriage certificate hung, framed, on a nail over--"

"What kind of a lady was Miss Sprowls--in looks, I mean?"

Why, black-haired, sir, short, and stout, with a comical face. They left a week ago Tuesday."

"And before they occupied it?"

"Why, there was a single gentleman connected with the draying [dray, a vehicle to haul goods] business. He left owing me a week. Before him was Missis Crowder and her two children, that stayed four months; and back of them was old Mr. Doyle, whose sons paid for him. He kept the room six months. That goes back a year, sir, and further I do not remember."

He thanked her and crept back to his room. The room was dead. The essence that had vivified it was gone. The perfume of mignonette had departed. In its place was the old, stale odour of mouldy house furniture, of atmosphere in storage.

The ebbing of his hope drained his faith. He sat staring at the yellow, singing gaslight. Soon he walked to the bed and began to tear the sheets into strips. With the blade of his knife he drove them tightly into every crevice around windows and door. When all was snug and taut he turned out the light, turned the gas full on again and laid himself gratefully upon the bed.

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It was Mrs. McCool's night to go with the can for beer. So she fetched it and sat with Mrs. Purdy in one of those subterranean retreats where house-keepers foregather and the worm dieth seldom.

"I rented out my third floor, back, this evening," said Mrs. Purdy, across a fine circle of foam. "A young man took it. He went up to bed two hours ago."

"Now, did ye, Mrs. Purdy, ma'am?" said Mrs. McCool, with intense admiration. "You do be a wonder for rentin' rooms of that kind. And did ye tell him, then?" she concluded in a husky whisper, laden with mystery.

"Rooms," said Mrs. Purdy, in her furriest tones, "are furnished for to rent. I did not tell him, Mrs. McCool."

"'Tis right ye are, ma'am; 'tis by renting rooms we kape alive. Ye have the rale sense for business, ma'am. There be many people will rayjict the rentin' of a room if they be tould a suicide has been after dyin' in the bed of it."

"As you say, we has our living to be making," remarked Mrs. Purdy.

"Yis, ma'am; 'tis true. 'Tis just one wake ago this day I helped ye lay out the third floor, back. A pretty slip of a colleen she was to be killin' herself wid the gas--a swate little face she had, Mrs. Purdy, ma'am."

"She'd a-been called handsome, as you say," said Mrs. Purdy, assenting but critical, "but for that mole she had a-growin' by her left eyebrow. Do fill up your glass again, Mrs. McCool."

To consider:

1. Who are the principal characters in "The Furnished Room"?
2. What is the mission of the young man?
3. How does the narrator present the process of the young man's search?
4. What is revealed at the end of the story?
5. How can one describe the style of O. Henry in this story?

**H. H. Munro (1870-1913) was a British writer, primarily of short stories, who wrote under the pen name of SAKI.**

**H. H. Munro (SAKI), “The Disappearance of Crispina UMBERLEIGH”**

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*"Charwoman" is a dated English term that was used to designate a woman employed to clean houses or offices.*

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In a first-class carriage of a train speeding Balkanward across the flat, green Hungarian plain two Britons sat in friendly, fitful converse. They had first foregathered in the cold grey dawn at the frontier line, where the presiding eagle takes on an extra head and Teuton lands pass from Hohenzollern to Habsburg keeping--and where a probing official beak [nose] requires to delve in polite and perhaps perfunctory, but always tiresome, manner into the baggage of sleep-hungry passengers. After a day's break of their journey at Vienna the travellers had again foregathered at the trainside and paid one another the compliment of settling instinctively into the same carriage. The elder of the two had the appearance and manner of a diplomat; in point of fact he was the well-connected foster-brother of a wine business. The other was certainly a journalist. Neither man was talkative and each was grateful to the other for not being talkative. That is why from time to time they talked.

One topic of conversation naturally thrust itself forward in front of all others. In Vienna the previous day they had learned of the mysterious vanishing of a world-famous picture from the walls of the Louvre.

"A dramatic disappearance of that sort is sure to produce a crop of imitations," said the Journalist.

"It has had a lot of anticipations, for the matter of that," said the Wine-brother.

"Oh, of course there have been thefts from the Louvre before."

"I was thinking of the spiriting away of human beings rather than pictures. In particular I was thinking of the case of my aunt, Crispina UMBERLEIGH."

"I remember hearing something of the affair," said the Journalist, "but I was away from England at the time. I never quite knew what was supposed to have happened."

"You may hear what really happened if you will respect it as a confidence," said the Wine Merchant. "In the first place I may say that the disappearance of Mrs. Umberleigh was not regarded by the family entirely as a bereavement. My uncle, Edward Umberleigh, was not by any means a weak-kneed individual, in fact in the world of politics he had to be reckoned with more or less as a strong man, but he was unmistakably dominated by Crispina; indeed I never met any human being who was not frozen into subjection when brought into prolonged contact with her. Some people are born to command; Crispina Mrs. Umberleigh was born to legislate, codify, administrate, censor, license, ban, execute, and sit in judgement generally. If she was not born with that destiny she adopted it at an early age. From the kitchen regions upwards everyone in the household came under her despotic sway and stayed there with the submissiveness of molluscs involved in a glacial epoch. As a nephew on a footing of only occasional visits she affected me merely as an epidemic, disagreeable while it lasted, but without any permanent effect; but her own sons and daughters stood in mortal awe of her; their studies, friendships, diet, amusements, religious observances, and way of doing their hair were all regulated and ordained according to the august lady's will and pleasure. This will help you to understand the sensation of stupefaction which was caused in the family when she unobtrusively and inexplicably vanished. It was as though St. Paul's Cathedral or the Piccadilly Hotel had disappeared in the night, leaving nothing but an open space to mark where it had stood. As far as was known nothing was troubling her; in fact there was much before her to make life particularly well worth living. The youngest boy had come back from school with an unsatisfactory report, and she was to have sat in judgement on him the very afternoon of the day she disappeared--if it had been he who had vanished in a hurry one could have supplied the motive. Then she was in the middle of a newspaper correspondence with a rural dean in which she had already proved him guilty of heresy, inconsistency, and unworthy quibbling, and no ordinary consideration would have induced her to discontinue the controversy. Of course the matter was put in the hands of the police, but as far as possible it was kept out of the papers, and the generally accepted explanation of her withdrawal from her social circle was that she had gone into a nursing home."

"And what was the immediate effect on the home circle?" asked the Journalist.

"All the girls bought themselves bicycles; the feminine cycling craze was still in existence, and Crispina had rigidly vetoed any participation in it among the members of her household. The youngest boy let himself go to such an extent during his next term that it had to be his last as far as that particular establishment was concerned. The elder boys propounded a theory that their mother might be

wandering somewhere abroad, and searched for her assiduously, chiefly, it must be admitted, in a class of Montmartre resort where it was extremely improbable that she would be found."

"And all this while couldn't your uncle get hold of the least clue?"

"As a matter of fact he had received some information, though of course I did not know of it at the time. He got a message one day telling him that his wife had been kidnapped and smuggled out of the country; she was said to be hidden away, in one of the islands off the coast of Norway I think it was, in comfortable surroundings and well cared for. And with the information came a demand for money; a lump sum of 2000 pounds was to be paid yearly. Failing this she would be immediately restored to her family."

The Journalist was silent for a moment, and then began to laugh quietly.

"It was certainly an inverted form of holding to ransom," he said.

"If you had known my aunt," said the Wine Merchant, "you would have wondered that they didn't put the figure higher."

"I realise the temptation. Did your uncle succumb to it?"

"Well, you see, he had to think of others as well as himself. For the family to have gone back into the Crispina thralldom [sphere of influence] after having tasted the delights of liberty would have been a tragedy, and there were even wider considerations to be taken into account. Since his bereavement he had unconsciously taken up a far bolder and more initiatory line in public affairs, and his popularity and influence had increased correspondingly. From being merely a strong man in the political world he began to be spoken of as *the* strong man. All this he knew would be jeopardised if he once more dropped into the social position of the husband of Mrs. UMBERLEIGH. He was a rich man, and the 2000 pounds a year, though not exactly a fleabite, did not seem an extravagant price to pay for the boarding-out of Crispina. Of course, he had severe qualms of conscience about the arrangement. Later on, when he took me into his confidence, he told me that in paying the ransom, or hush-money as I should have called it, he was partly influenced by the fear that if he refused it the kidnappers might have vented their rage and disappointment on their captive. It was better, he said, to think of her being well cared for as a highly-valued paying-guest in one of the Lofoden Islands [Lofoten Islands, Norway] than to have her struggling miserably home in a maimed and mutilated condition. Anyway he paid the yearly instalment as

punctually as one pays a fire insurance, and with equal promptitude there would come an acknowledgment of the money and a brief statement to the effect that Crispina was in good health and fairly cheerful spirits. One report even mentioned that she was busying herself with a scheme for proposed reforms in Church management to be pressed on the local pastorate. Another spoke of a rheumatic attack and a journey to a 'cure' on the mainland, and on that occasion an additional eighty pounds was demanded and conceded. Of course it was to the interest of the kidnappers to keep their charge in good health, but the secrecy with which they managed to shroud their arrangements argued a really wonderful organisation. If my uncle was paying a rather high price, at least he could console himself with the reflection that he was paying specialists' fees."

"Meanwhile had the police given up all attempts to track the missing lady?" asked the Journalist.

"Not entirely; they came to my uncle from time to time to report on clues which they thought might yield some elucidation as to her fate or whereabouts, but I think they had their suspicions that he was possessed of more information than he had put at their disposal. And then, after a disappearance of more than eight years, Crispina returned with dramatic suddenness to the home she had left so mysteriously."

"She had given her captors the slip?"

"She had never been captured. Her wandering away had been caused by a sudden and complete loss of memory. She usually dressed rather in the style of a superior kind of charwoman, and it was not so very surprising that she should have imagined that she was one; and still less that people should accept her statement and help her to get work. She had wandered as far afield as Birmingham, and found fairly steady employment there, her energy and enthusiasm in putting people's rooms in order counterbalancing her obstinate and domineering characteristics. It was the shock of being patronisingly addressed as 'my good woman' by a curate, who was disputing with her where the stove should be placed in a parish concert hall that led to the sudden restoration of her memory. 'I think you forget who you are speaking to,' she observed crushingly, which was rather unduly severe, considering she had only just remembered it herself."

"But," exclaimed the Journalist, "the Lofoden Island people! Who had they got hold of?"

"A purely mythical prisoner. It was an attempt in the first place by someone who knew something of the domestic situation, probably a discharged valet, to bluff a lump sum out of Edward Umberleigh before the missing woman turned up; the subsequent yearly instalments were an unlooked-for increment to the original haul.

"Crispina found that the eight years' interregnum had materially weakened her ascendancy over her now grown-up offspring. Her husband, however, never accomplished anything great in the political world after her return; the strain of trying to account satisfactorily for an unspecified expenditure of sixteen thousand pounds spread over eight years sufficiently occupied his mental energies. Here is Belgrad[e] and another custom house."

To consider:

1. What does the reader learn of the title character?
2. What are the principal events recounted in the story?
3. What is the tone of the story?
4. How does irony function in the story?
5. How does the story conclude?

**James Joyce (1882-1941) was an internationally known Irish writer, whose most famous novel is *Ulysses*. "Eveline" is from the collection *Dubliners*.**

**James Joyce, "Eveline"**

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*Eveline is Joyce's captivating "circular journey" in which a character's experiences of disappointment end where they began.*

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SHE sat at the window watching the evening invade the avenue. Her head was leaned against the window curtains and in her nostrils was the odour of dusty cretonne [a heavy fabric, usually with a print, for upholstery]. She was tired.

Few people passed. The man out of the last house passed on his way home; she heard his footsteps clacking along the concrete pavement and afterwards crunching

on the cinder path before the new red houses. One time there used to be a field there in which they used to play every evening with other people's children. Then a man from Belfast bought the field and built houses in it -- not like their little brown houses but bright brick houses with shining roofs. The children of the avenue used to play together in that field -- the Devines, the Waters, the Dunns, little Keogh the cripple, she and her brothers and sisters. Ernest, however, never played: he was too grown up. Her father used often to hunt them in out of the field with his blackthorn stick; but usually little Keogh used to keep nix and call out when he saw her father coming. Still they seemed to have been rather happy then. Her father was not so bad then; and besides, her mother was alive. That was a long time ago; she and her brothers and sisters were all grown up her mother was dead. Tizzie Dunn was dead, too, and the Waters had gone back to England. Everything changes. Now she was going to go away like the others, to leave her home.

Home! She looked round the room, reviewing all its familiar objects which she had dusted once a week for so many years, wondering where on earth all the dust came from. Perhaps she would never see again those familiar objects from which she had never dreamed of being divided. And yet during all those years she had never found out the name of the priest whose yellowing photograph hung on the wall above the broken harmonium [a keyboard instrument similar to an organ] beside the coloured print of the promises made to Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque [a 17<sup>th</sup>-century French nun and mystic]. He had been a school friend of her father. Whenever he showed the photograph to a visitor her father used to pass it with a casual word:

"He is in Melbourne now."

She had consented to go away, to leave her home. Was that wise? She tried to weigh each side of the question. In her home anyway she had shelter and food; she had those whom she had known all her life about her. Of course she had to work hard, both in the house and at business. What would they say of her in the Stores when they found out that she had run away with a fellow? Say she was a fool, perhaps; and her place would be filled up by advertisement. Miss Gavan would be glad. She had always had an edge on her, especially whenever there were people listening.

"Miss Hill, don't you see these ladies are waiting?"

"Look lively, Miss Hill, please."

She would not cry many tears at leaving the Stores.

But in her new home, in a distant unknown country, it would not be like that. Then she would be married -- she, Eveline. People would treat her with respect then. She would not be treated as her mother had been. Even now, though she was over nineteen, she sometimes felt herself in danger of her father's violence. She knew it was that that had given her the palpitations. When they were growing up he had never gone for her like he used to go for Harry and Ernest, because she was a girl but latterly he had begun to threaten her and say what he would do to her only for her dead mother's sake. And no she had nobody to protect her. Ernest was dead and Harry, who was in the church decorating business, was nearly always down somewhere in the country. Besides, the invariable squabble for money on Saturday nights had begun to weary her unspeakably. She always gave her entire wages -- seven shillings -- and Harry always sent up what he could but the trouble was to get any money from her father. He said she used to squander the money, that she had no head, that he wasn't going to give her his hard-earned money to throw about the streets, and much more, for he was usually fairly bad on Saturday night. In the end he would give her the money and ask her had she any intention of buying Sunday's dinner. Then she had to rush out as quickly as she could and do her marketing, holding her black leather purse tightly in her hand as she elbowed her way through the crowds and returning home late under her load of provisions. She had hard work to keep the house together and to see that the two young children who had been left to her charge went to school regularly and got their meals regularly. It was hard work -- a hard life -- but now that she was about to leave it she did not find it a wholly undesirable life.

She was about to explore another life with Frank. Frank was very kind, manly, open-hearted. She was to go away with him by the night-boat to be his wife and to live with him in Buenos Ayres [Aires] where he had a home waiting for her. How well she remembered the first time she had seen him; he was lodging in a house on the main road where she used to visit. It seemed a few weeks ago. He was standing at the gate, his peaked cap pushed back on his head and his hair tumbled forward over a face of bronze. Then they had come to know each other. He used to meet her outside the Stores every evening and see her home. He took her to see *The Bohemian Girl* [and Irish opera based loosely on Cervantes's novella *The Little Gypsy Girl*] and she felt elated as she sat in an unaccustomed part of the theatre with him. He was awfully fond of music and sang a little. People knew that they were courting and, when he sang about the lass that loves a sailor, she always felt pleasantly confused. He used to call her Poppens out of fun. First of all it had been an excitement for her to have a fellow and then she had begun to like him. He had tales of distant countries. He had started as a deck boy at a pound a month on a ship of the Allan Line going out to Canada. He told her the names of the ships he

had been on and the names of the different services. He had sailed through the Straits of Magellan and he told her stories of the terrible Patagonians. He had fallen on his feet in Buenos Ayres, he said, and had come over to the old country just for a holiday. Of course, her father had found out the affair and had forbidden her to have anything to say to him.

"I know these sailor chaps," he said.

One day he had quarrelled with Frank and after that she had to meet her lover secretly.

The evening deepened in the avenue. The white of two letters in her lap grew indistinct. One was to Harry; the other was to her father. Ernest had been her favourite but she liked Harry too. Her father was becoming old lately, she noticed; he would miss her. Sometimes he could be very nice. Not long before, when she had been laid up for a day, he had read her out a ghost story and made toast for her at the fire. Another day, when their mother was alive, they had all gone for a picnic to the Hill of Howth. She remembered her father putting on her mother's bonnet to make the children laugh.

Her time was running out but she continued to sit by the window, leaning her head against the window curtain, inhaling the odour of dusty cretonne. Down far in the avenue she could hear a street organ playing. She knew the air. Strange that it should come that very night to remind her of the promise to her mother, her promise to keep the home together as long as she could. She remembered the last night of her mother's illness; she was again in the close dark room at the other side of the hall and outside she heard a melancholy air of Italy. The organ-player had been ordered to go away and given sixpence. She remembered her father strutting back into the sickroom saying:

"Damned Italians! coming over here!"

As she mused the pitiful vision of her mother's life laid its spell on the very quick of her being -- that life of commonplace sacrifices closing in final craziness. She trembled as she heard again her mother's voice saying constantly with foolish insistence:

"Derevaun Seraun! Derevaun Seraun!" [This phrase has baffled critics.]

She stood up in a sudden impulse of terror. Escape! She must escape! Frank would save her. He would give her life, perhaps love, too. But she wanted to live. Why

should she be unhappy? She had a right to happiness. Frank would take her in his arms, fold her in his arms. He would save her.

She stood among the swaying crowd in the station at the North Wall. He held her hand and she knew that he was speaking to her, saying something about the passage over and over again. The station was full of soldiers with brown baggages. Through the wide doors of the sheds she caught a glimpse of the black mass of the boat, lying in beside the quay wall, with illumined portholes. She answered nothing. She felt her cheek pale and cold and, out of a maze of distress, she prayed to God to direct her, to show her what was her duty. The boat blew a long mournful whistle into the mist. If she went, tomorrow she would be on the sea with Frank, steaming towards Buenos Ayres. Their passage had been booked. Could she still draw back after all he had done for her? Her distress awoke a nausea in her body and she kept moving her lips in silent fervent prayer.

A bell clanged upon her heart. She felt him seize her hand:

"Come!"

All the seas of the world tumbled about her heart. He was drawing her into them: he would drown her. She gripped with both hands at the iron railing.

"Come!"

No! No! No! It was impossible. Her hands clutched the iron in frenzy. Amid the seas she sent a cry of anguish.

"Eveline! Evvy!"

He rushed beyond the barrier and called to her to follow. He was shouted at to go on but he still called to her. She set her white face to him, passive, like a helpless animal. Her eyes gave him no sign of love or farewell or recognition.

To consider:

1. What is the central conflict of "Eveline"?
2. What is the resolution, and how can the ending be explained?
3. How is the title character portrayed?
4. How are the family members described?

5. Do you consider “Eveline” to be a social document of sorts? Explain your response.
6. What do you see as strong points and, if any, weak points of the story?

**Shirley Jackson (1916-1965) wrote six novels, including *The Haunting of Hill House* and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. Her best-known story is “The Lottery.”**

**Shirley Jackson, “Call Me Ishmael”**

“Yes,” she said. “It’s incredible.”

It was quite stupid of people, she thought, to make everything, even conversation, so interrelated and dependent that she could not say merely that *it* was incredible but must be referring to something preceding or obvious; nothing exists, she thought, unless it depends upon something previous; people are incapable of realizing anything that does not bear upon that interrelation. In this case, it was the number of warm days that was incredible (warm days being a factor in *anyone’s* understanding), instead of anything more important, and there seem to be so few important things, she thought desperately, besides the weather.

“I like it, though,” said her mother.

There. Her mother liked it. In the pattern which existed around and in and was a part of her mother, there was a place for liking the weather.

“Look,” said her mother. “She’s there again.”

Thus, something outside the pattern was only a subject for comment, never as real as the weather, never as permanent. Only a subject for “Look. She’s there again.”

“I thought she had moved.”

“And a good thing, too,” said her mother. “No better than she should be. Decent people expected to live with a woman who . . . with a woman like that. More than a person should be expected to put up with. I suggested to the landlord that he put her out.”

Again, it was not the concreteness of the act of forcing a woman out of a house that was important; it was the fact of mentioning it to the landlord.

“What a queer interpretation you put on things, Mother.”

“Queer?” said her mother. “Queer to refuse to live in the same house with that woman? And now she comes and stands on the corner. On the corner!”

The corner was important, more important than the woman; the woman derived her actuality from the place where she lived, her landlord, the people she lived with, the corner she stood on; there was no woman, there was a corner, and a corner was no place for a woman to stand, any more than a decent house was any place for her to live.

“She seems to be drunk. . . .”

“There,” said her mother, “don’t blame the poor creature; you don’t really know, and, anyway, she’s to be forgiven.”

The woman, then, existed to be forgiven, not blamed; not understood, forgiven.

“She’s probably tired,” said her mother. “But I can’t understand why she comes back here; the landlord says she lives so far away now.” She paused. “And not in the *niciest* part of town,” she added reflectively.

“I believe I’ll speak to her.”

“We should,” said her mother, making the decision, by the use of the “should,” one of nothing; thus, the woman lost the momentary personality and became again the object of a verb.

“My good woman,” said her mother (and again the woman regained personality for a moment, by the confusion resulting from the use of “good”), “aren’t you lost?”

The woman, gathering reality from the people in the house, from the corner, from being the object of a verb and the subject of an adjective, raised her eyes and looked levelly.

“Yes, thank you,” she said flatly. “Very well lost, thank you.”

And there was the confusion of a non-related thought scattering for a moment all

of the pattern; her mother stared, the corner vanished; and then the pattern was reestablished.

“I’m sure I don’t know what to make of it,” said her mother. “I’m sure I don’t understand it at all.”

To consider:

1. What are the themes and messages of “Call Me Ishmael”?
2. How is the story structured?
3. What is the significance of the title?
4. What might be the effect of the openness of the narrative?

**Alice Munro (b. 1930) is a Canadian writer, winner of the 1913 Pulitzer Prize for Literature. Munro classifies this work as “autobiographical in feeling.”**

**Alice Munro, “Voices”**

When my mother was growing up, she and her whole family would go to dances. These would be held in the schoolhouse, or sometimes in a farmhouse with a big enough front room. Young and old would be in attendance. Someone would play the piano — the household piano or the one in the school — and someone would have brought a violin. The square dancing had complicated patterns or steps, which a person known for a special facility would call out at the top of his voice (it was always a man) and in a strange desperate sort of haste which was of no use at all unless you knew the dance already. As everybody did, having learned them all by the time they were ten or twelve years old.

Married now, with three of us children, my mother was still of an age and temperament to enjoy such dances if she had lived in the true countryside where they were still going on. She would have enjoyed too the round dancing performed by couples, which was supplanting the old style to a certain extent. But she was in

an odd situation. We were. Our family was out of town but not really in the country.

My father, who was much better liked than my mother, was a man who believed in taking whatever you were dealt. Not so my mother. She had risen from her farm girl's life to become a schoolteacher, but this was not enough, it had not given her the position she would have liked, or the friends she would have liked to have in town. She was living in the wrong place and had not enough money, but she was not equipped anyway. She could play euchre but not bridge. She was affronted by the sight of a woman smoking. I think people found her pushy and overly grammatical. She said things like "readily" and "indeed so." She sounded as if she had grown up in some strange family who always talked that way. And she hadn't. They didn't. Out on their farms, my aunts and uncles talked the way everybody else did. And they didn't like my mother very much, either.

I don't mean that she spent all her time wishing that things weren't as they were. Like any other woman with washtubs to haul into the kitchen and no running water and a need to spend most of the summer preparing food to be eaten in the winter, she was kept busy. She couldn't even devote as much time as she otherwise would have done in being disappointed with me, wondering why I was not bringing the right kind of friends, or any friends at all, home from the town school. Or why I was shying away from Sunday School recitations, something I used to make a grab at. And why I came home with the ringlets torn out of my hair — a desecration I had managed even before I got to school, because nobody else wore their hair the way she fixed mine. Or indeed why I had learned to blank out even the prodigious memory I once had for reciting poetry, refusing to use it ever again for showing off.

But I am not always full of sulks and disputes. Not yet. Here I am when about ten years old, all eager to dress up and accompany my mother to a dance.

The dance was being held in one of the altogether decent but not prosperous-looking houses on our road. A large wooden house inhabited by people I knew nothing about, except that the husband worked in the foundry, even though he was old enough to be my grandfather. You didn't quit the foundry then, you worked as long as you could and tried to save up money for when you couldn't. It was a disgrace, even in the middle of what I later learned to call the Great Depression, to find yourself having to go on the Old Age Pension. It was a disgrace for your grown children to allow it, no matter what straits they were in themselves.

Some questions come to mind now that didn't then.

Were the people who lived in the house giving this dance simply in order to create some festivity? Or were they charging money? They might have found themselves in difficulties, even if the man had a job. Doctor's bills. I knew how dreadfully that could fall upon a family. My little sister was delicate, as people said, and her tonsils had already been removed. My brother and I suffered spectacular bronchitis every winter, resulting in doctor's visits. Doctors cost money.

The other thing I might have wondered about was why I should have been chosen to accompany my mother, instead of my father doing that. But it really isn't such a puzzle. My father maybe didn't like to dance, and my mother did. Also, there were two small children to be looked after at home, and I wasn't old enough yet to do that. I can't remember my parents ever hiring a babysitter. I'm not sure the term was even familiar in those days. When I was in my teens I found employment that way, but times had changed by then.

We were dressed up. At the country dances my mother remembered, there was never any appearance in those sassy square dance outfits you would see later on television. Everybody wore their best, and not to do so — to appear in anything like those frills and neckerchieves that were the supposed attire of country folk — would have been an insult to the hosts and everybody else. I wore a dress my mother had made for me, of soft winter wool. The skirt was pink and the top yellow, with a heart of the pink wool sewn where my left breast would be one day. My hair was combed and moistened and shaped into those long fat sausage-like ringlets that I got rid of every day on the way to school. I had complained about wearing them to the dance on the grounds that nobody else wore them. My mother's retort was that nobody else was so lucky. I dropped the complaint because I wanted to go so much, or perhaps because I thought that nobody from school would be at the dance so it didn't matter. It was the ridicule of my school fellows that I feared always.

My mother's dress was not homemade. It was her best, too elegant for church and too festive for a funeral, and so hardly ever worn. It was made of black velvet, with sleeves to the elbows, and a high neckline. The wonderful thing about it was a proliferation of tiny beads, gold and silver and various colors, sewn all over the bodice and catching the light, changing whenever she moved or only breathed. She had braided her hair, which was still mostly black, then pinned it in a tight coronet on top of her head. If she had been anybody else but my mother I would have thought her thrillingly handsome. I think I did find her so, but as soon as we got

into the strange house I had to notice that her best dress was nothing like any other woman's dress, though they must have put on their best too.

The other women I'm speaking of were in the kitchen. That was where we stopped and looked at things set out on a big table. All sorts of tarts and cookies and pies and cakes. And my mother too set down some fancy thing she had made and started to fuss around to make it look better. She commented on how mouthwatering everything looked.

Am I sure she said that — mouthwatering? Whatever she said, it did not sound quite right. I wished then for my father to be there, always sounding perfectly right for the occasion, even when he spoke grammatically. He would do that in our house but not so readily outside of it. He slipped into whatever exchange was going on — he understood that the thing to do was never to say anything special. My mother was just the opposite. With her everything was clear and ringing and served to call attention.

Now that was happening and I heard her laugh, delightedly, as if to make up for nobody's talking to her. She was inquiring where we might put our coats.

It turned out that we could put them anywhere, but if we wanted, somebody said, we could lay them down on the bed upstairs. You got upstairs by a staircase shut in by walls, and there was no light, except at the top. My mother told me to go ahead, she would be up in a minute, and so I did.

A question here might be whether there could really have been a payment for attending that dance. My mother could have stayed behind to arrange it. On the other hand, would people have been asked to pay and still have brought all those refreshments? And were the refreshments really as lavish as I remember? With everybody so poor? But maybe they were already feeling not so poor, with the war jobs and money that soldiers sent home. If I was really ten, and I think I was, then those changes would have been going on for two years.

The staircase came up from the kitchen and also from the front room, joining together into one set of steps that led up to the bedrooms. After I had got rid of my coat and boots in the tidied-up front bedroom, I could still hear my mother's voice ringing out in the kitchen. But I could also hear music coming from the front room, so I went down that way.

The room had been cleared of all furniture except the piano. Dark green cloth blinds, of the kind I thought particularly dreary, were pulled down over the

windows. But there was no dreary sort of atmosphere in the room. Many people were dancing, decorously holding on to each other, shuffling or swaying in tight circles. A couple of girls still in school were dancing in a way that was just becoming popular, moving opposite each other and sometimes holding hands, sometimes not. They actually smiled a greeting when they saw me, and I melted with pleasure, as I was apt to do when any confident older girl paid any attention to me.

There was a woman in that room you couldn't help noticing, one whose dress would certainly put my mother's in the shade. She must have been quite a bit older than my mother — her hair was white, and worn in a smooth sophisticated arrangement of what were called marcelled waves, close to her scalp. She was a large person with noble shoulders and broad hips, and she was wearing a dress of golden-orange taffeta, cut with a rather low square neck and a skirt that just covered her knees. Her short sleeves held her arms tightly and the flesh on them was heavy and smooth and white, like lard.

This was a startling sight. I would not have thought it possible that somebody could look both old and polished, both heavy and graceful, bold as brass and yet mightily dignified. You could have called her brazen, and perhaps my mother later did — that was her sort of word. Someone better disposed might have said, stately. She didn't really show off, except in the whole style and color of the dress. She and the man with her danced together in a respectful, rather absent-minded style, like spouses.

I didn't know her name. I had never seen her before. I didn't know that she was notorious in our town, and maybe farther afield, for all I knew.

I think that if I was writing fiction instead of remembering something that happened, I would never have given her that dress. A kind of advertisement she didn't need.

Of course, if I had lived in the town, instead of just going in and out every day for school, I might have known that she was a notable prostitute. I would surely have seen her sometime, though not in that orange dress. And I would not have used the word prostitute. Bad woman, more likely. I would have known that there was something disgusting and dangerous and exciting and bold about her, without knowing exactly what it was. If somebody had tried to tell me, I don't think I would have believed them.

There were several people in town who looked unusual and maybe she would have seemed to me just another. There was the hunchbacked man who polished the doors of the town hall every day and as far as I know did nothing else. And the quite proper looking woman who never stopped talking in a loud voice to herself, scolding people who were nowhere in sight.

I would have learned in time what her name was and eventually found out that she really did the things I could not believe she did. And that the man I saw dancing with her and whose name perhaps I never knew was the owner of the pool room. One day when I was in high school a couple of girls dared me to go into the poolroom when we were walking past, and I did, and there he was, the same man. Though he was balder and heavier now, and wearing shabbier clothes. I don't recall that he said anything to me, but he did not have to. I bolted back to my friends, who were not quite friends after all, and told them nothing.

When I saw the owner of the pool room, the whole scene of the dance came back to me, the thumping piano and the fiddle music and the orange dress, which I would by then have called ridiculous, and my mother's sudden appearance with her coat on that she had probably never taken off.

There she was, calling my name through the music in the tone I particularly disliked, the tone that seemed to specially remind me that it was thanks to her I was on this earth at all.

She said, "Where is your coat?" As if I had mislaid it somewhere.

"Upstairs."

"Well go and get it."

She would have seen it there if she herself had been upstairs at all. She must never have got past the kitchen, she must have been fussing around the food with her own coat unbuttoned but not removed, until she looked into the room where the dancing was taking place and knew who that orange dancer was.

"Don't delay," she said.

I didn't intend to. I opened the door to the stairway and ran up the first steps and found that where the stairs took their turn some people were sitting, blocking my way. They didn't see me coming — they were taken up, it seemed, with something serious. Not an argument, exactly, but an urgent sort of communication.

Two of these people were men. Young men in Air Force uniforms. One sitting on a step, one leaning forward on a lower step with a hand on his knee. There was a girl sitting on the step above them, and the man nearest to her was patting her leg in a comforting way. I thought she must have fallen on these narrow stairs and hurt herself, for she was crying.

Peggy. Her name was Peggy. “Peggy, Peggy,” the young men were saying, in their urgent and even tender voices.

She said something I couldn’t make out. She spoke in a childish voice. She was complaining, the way you complain about something that isn’t fair. You say over and over that something isn’t fair, but in a hopeless voice, as if you don’t expect the thing that isn’t fair to be righted. Mean is another word to be made use of in these circumstances. It’s so mean. Somebody has been so mean.

By listening to my mother’s talk to my father when we got home I found out something of what had happened, but I was not able to get it straight. Mrs. Hutchison had shown up at the dance, driven by the pool room man, who was not known to me then as the pool room man. I don’t know what name my mother called him by, but she was sadly dismayed by his behavior. News had got out about the dance and some boys from Port Albert — that is, from the Air Force base — had decided to put in an appearance as well. Of course that would have been all right. The Air Force boys were all right. It was Mrs. Hutchison who was the disgrace. And the girl.

She had brought one of her girls with her.

“Maybe just felt like an outing,” my father said. “Maybe just likes to dance.”

My mother seemed not even to have heard this. She said that it was a shame. You expected to have a nice time, a nice decent dance within a neighborhood, and then it was all ruined.

I was in the habit of assessing the looks of older girls. I had not thought Peggy was particularly pretty. Maybe her make-up had rubbed off with her crying. Her rolled up mousey-colored hair had got loose from some of its bobby pins. Her fingernails were polished but they still looked as if she chewed them. She didn’t seem much more grown up than one of those whiny, sneaky, perpetually complaining older girls I knew. Nevertheless the young men treated her as if she was someone who deserved never to have encountered one rough moment, someone who rightfully should be petted and pleased and have heads bowed before her.

One of them offered her a ready-made cigarette. This in itself I saw as a treat, since my father rolled his own and so did every other man I knew. But Peggy shook her head and complained in that hurt voice that she did not smoke. Then the other man offered a stick of gum, and she accepted it.

What was going on? I had no way of knowing. The boy who had offered the gum noticed me, while rummaging in his pocket, and he said, "Peggy? Peggy, here's a little girl I think wants to go upstairs."

She dropped her head so I couldn't look into her face. I smelled perfume as I went by. I smelled their cigarettes too and their manly woollen uniforms, their polished boots.

When I came downstairs with my coat on they were still there, but this time they had been expecting me, so they all kept quiet while I passed. Except that Peggy gave one loud snuffle, and the young man nearest to her kept stroking her upper leg. Her skirt was pulled up and I saw the fastener holding her stocking.

For a long time I remembered the voices. I pondered over the voices. Not Peggy's. The men's. I know now that some of the Air Force men stationed at Port Albert early in the war had come out from England, and were training there to fight the Germans. So I wonder if it was the accent of some part of Britain that I was finding so mild and entrancing. It was certainly true that I had never in my life heard a man speak in that way, treating a woman as if she was so fine and valued a creature that whatever it was, whatever unkindness had come near her, was somehow a breach of a law, a sin.

What did I think had happened to make Peggy cry? The question did not much interest me at the time. I was not a brave person myself. I cried when chased and beaten with shingles on the way home from my first school. I cried when the teacher in the town school singled me out, in front of the class, to expose the shocking untidiness of my desk. And when she phoned my mother about the same problem and my mother hanging up the phone herself wept, enduring misery because I was not a credit to her. It seemed as though some people were naturally brave and others weren't. Somebody must have said something to Peggy, and there she was snuffling, because like me she was not thick-skinned.

It must have been that orange-dressed woman who had been mean, I thought, for no particular reason. It had to have been a woman. Because if it had been a man, one of her Air Force comforters would have punished him. Told him to watch his mouth, maybe dragged him outside and beaten him up.

So it wasn't Peggy I was interested in, not her tears, her crumpled looks. She reminded me too much of myself. It was her comforters I marvelled at. How they seemed to bow down and declare themselves in front of her.

What had they been saying? Nothing in particular. All right, they said. It's all right, Peggy, they said. Now, Peggy. All right. All right.

Such kindness. That anybody could be so kind.

It is true that these young men, brought to our country to train for bombing missions on which so many of them would be killed, might have been speaking in the normal accents of Cornwall or Kent or Hull or Scotland. But to me they seemed to be unable to open their mouths without uttering some kind of blessing, a blessing on the moment. It didn't occur to me that their futures were all bound up with disaster, or that their ordinary lives had flown out the window and been smashed on the ground. I just thought of the blessing, how wonderful to get on the receiving end of it, how strangely lucky and undeserving was that Peggy.

And, for I don't know how long, I thought of them. In the cold dark of my bedroom they rocked me to sleep. I could turn them on, summon up their faces and their voices—but oh, far more, their voices were now directed to myself and not to any unnecessary third party. Their hands blessed my own skinny thighs and their voices assured me that I, too, was worthy of love.

And while they still inhabited my not yet quite erotic fantasies they were gone. Some, many, gone for good.

To consider:

1. What is "Voices" about?
2. What are its primary themes and messages?
3. How specifically does Munro deal with the topic of memory?
4. Can one see a separation of narrator and author here?

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Do you have a favorite among the stories in this group?