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May 2, 2005

**The Garden Party Must Go On: Class Sympathy and
Characterization in Katherine Mansfield's Short Stories
&
"A Surprise" and Other Original Short Stories**

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PREFACE

The history of literary studies is fraught with missed opportunities—numerous manuscripts have been destroyed in fires, eaten by mice, or simply lost. But perhaps the greatest loss is that of works never written. Katherine Mansfield is a literary figure who seems to fit perfectly our conception of the tragic young artist: she was daring, attractive, and she died young. Mansfield was also a talented writer. Born in New Zealand in 1888, Mansfield moved to England as a young woman. As an emerging artist, she was friends and rivals with such literary giants as D.H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf. In less than fifteen years, she produced seventy-three stories and fifteen fragments.

Mansfield's promising literary career was cut short in 1923, when she died of tuberculosis at the age of thirty-four.¹ The irony for the modern reader of Mansfield's biography is the relatively short gap between her death and the widespread use of penicillin. Within twenty years of Mansfield's death, penicillin was proven effective in treating bacterial infections. It is tempting to imagine what Mansfield's masterpiece would have been, had she lived longer.

What we do have of Mansfield's work, however, is voluminous enough to allow for the study of her technique and her worldview. Mansfield was clearly capable of a variety of creative work. Her characters range from the released convict of "Old Underwood" to the quintessential teenage girl in "The Young Girl." She experimented with form, writing "Spring Pictures" in first, second, and

¹ One of Mansfield's biographers, Claire Tomalin, suggests that Mansfield's ill health was probably also caused by an untreated venereal disease: "Katherine became ill with what she called rheumatism, i.e., the arthritic pains in her joints caused by gonorrhoea" (78).

third person; other stories, such as “The Lady’s Maid,” are essentially dramatic monologues. Despite this variety, there is a definite style associated with Mansfield’s work. The following passage from “Bliss” (1918) exemplifies the style and technique of many of her best stories:

Oh, is there no way you can express [bliss] without being “drunk and disorderly”? How idiotic civilization is! Why be given a body if you have to keep it shut up in a case like a rare, rare fiddle?

“No, that about the fiddle is not quite what I mean,” she thought, running up the steps and feeling in her bag for the key—she’d forgotten it, as usual—and rattling the letter-box. “It’s not what I mean, because—Thank you, Mary”—she went into the hall. “Is nurse back?” (337-8)

Although this passage is written from the perspective of a limited omniscient third-person narrator, we might well mistake the tone and sense for a first person narrator. The entire first paragraph quoted above could be the transcribed thoughts of Bertha Young, the main character. In the next paragraph, Bertha’s thoughts are attributed to her through quotation marks, but we still get a sense of a mind at work. The description of her thoughts and actions are intertwined, and she is distracted from what she means to say by her servant, Mary.

From this passage, it seems that Mansfield depicts the ordinary mind on an ordinary day—the modernist goal of Virginia Woolf (1923). Yet there is a marked difference between Mansfield’s writing and that of the modernists—we do not see the highly experimental quality of Woolf and Joyce. Mansfield’s language is natural and precise, most of her characters are women or children, and her plots are the stuff of everyday life. Her writing reflects what her husband, J. Middleton Murry, has termed her “purity,” or a “crystal-clear” lens of seeing the world around her (x).

It is this clear yet intimately psychological style that I find most attractive about Mansfield's work. As I read Mansfield's stories in my junior year for Professor Demas's Short Story Seminar (English 303), I began, unconsciously, to attempt to convey her distinctive third-person narration in my own writing.² The story that resulted from Mansfield's influence sparked an idea for a creative writing project. During the past year, I have written six original stories: "A Surprise," "Street Smarts," "The Sun on Clouds," "First Grade," "A Day at the Beach," and "Above the Streets." In these stories, I have attempted to apply the lessons I have learned from Mansfield's writing. My goal is to create multi-faceted characters—characters with whom we can sympathize, even if we find their mindsets or actions objectionable. Although the situations and characters that I concentrate on are different from those of Mansfield, I did branch out in similar ways. For example, in "First Grade" the main character is a first grader; this is the only story in which I have attempted to write from the perspective of a child. I attempted this after reading Mansfield's New Zealand stories, "Prelude" and "At the Bay." This is a perfect example of how technique and content merge: I used techniques typical of Mansfield's writing, while venturing into similar thematic territory.

The short story is often described as portraying a slice of life, yet most of Mansfield's stories are highly crafted (as most successful short stories are). In her stories there are no mistakes—everything means something and is necessary to the story. Her stories show a specific turning point or a culminating moment in a

² In the same course we read many of Chekhov's short stories, thus establishing the influence of his style upon hers.

person's life. For example, in "Bliss" Mansfield does not describe every happy day in the character's life, nor every suspicious action of the unfaithful husband; instead, she shows the moment in which the wife opens her eyes to the infidelity. In my story "Street Smarts" I employ this strategy to portray a similarly telling moment in a relationship. Although the main character in my story makes a decision about her feelings within the scope of the story, it is clear that the past has led up to this culminating moment. I also followed Mansfield's lead in striving to portray issues of socio-economic class in subtle ways. In two of my stories characters of different economic backgrounds encounter one another: in "Above the Streets" these characters fail to connect, and in "Street Smarts" the main characters apply stereotypes to the lower class characters.

The other three stories, "A Day at the Beach," "A Surprise," and "The Sun on Clouds," also pay homage to Mansfield in thematic as well as stylistic ways. In "A Day at the Beach" my aim is to portray the power dynamics of a family, while concentrating upon the consciousness of a character unlike myself—she is a married woman with children. "Sun on Clouds" is my attempt to capture an ordinary woman's everyday life. In "A Surprise" I again emulate Mansfield's third person limited omniscient narrator. While writing this story I had in mind two of Mansfield's stories, each of which focus upon a single object—in "Bliss" a pear tree, in "Poison" the mail.

Although my goal has been to emulate Mansfield's writing style, and even to address similar themes, I am not attempting to step into her persona as an author. My stories are all set in the contemporary U.S., not England and New

Zealand in the early twentieth century. I address similar themes—particularly those of class and imbalance in the modern world—not simply because Mansfield did so in her writing, but because I find these themes pertinent to the contemporary world.

The first section of this project is a critical exploration of how Mansfield depicts class relations, entitled “The Garden-Party Must Go On: Class Sympathy and Characterization in Katherine Mansfield’s Short Stories.” I have divided this work into five chapters. “The Dreams of the Working Class” examines Mansfield’s early stories, “The Tiredness of Rosabel” and “The Child-Who-Was-Tired.” In “The Death of a Child: The Impossibility of Inter-class Sympathy,” I work with several of Mansfield’s stories: “Life of Ma Parker,” “Revelations,” “The Fly,” and “Six Years After.” In the third chapter, “The Politics of Aesthetics and Sexuality,” I concentrate on the story “A Cup of Tea.” The fourth chapter, “Acting the Part: Performance vs. Innocence in Class Relations” examines the stories “The Garden-Party” and “The Doll’s House.” The final chapter, “Beyond Class: Mansfield’s Overarching Concern,” involves a close reading of “Sun and Moon.” Throughout this work, I analyze the role that socio-economic class plays in these characters’ lives and interactions, and what the implications are for a capitalist system that perpetuates class disparities. Ultimately, I connect this socio-economic imbalance to the larger imbalances—of power, time, resources, love, and money—that Mansfield depicts in her stories, and which seem to drive her characters into misunderstood isolation.

My goal in this project is for its creative and critical aspects to engage in a dialogue with one another. Beyond style and technique, I also admire Mansfield's boldness in tackling every subject—from poverty to death—with grace and subtlety. Many of Mansfield's stories that I analyze in the critical half of this work have a clear political aim: she is bringing a social problem to the forefront of her work. As I develop my own writing style, I hope, eventually, to address such important issues with a similar commitment to both politics and aesthetics.

PART I:

**THE GARDEN PARTY MUST GO ON:
CLASS SYMPATHY AND CHARACTERIZATION IN
KATHERINE MANSFIELD'S SHORT STORIES**

INTRODUCTION

Katherine Mansfield was clearly concerned with an entire range of political matters: from her complicated perspective regarding women's suffrage in "The Journey to Bruges" to her depiction of military might in "Germans at Meat." A major issue that Mansfield addresses in many stories, spanning the length of her writing career, is that of class. The question of how individuals of different socio-economic classes relate to one another is paramount in these stories.

Mansfield repeatedly tackles class in her writing, concentrating on portraying the working class. The reader is asked, in story after story, to sympathize with the impoverished characters. In her early story, "The Tiredness of Rosabel," she traces a day in the life of a girl who works at a hat shop. Another early story, "The Child-Who-Was-Tired," takes the perspective of a servant-child. In numerous later stories Mansfield focuses closely upon the treatment of the working-class by the middle and upper classes ("Life of Ma Parker," "A Cup of Tea," "The Doll's House," "The Garden Party," and "Revelations"). Reading chronologically, we can see the development of Mansfield's class sensibility. From her initial attempts to invoke sympathy for members of the working class, she constructs a criticism of her well-to-do characters' sensibilities, repeatedly pointing out their problematic desire to be generous. Mansfield does, however, offer us a small number of characters of the upper class who resist subscribed class roles and seem to have a more genuinely sensitive nature. These characters

offer an uncertain hope for a new generation that might have the power to change interclass relations.

At this point, it is important to clarify the methodology behind my work. The tradition in literary criticism for addressing the issue of class is inextricably entwined with Marxist theory. This work is not written in the tradition of cultural studies; I have based my arguments upon close reading and an examination of how Mansfield creates characters of different socio-economic classes.³ She pushes the reader to sympathize with characters of either background, creating a complex sympathy that prevents us from simply condemning the upper class characters. This speaks to both Mansfield's technical ability as a writer, and her thematic aims.

Considering the clear political ramifications of addressing class, it is surprising that Mansfield's stories have only recently been read as texts containing political statements. In fact, as critic Pamela Dunbar reminds us in *Radical Mansfield*, a common criticism of Mansfield's work in the past has been that it "exists only on the margins of history, unaffected by contemporary literary trends and divorced from the great social, political and cultural events of her time" (x). As recently as 1997, Tim Marshall noted that one of Mansfield's stories had not yet been acknowledged for its "imaginative closeness to working-class

³ To clarify how words and phrases such as "class" and "capitalism" will be used throughout this work, I have relied upon the definitions outlined by Raymond Williams in his handbook *Keywords*. I use the word "class" as Williams explains its meaning—as a category—in *Keywords*: "an economic category, including all who are objectively in that economic situation" (68). The term "socio-economic class" is used interchangeably with the word "class," as I believe we tend to think of economic disparities as a function of both social status and economic standing. The word "capitalism" is prone to the pitfall that Williams points out in *Keywords*: it describes both a mode of production and a type of society (52). The blurring of definitions seems natural, as the former leads to the latter. Capitalist society is also associated in my essay with a consumer society—"a wasteful and 'throw-away' society" (Williams 79).

culture” (103). Mansfield’s texts have not been thoroughly examined for their political implications; I have not been able to locate an in-depth study of how Mansfield addresses class in her stories.

In light of this critical tradition surrounding Mansfield, it is startling to find that she had many connections to socially radical publications and personalities. For example, Lee Garver has traced the politics of *The New Age*, a weekly magazine through which Mansfield published the stories she wrote in 1910 and 1911 (225). Garver writes that this magazine

[...] was not only the most significant clearinghouse of anticapitalist thought in Britain, but it was also a site of culturally pivotal debate about socialism, feminism, and the arts...Politically, *The New Age* was the birthplace of guild socialism, a short-lived political theory that combined an anarcho-libertarian hostility to state authority with a socialist commitment to communal ownership of the means of production. (226)

Mansfield wrote in an era before the Cold War—before communism gained its present-day negative connotations. Because Mansfield lived and worked in such close proximity to new ideas about economic systems, it is not surprising that her own work is critical of the current capitalist system. Instead of writing manifestos, of course, she chose the short story as her medium. This brings the abstract ideas of class and economics to the concrete level of individuals.

Mansfield seems to identify with both upper class and working class characters. Although Mansfield’s later life was marked by what Jayne Marek calls illness and poverty (41), she grew up in a position of privilege. Mansfield’s own poverty in adult life seems to have affected her writing—especially in the stories “The Doll’s House” and “The Garden-Party,” which seem to rework childhood memories of privilege. These stories are critical of the blindness that can

accompany an upper class existence. In writing about subjects with which one is unfamiliar, a writer might tend to either rely upon stereotypes or romanticize the subjects. Mansfield never succumbs to these crutches, portraying real and dynamic characters—not “types” or representations of a noble poverty. When her upper class characters display these misconceptions, she treats them ironically, critiquing such tendencies to over-romanticize poverty. Her working class characters are not part of a pastoral of poverty (or a romantic portrayal of the supposedly simple life of the poor), but rather depict and embody realistic problems and emotions: hunger, death, grief, and envy. Mansfield also confronts the problem of romanticizing the poor by writing from the perspective of members of both the working class and the upper class.

This was an important task, particularly in the post-Victorian era. As Martha Vicinus notes in *The Industrial Muse*, working class writers of the Victorian age were not necessarily able to write about working class issues and still gain the favor of the publishing houses, which were “controlled” by the middle class and directed at the middle masses (3-4). Such writers “were tempted to sacrifice their class base for a mass base to avoid controversy and gain greater popularity” (4). Both the literary “means of production” and the mass audience for literature were dominated by the middle class. In light of this literary tradition in England, Mansfield’s confrontation of the problem of class relations seems all the more daring and necessary.

Ultimately, however, Mansfield is not simply condemning the upper class or asking us to sympathize with the lower classes. There is a complex sympathy at

work in her stories that defies simple labels. Mansfield uses class not as a way to condemn, but as a springboard to explore how human nature plays out through class constructs. The question of class sympathy is one way of entering Mansfield's texts. What Mansfield seems to be portraying is not simply the unjust disparities between the haves and the have-nots, but the larger imbalances in the modern world of power, time, resources, love, and money. Mansfield's world is one in which people are separated and alienated by this imbalance. Some characters work all day just to feed themselves, while others lead lives empty of any useful labor or action. This imbalance affects characters of all socio-economic classes, yet this shared experience does not draw them together. They cannot relate even in their discontent—the rift is too wide.

THE DREAMS OF THE WORKING CLASS

Mansfield's "The Tiredness of Rosabel" (1908) takes as its subject one day in the life of a young girl working at a "millinery establishment" (3). Within the first paragraph our attention is turned not only to the capitalistic society of which Rosabel is a part, but also to her aspirations toward the luxury items (status symbols) associated with disposable income. In the opening sentence Mansfield's narrator tells us: "Rosabel bought a bunch of violets, and that was practically the reason why she had so little tea" (3). She chooses to buy flowers (aesthetically pleasing but short-lived and unsubstantial "products") instead of spending the money on food (sustenance). On her way home from work, Rosabel notices the advertisements urging the occupants of the bus to buy consumer goods. These are ads she has read "many times" (4)—capitalism is an ever-present backdrop to her existence.⁴

In opposition to the "stifled" atmosphere of the bus, with its "sickening smell of warm humanity," the narrator describes the "fairy palaces" that are jewelry shops (3). Rosabel seems to reject some of the realities of a corporeal existence: she would rather buy violets than food, and she is sickened by the smell of people. Rosabel's thoughts take us back earlier in the day to describe the sort of young lady who might be found frequenting magical shops. We know right away

⁴ The opening of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* bears a number of similarities to the beginning of "The Tiredness of Rosabel." Woolf's novel was published after the end of the first World War, long after Mansfield wrote this short story. Woolf's novel opens with the line: "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself" (3), and follows with a description of walking into town, with "shopkeepers [...] fidgeting in their windows" (6), a bookshop (12-3), flags flying on Bond Street (15), a glove shop (15), and of course the flower shop (17-8). Mrs. Dalloway, a member of the upper class, buys her own flowers among the same backdrop of buying and selling that we find in Mansfield's "The Tiredness of Rosabel."

that the “girl with beautiful red hair” (5) is extravagant and the personification of wealth. Her bright hair and eyes “the colour of that green ribbon shot with gold they had got from Paris last week” (5) are the marks of a more exciting life than that of Rosabel—we might compare the girl’s red hair to Rosabel’s own brown hair. Her eyes are likened to an expensive product; they are gold (an obvious sign of wealth) and from Paris (a city associated with high fashion).

Rosabel finds a hat that charms the girl and her beau, but before buying it, the girl offers the hat to Rosabel to try on. This seems to be a generous gesture, which attempts to draw Rosabel into the drama of buying:

“Oh, Harry, isn’t it adorable,” the girl cried, “I must have that!”
She smiled again at Rosabel. ‘It suits you, beautifully.’

A sudden, ridiculous feeling of anger had seized Rosabel. She longed to throw the lovely, perishable thing in the girl’s face, and bent over the hat, flushing. (6)

The hat that will belong to the girl suits Rosabel “beautifully”—but there is no possibility that Rosabel will ever own such a hat. With the hat she tries on the status and style that accompany such a “lovely” object. The fact that the hat “suits” her seems to raise the possibility that with the hat Rosabel might be mistaken as a member of the upper class—perhaps even become a member of the upper class. Costume, then, can be a transformative construction: the clothes make the queen. Rosabel’s anger might be explained by a realization that she cannot own the hat or the life that it symbolizes, despite the fact that there is no inherent difference between the girl and herself. The hat itself is a “perishable” thing, much like the violets she buys in an attempt to imitate the upper-class’s freedom to spend money for purposes of aesthetics or pleasure, rather than for

basic necessities. Predictably, the markers of class are items of no lasting use—items that one would only buy if one had disposable income. Her longing to throw the hat “in the girl’s face” can be interpreted, then, as a desire to force the girl to recognize this symbol of disposable income—this symbol of everything that separates Rosabel from the girl.

Rosabel clearly envies the girl’s place in the economic class system. Her beau stays behind to pay for the hat; he fascinates Rosabel:

“Ever been painted?” he said.

“No,” said Rosabel, shortly, realizing the swift change in his voice, the slight tinge of insolence, of familiarity.

“Oh, well you ought to be,” said Harry. “You’ve got such a damned pretty little figure.”

Rosabel did not pay the slightest attention. How handsome he had been! She had thought of no one else all day [...] (6)

Left alone with the pretty employee, Harry’s voice changes to one that he does not use around the girl with whom he has a relationship (and who shares his upper-class status). He is “familiar” and “insolent” with Rosabel, asking questions with explicit sexual overtones. He suggests that Rosabel be painted—that her “damned pretty little figure” be turned into an immortal but inanimate object. The suggestion that Rosabel be painted positions Harry as a possible owner of the painting. The very phrasing of his comment suggests ownership: “You’ve got.” What she possesses he might wish to own. Harry might buy such an object, but he will not marry such a girl. Clearly, something about sexuality is free from class. The articulation of sexual attraction is not free from class, however, because the construction of marriage is not.

Rosabel does not pay attention to his comments. Whether she is accustomed to such treatment, flattered, or using blinders, we do not know.

Rosabel instead focuses on how “handsome” he is. Even with this proof that he is less than the perfect beau (he flirts with her while the girl is out of earshot), and less than a gentleman (the sexual tone of his flirting), she considers the girl lucky to have such a man attached to her (6). Harry’s handsomeness seems to represent his class, to which so many lovely things belong. Her desire for everything that the girl has—her beau, her status, and her hat—drives Rosabel to “[suppose] they changed places” (6). The idea of a working-class individual switching position with someone of the upper class is a common motif in literature; it is important that in Mansfield’s story the switch is only a fantasy, not an actual event.

Rosabel’s fantasy is blind to any possible faults in Harry’s character. It is telling that she notes the actual *feeling* between Harry and herself only once. This comes within the first sentence, seeming to serve almost as a disclaimer: “of course they were in love with each other” (6). The rest of Rosabel’s fantasy is composed solely of money and status symbols: a French maid, roses, white suede gloves (which can be disposed of and replaced as soon as one button is missing), champagne, a shining silver dress (6-7). Even her fantasy mail revolves around displaying these riches and enjoying expensive activities, rather than spending time with friends and loved ones: “invitations for the Opera, dinners, balls, a weekend on the river, a motor tour” (7). Rosabel imagines a decadent and opulent life, the sole purpose of which is to acquire lovely and perishable experiences and products.

Flashes of Rosabel's literally hard reality—the stiffness of her knees, the heat of her mouth—interrupt her fantasy as she sits on the floor (7-8). The emphasis on Rosabel's mouth in these passages is important to note. While she imagines being caught up in Harry's arms in this rich fantasy, she “[puts] her hand up to her hot mouth” (8). This draws the reader's attention back to the beginning, when we realize that, having bought violets, Rosabel has not had enough to eat. More importantly, however, this attention on Rosabel's mouth reminds us of consumption in general. Although the allusion to her hot mouth also suggests a sexual desire, Rosabel's interest in Harry is predominantly economic. Her concentration is focused upon his handsomeness (perhaps an objectification similar to his preoccupation with her figure) and the luxury products a marriage with such a man would provide. The fantasy relationship is more a transaction than a romance. In the final paragraph, we see Rosabel wake up with “a little nervous tremor round her mouth” (8), reminding us that in her daily life she must confront the anxiety of not having enough to eat. This mention of her mouth might remind us of the allusion to her “hot mouth” on the same page. Rosabel's mouth would also be a site of class—the accents of the English have traditionally exposed a person's class. The social difference between Received Pronunciation (RP) and a Cockney accent, for example, is huge. As the linguist Naomi Baron notes, RP is “associated with social class rather than geography” (130). Perhaps one reason that Rosabel cannot appropriate the upper class hat is her lower-class accent.

This story portrays the consumer culture that dominates Rosabel's fantasy life and the economic and class systems that prevent her from participating in such a culture. Pamela Dunbar has analyzed the Cinderella-like elements to the story, which of course ends not in a happily-ever-after, but rather in an awakening to reality. There is an element of alienation due to the separation from the desired position of what Dunbar terms the "privileged customer" (5). After a close examination of Rosabel's fantasy life and reaction to Harry, we might consider Rosabel a somewhat blind character. She does not seem to have a realistic vision of the lives the girl and Harry lead; instead, she seems to think that anyone with money is unbelievably happy. We do not condemn her, however, as we can sympathize with her position and desperate desire to be rich (and therefore happy). The narrator clearly positions the reader in Rosabel's consciousness in order to build sympathy with Rosabel and her plight as a working class girl. Mansfield reverses Rosabel's fantasy of becoming rich: she asks her audience (composed largely of middle or upper class readers) to imagine being poor rather than excessively wealthy.

Another early story, "The Child-Who-Was-Tired" (1909), adheres closely to the perspective of an outsider of the class system: a child servant. One of Mansfield's biographers has termed this story a "free translation" of Anton Chekhov's short story "Sleepy" (Tomalin 73). Regardless as to how much of the story is, or was intended to be, original, the important fact to keep in mind is that

Mansfield chose this particular story to adapt into English.⁵ She took the theme and subject matter as her own, and used her own abilities as a writer to render the story into English. From “The Tiredness of Rosabel” we can see that Mansfield was thinking about class and the imagination—two of the main elements in Chekhov’s story.

In “The Child-Who-Was-Tired,” unlike “The Tiredness of Rosabel,” however, there is no time for a fantasy life. The first sentence leads us along “a little white road with tall black trees” (91), but we are as quickly ripped out of this dream when the Child is shaken and slapped awake. She is not part of the family; significantly, she is also unnamed. No one loves her (or understands her) enough to name her. To not have a name is to be somehow less than a person: anonymous, unformed, and insignificant.

Throughout the story the Child tries to return to her dream-moment of walking down the road. When the baby cries, the Child says: “I’ll tell you a dream. Once upon a time there was a little white road—” (96). She cannot finish, however, as she is crying into the vegetables that she has been preparing for the meal. The labor she must perform prevents her from expressing her imaginative life. Hanging up the wash, she tries to remember a story about “a child who had once played for a whole day in just such a meadow with real sausages and beer for her dinner—and not a little bit of tiredness” (96). This story serves as a fantasy of a better life, yet there is no way to make it real; she cannot even remember who

⁵ It is very likely that Mansfield had no intention of taking credit for Chekhov’s story. But A.R. Orage of the *New Age* looked through Mansfield’s work and selected “The Child-Who-Was-Tired” to publish (Tomalin 80). As Claire Tomalin notes, it must have been a difficult moment; if Mansfield had pointed out that it was essentially a free translation of Chekhov’s work, it might have “cast a doubt over the authenticity of the rest of the stories” (80).

told her the story (the source of the fantasy). The next paragraph begins with “wet clothes [flapping] in her face” (96), indicating that her work has again asserted its dominance over her consciousness—it literally covers her eyes from seeing anything else. From these examples it is clear that her imaginative life has been stifled by her position as a servant.

The search for this elusive dream continues as the Child is forced to walk the baby along the road:

Two girls with bundles on their shoulders came walking out of the village...They were laughing and holding each other by the hand. Then the sun pushed by a heavy fold of grey cloud and spread a warm yellow light over everything.

“Perhaps,” thought the Child-Who-Was-Tired, “if I walked far enough up this road I might come to a little white one, with tall black trees on either side—a little road—”

“Salad, salad!” cried the Frau’s voice from the house. (97)

The Child sees that these girls walking on the road are happy, and that the sun comes out as they go by, spreading warm light. There seems to be a possibility for happiness and warmth along this road. The Child immediately links this glimpse of happiness with her own dream: perhaps the scene from her imagination can be found farther along the road. This attempt to realize a fantasy of a better life is literally interrupted by her position as a servant.

During the exhausting evening, the Child must look after the screaming baby instead of going to sleep. Her masters again interrupt her story as she looks after the baby, and they order her to “keep that baby quiet” (98). She realizes that it is this baby (her main responsibility as a servant) that prevents her from continuing her dream. In a twist ending, the Child smothers the baby. She is now free to sleep and follow the “little road that led to nowhere, and where nobody

walked at all—nobody at all” (99). This is the last line of the story, implying that she is able to finish the dream at last. The narrator denies the reader’s urge to know what happens next, after the crisis. Although we might imagine the subsequent disaster, we are left with the peaceful dream of the Child. In order to follow this dream to completion, the Child must smother the representation of her essential enslavement as a servant. She thus destroys her condition as a servant, by taking away that which defines her responsibility.

The fact that the Child’s dream is a deserted road where “nobody walked [...] nobody at all” (99) seems to imply the necessity of being alone in order to be free. We are told earlier that she is “so small” (95), and easily scared by the Frau. If anyone else existed along the dream road, we might see him or her as a risk to the Child’s freedom and happiness. The effectiveness of Mansfield’s narrator is that we completely empathize with the Child when she murders the baby. This turns our values upside down—we care more for the murderer than the victim. We are able to identify with the Child’s actions because we recognize the injustice of her situation as a servant. We must question the imbalance of the world in this story: the Frau and her husband have power over the Child (and the Child over the baby). This seems to correspond with the morality of this world, as our ideas of right and wrong are turned on their heads. There is no way out of the position except to destroy the baby. Although we can see that the baby is to some extent a symbol for all that oppresses the Child, it is still a perverse action on a literal level. As a result of this two-tiered structure (symbolic and literal), the

narrator implies that the economic and social systems that allow a child to be mistreated to this extent are also corrupt enough to produce such grotesque acts.

These are the two major early Mansfield stories that center upon members of the lower classes and their labor. Although their settings are widely different (“The Tiredness of Rosabel” takes place in England, while “The Child-Who-Was-Tired” takes place in Germany), there is the common theme of an unrealized dream. The problem of an indentured class is not confined within one country, but spread internationally. Rosabel fantasizes about switching places into the upper class, and the Child is prevented by her position from fulfilling her desires to sleep and dream. Laboring all day for little money leads Rosabel to an obsession with the symbols of opulence—her imaginative life is consumed by such products. The Child, on the other hand, does not even have time to fantasize. Her dream is cut short, as are her attempts to retell the dream or imagine a carefree life. It is interesting that the word “tired” appears in both titles. There is a natural association between tiredness and drudgery, of course, but there is also the indication that both characters are mentally as well as physically exhausted by their work. Both characters’ existences are consumed by their positions as laborers—their imaginative lives are defined by the pursuit of a way out of these positions. For Rosabel marriage to a rich man is the escape route; for the Child a road is the way to distance herself from her present situation.

**THE DEATH OF A CHILD:
THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF INTER-CLASS SYMPATHY**

After producing stories that centered our sympathy solely upon the working class (“The Tiredness of Rosabel” and “The Child-Who-Was-Tired”), Mansfield began to write stories that divide the reader’s sympathy between characters of different classes. She would not attempt a critique of the class system from solely the perspective of the working class again. Nearly a decade later, however, she did begin to write stories examining class relations from the perspective of the upper class. Two stories written at approximately the same time, “Revelations” (1920) and “Life of Ma Parker” (1920), demonstrate the inability of the middle and upper classes to effectively relate to those who serve them. In both texts it is the death of a child that brings this impossibility to light. Mansfield seems to be writing with both the Victorian motif of the dead innocent and Anton Chekhov’s short story “Misery” in mind.

In “Revelations” the reader immediately senses that the narrator treats Monica Tyrell’s point of view ironically. Monica “[suffers] from her nerves, and [suffers] so terribly that these hours [are]—agonizing, simply” (425). Her eyes, when she refers to her age (which she does “on all occasions”), are “grave” but “childish” (425). The banging of a door and the acts of her servant are enough to bring Monica to the “limit of her suffering” (426). Staying in bed while a servant brings in a tray of breakfast and opens the blinds has never been portrayed as such an unbearable experience—the reader might well be thankful that she prepares her

own breakfast in the morning! When Monsieur inquires after Monica at this hour of the morning, we learn that it is the “one unforgivable thing” (426).

However comical Monica’s reaction might seem, it is also telling. What bothers Monica is the noise and the light: the banging of the front door, “voices in the passage,” the maid entering the room, etc. She does not want the outside world to intrude upon her silent, dark privacy. She wants a world in which she has some control over her surroundings. The scene culminates in the opening of the blinds that lets in a “whitey-greyish light” (426): “with a sharp tearing rip out flew the blind and the curtains, stiffening, flapping, jerking. The tassel of the blind knocked—knocked against the window” (426). This is a violent depiction of light coming into the room. In a metaphorical sense, Monica seems determined to keep her eyes closed to the outside world. When the phone rings, Monica reaches “the limit of her suffering” (426). The ringing is not only noise, but also a sign that another person wants her attention. Monica refuses to see the caller (her beau, Ralph) for lunch later; she is angry with him for misunderstanding her:

How dared Ralph do such a thing when he knew how agonizing her nerves were in the morning! Hadn’t she explained and described and even—though lightly, of course; she couldn’t say such a thing directly—given him to understand that this was the one unforgivable thing? (426)

What bothers Monica even more than the actual noise of the phone is the fact that a man with whom she is in a romantic relationship would misread her. She is not direct with him; we can presume she has dropped hints, skirted around the subject—in short, that she has given him an indication of her feelings. Monica seems to value the idea of a tacit understanding between lovers. She should not have to spell everything out to Ralph, he should be able to piece together her

words in order to figure her out. She seeks something beyond a silent and dark solitude: she wants to be understood.

To escape this situation, Monica flees to her hairdresser's. Here in this shop she "always [has] the feeling that they [love] her" (428). The idea that a hairdresser might love his patron seems unlikely. More realistically, we might assume that the hairdresser appreciates her business, or knows how to make conversation. She might feel understood at the hairdresser's, but this is an understanding that is bought, not freely given. The other person we might expect Monica to love and be loved by, Ralph, does not seem to please her as much as the hairdresser. We might question Monica's idea of love—she seems to want the power of the customer in her romantic relationship.

When Monica arrives at the hairdresser's, she quickly senses that something is wrong:

When [Madame] called through the wall-telephone to George there was a note in her voice that had never been there before. But Monica would not believe this. No, she refused to. It was just her imagination. She sniffed greedily the warm, scented air, and passed behind the velvet curtain into the small cubicle. (428)

Monica refuses to accept that something is different about this day. She successfully deceives herself: instead of asking after the family's welfare, she "greedily" sniffs the characteristic scent of the shop. She consumes the plush smell, much as she will consume the services offered here. This is her purpose in coming to the shop—to be pampered and served (and perhaps, in her mind, loved). She easily dismisses the "note" in Madame's voice, separating herself from Madame with the velvet curtain.

As she sits, Monica senses that “[s]omething awful had happened” (430). She feels an intense loneliness, and likens our lives to leaves that fall and float away: “nobody knows—nobody cares where we fall” (430). She seems to realize that her “relationship” with George is based not on love but money and service. Appropriately, she sees George standing as “so submissive”—he is subject to her orders (430). As he goes about handing Monica her things and finalizing the payment, Monica sees George as a “wooden man” (430). This acts on two levels: George is probably wooden in his grief, but he is also in some way under her control—wooden like a puppet or a doll.

George finally tells Monica what the “something awful” is:

“The truth is...my little daughter died this morning...” —and then his white face crumpled like paper, and he turned his back on her and began brushing the cotton kimono. “Oh, oh,” Monica began to cry. She ran out of the shop into the taxi. (430)

Mansfield’s distinctive third-person narrator describes this scene from Monica’s perspective. Even in his grief, George is described in terms of his work: his face crumples “like paper,” just as Monica associates the smell of burnt paper (a smell she loves) with the labor he performs. Monica does not offer a word of condolence, nor does she try to relate to his grief. Her trivial grievances of the morning, in juxtaposition to a child’s death, seem ridiculous to the reader.

But Mansfield’s narrator does not leave us with a simple picture of Monica’s superficiality. Monica rushes out crying, and enters the car sobbing (430). We have sat in on her thoughts about life and loneliness, and can in some capacity sympathize with her position: what does one say in the face of such grief? In some way, is it not inevitable that we will be unable to comfort others,

when we are both horrified by such grief and outside of its scope? In the final paragraph of the story, however, the narrator seems to focus in on the question of how well Monica understands the situation of which she has been a part.

In the car, Monica cannot escape the thought of the dead child: she sees “nothing but a tiny wax doll” (431). This image is indicative not only of the impact the news has had on Monica, but also of the way in which she understands the world. The only way that Monica can relate to George’s grief is by thinking of a “wax doll with a feather of gold hair” (431). She reduces the figure of the child to an object—she seems unable to relate to George or his family in terms of real human emotions or experiences. Correspondingly, Monica considers a way to console George only when she sees “a flower shop full of white flowers” (431). She does not attempt to offer sympathy in person, but instead considers buying its equivalent. We might take this as a sign of how deeply Monica is imbedded in a capitalist culture: the only way to relate to George is by purchasing commodities. To some extent, the reaction to buy something to alleviate or sympathize with grief is a natural gesture for Monica. Buying flowers for a bereaved family is of course part of her class’s ethos, which points to the underlying value system: something purchased, and perhaps never even seen by the giver, is supposed to convey an emotion to the receiver. Whether it is ingrained social behavior or an avoidance of intimate contact with George (someone she surely has little in common with), it is an important detail for the narrator to include. But even this possibility is literally passed by: “She tapped against the window, but the driver did not hear; and, anyway, they were at Princes’ already” (431). The potential to

connect, even on this object-oriented level, is undermined by the prospect of lunching at the exclusive restaurant.

We might wonder to what extent Monica empathizes with George. She considers sending flowers and signing herself as “one who understands” (431); but does she understand grief? At the start of the story she seems wrapped up in trivial annoyances. As the story unfolds, however, we see that the place she flees to, the people who supposedly love her, are there for her only for so long as she is a paying customer. If we believe in Tennyson’s lines, that it is better to “have loved and lost/ Than never to have loved at all,” then Monica is the one most deserving of our pity. By the end of the story we know that she does have deep fears and thoughts about the nature of life. Mansfield’s narrator gives us just enough of Monica’s personal life to complicate our sympathies. To what extent are we supposed to condemn or identify with Monica? We know that she suffers in a different way from George; this does not seem to mean, however, that her suffering is less valid. It is no mistake that the reader is informed of Monica’s age within the first paragraph (33). Monica is unmarried, childless, and seemingly unable to cope with much of the outside world. Her life appears to have no meaning beyond lunching and primping, and everything is done by servants. She literally has nothing to do. This economic system not only shortchanges the working class, it also deprives many upper class members of a meaningful or useful existence.

In “Life of Ma Parker,” Mansfield again makes use of the “death of an innocent” plot set-up. A working class child has died (much as George’s daughter

in “Revelations” dies), and the ensuing impact demonstrates the impossibility of authentic interclass relations. Again, the two main characters are engaged in the employer-employee relationship: Ma Parker is the literary gentleman’s housecleaner. She is in mourning, but the gentleman does not notice. In an essay on this story as a representation of “pauperland,” Tim Marshall has observed that Ma Parker is “illegible to her employer at the level of cultural symbolism” because he does not notice her black hairpins (101). The gentleman feels “awkward” upon the news of Ma Parker’s grandson’s death—he “could hardly go back to the warm sitting-room without saying something [...] Then because these people set such store by funerals” he asks after the services (484). His awkwardness stems from an inability to relate to Ma Parker’s perspective. Ma Parker does not answer his question; her silence might be due to his miscalculation of her concerns and values. The literary gentleman is dismissive of her loss. He thinks: “Poor old bird! She did look dashed” (484). When one thinks of losing one’s grandson (after a series of misfortunes in a hard life), one generally does not describe the feeling as “dashed.” Furthermore, he seems to be relating to her only from seeing her demeanor (“look”), not from any sympathy with her emotions.

When the narrator switches to the consciousness of Ma Parker, a firm opposition between the literary gentleman and his housecleaner is developed. Ma Parker, a native of Stratford-upon-Avon, never hears of Shakespeare until seeing his name “on the theatres” (486). She is cut off from the literary world of the gentleman she cleans for. At her first job, she is not allowed to read letters from

home because they “[make] her dreamy” (486). Similar to the Child in “The Child-Who-Was-Tired,” Ma Parker is not allowed to be dreamy or imaginative—she must keep her mind upon her labor. The literary gentleman, on the other hand, is allowed a life of the mind; in fact, his mind is what defines his occupation.

Another strong contrast between the gentleman and Ma Parker is in their perspectives on life. Ma Parker’s life is a struggle, but the gentleman romanticizes her life:

“A baker, Mrs. Parker!” [he] would say. For occasionally he laid aside his tomes and lent an ear, at least, to this product called Life. “It must be rather nice to be married to a baker!”

Mrs. Parker didn’t look so sure.

“Such a clean trade,” said the gentleman.

Mrs. Parker didn’t look convinced.

“And didn’t you like handing the new loaves to the customers?”

“Well, sir [...] I wasn’t in the shop above a great deal. We had thirteen little ones and buried seven of them” (487)

The gentleman is typically too busy with books to pay attention to the stark realities of life, and even when he does, he is apt to romanticize it in a ridiculous manner. He has an image of a happy peasant woman handling the freshly baked bread, but Ma Parker is not “convinced” of his impression. Her experience does not match his imagination—there is an insurmountable difference in perspectives. The fact that Ma Parker’s husband dies of “flour on the lungs” (487) further pushes apart these perspectives. The husband dies of a condition that is inextricably linked to his labor; just as the gentleman’s life is defined by his books, the baker’s death is caused by his occupation.

The disparity between Ma Parker’s life and that of the literary gentleman is emphasized by his almost comical parting comment about the missing teaspoon

of cocoa. As he steps out of the apartment, he asks Ma Parker if she threw out the last teaspoon of cocoa in the tin the last time she cleaned the apartment. She says she did not. He replies “softly and firmly”: “You’ll always tell me when you throw things away—won’t you, Mrs. Parker?” (488). He is “very well pleased with himself” (488) after making this comment, leading the reader to question his decency.

It is interesting that the literary gentleman thinks that baking is a clean trade. As a cleaning woman, Ma Parker cleans up after her employers’ lives. It seems that the relationship does not go the other way—the literary gentleman does not help Ma Parker deal with the emotional mess she finds herself in as a bereaved woman. By the end of the story we know that Ma Parker needs a place to cry—a way to release her grief: “Wasn’t there anywhere in the world where she could have her cry out—at last?” (490). This sentiment is strikingly similar to the one found in Anton Chekhov’s short story, “Misery,” in which a sleigh driver tries to tell various passengers about his son’s death, but no one will listen except for his horse. In Mansfield’s story, however, there is not even a horse to be found. In fact, Ma Parker does not even consider the possibility of sharing her grief with someone else. All she looks for is a place to be sad in private, which proves to be a futile search: “Ma Parker stood, looking up and down [...] There was nowhere” (490).

Naturally, we sympathize primarily with Ma Parker in this story—her life has been difficult and her grandson’s death carries tremendous emotional weight. What makes this story more interesting, however, is the fact that we also must

sympathize with the literary gentleman. From the first sentence of the story we know that the gentleman means well: “When the literary gentleman [...] opened the door to [Ma Parker] that morning, he asked after her grandson” (484). He is interested (or at least gives the appearance of being so) in the welfare of Ma Parker’s family. We can understand why he feels awkward at the news—what does one say in such a situation? Even the comments that he makes about Ma Parker’s life as a baker’s wife are easily forgivable. In fact, many of us probably would jump to the same conclusions if asked to imagine a baker’s shop and home.

The literary gentleman wins our sympathy at various points in the story not only because we can understand his actions, but also because he is an easy character to identify with. We see him in his home, in a “shabby dressing-gown” with his newspaper in hand (484). Interestingly, he has no name. We also know nothing about his past, which is juxtaposed as an absence next to Ma Parker’s complete life story. The literary gentleman’s lack of a name and lack of a history are both ways to make his character more anonymous (and possibly easier to identify with). This character is not just a gentleman—he is a literary gentleman. As readers, we can relate to this man. Additionally, one of the few descriptive details we have is the mention of the newspaper in his hand. Mansfield seems to mean for us to imagine ourselves in the literary gentleman’s place: interrupted by Ma Parker at the door while reading and eating breakfast.

In both of these stories the reader’s sympathies are not solely concentrated on any one character. We lean toward the working class characters, however, as they both have lost children. The narrator treats the characters of the middle and

upper classes ironically; the reader is led to see the hypocritical or shallow elements within these characters. Monica and the literary gentleman are in some ways too enmeshed in a separate class to transcend these boundaries and relate on an authentic emotional level with George and Ma Parker, respectively.

In the later story “The Fly” (1922) and in her unfinished story “Six Years After” (1921) Mansfield further explores grief over the loss of a child. Again, this grief is narrated in terms of power relations. In these stories Mansfield steps beyond the overt socio-economic class references of “Revelations” and “Life of Ma Parker.” When read in combination with such stories, however, “The Fly” clearly comments upon class and power through the psychological study of the main character, the boss.

We are introduced to the boss through the perspective of Mr. Woodifield, who, as the story opens, is visiting him and staring “almost greedily” at the “stout, rosy...still going strong” boss (597). Through the narrator, who seems to be situated in Mr. Woodifield’s consciousness, we learn that it “[does] one good to see [the boss]” (597). Such visits help the coddled and retired Mr. Woodifield feel a part of the life he used to lead. But the visit is not only beneficial to Mr. Woodifield—this is a symbiotic rather than a parasitic relationship. The narrator, who previously occupied Mr. Woodifield’s consciousness, switches to the boss’s side. The boss derives pleasure in comparing his own strength to the retired man’s weakness: “It gave him a feeling of deep, solid satisfaction to be planted there in the midst of it in full view of that frail old figure in the muffler” (597). As the boss, he is “planted” in this business, a strong and growing figure. There is

something about being viewed by the weaker subject (who is bundled up against the cold) that boosts the boss's view of himself. The "solid" satisfaction derived from the situation adds to the authority we already know the boss has; the comparison seems to further plant him in his powerful position.

The boss is defined by this position of power; he has no name beyond his job title. By now the withholding of a character's name is a familiar strategy in Mansfield's work (i.e. the Child and the literary gentleman). In this story the boss's lack of a name puts emphasis on his social power. The boss seems like a type—the type of person who is in a place of social and economic power. The details we learn about the boss build upon this persona of power: he has recently redone his office and he offers Mr. Woodifield whiskey taken from the cellars of Windsor Castle (597-8). He seems to be wealthy and to have good taste.

There is one blot in this otherwise flawless image of the successful and healthy boss. The boss's only son died in the war—a fact hinted at first by the narrator, who describes a photograph of the boy ("a grave-looking boy in uniform") over the boss's table (598). We learn the details through the dialogue and the omniscience of the narrator. Mr. Woodifield reminds the boss of this lost son when he remarks that his daughters saw the boy's grave in Belgium. To this news, "the boss [makes] no reply. Only a quiver in his eyelids [shows] that he heard" (599). This might be a foreshadowing of how the boss will cope with the reminder of his grief. It is a small thing on the outside—a quiver—but we assume it means more psychologically. The fly scene, possibly foreshadowed here, is also a small action that speaks volumes about the boss's state of mind.

After Mr. Woodifield leaves, the boss orders the office manager, Macey, not to admit anyone for half an hour. During this time, he has “wanted, he intended, he had arranged to weep” (600). But crying, unlike business, cannot be arranged. We learn that the boss sees no point in building up the business that defines his character without a son to pass it all onto: “[this business] had no other meaning if it was not for the boy. Life itself had come to have no other meaning” (600). But despite the fact that the boy has been dead for six years, the boss is still in his office. The fact that his character is defined by the workplace suggests that leaving the business would, as suggested in the above quote, would be tantamount to dying.

The boss’s attention is diverted from these reveries by a fly, which has fallen into the inkpot. He helps it out, and watches as it methodically cleans itself.

The fly overcomes this trial:

Now one could imagine that the little front legs rubbed against each other lightly, joyfully. The horrible danger was over; it had escaped; it was ready for life again.

But just then the boss had an idea. He plunged his pen back into the ink, leaned his thick wrist on the blotting paper, and as the fly tried its wings down came a great heavy blot. (601)

Although the boss initially aims to help the fly, by the end of this passage he seems to desire to test the fly’s ability to overcome obstacles. We might imagine that the personification of the fly comes primarily from the boss’s consciousness (as the narrator seems firmly entrenched in his mind). It seems strange, therefore, to inflict hurt on a being that one imagines has the capacity to experience pain and joy. The fly is “cowed, stunned, and afraid to move” (601) after the new drop hits it. The boss seems to feel an affinity with the fly—he too has been cowed by an

event in his life. The death of his son is in some sense the boss's drop of ink, and he seems unequal to the task of becoming "ready for life again."

As the boss watches the fly clean off for a second time, he feels "real admiration for the fly's courage. That was the way to tackle things; that was the right spirit. Never say die..." He seems to be deriving pleasure from seeing this courage, much as Mr. Woodifield derived pleasure from seeing the boss's vitality and strength. In the above scene we can also see a strange and somewhat violent sexual undertone. The boss "plunges" a pen into the inkpot (601), and deposits the liquid on the fly. In some way, the boss seems to be not only comparing himself to the fly, but also linking himself to the development of the fly's endurance through this physical act. Testing its limits, the boss does the same routine again.

After a suspenseful moment, the fly starts to clean off:

[...] the boss felt a rush of relief. He leaned over the fly and said to it tenderly, "You artful little b..." And he actually had the brilliant notion of breathing on it to help the drying process. All the same, there was something timid and weak about its efforts now, and the boss decided that this time should be the last, as he dipped the pen into the inkpot. (602)

In this passage the boss seems to identify the fly as a sort of offspring—the result of his "training." He leans over the fly and speaks to it, as one might speak to a child. He even wants to help the fly, and recognizes that it is not as strong. This tips the power scales—the previous courage of the fly is lessened in the face of its eventual weakening. The fly is not immune to the boss's actions, perhaps proving in the boss's mind that he is not weaker than the fly. Read in this way, then, the scene would hold a similar dynamic to the prior one with Mr. Woodifield. In both, the boss improves his state of mind by juxtaposing himself against a weaker

object. The action of burdening the fly seems to play out a psychological need to be in control, perhaps due to the fact that for all his planning and arranging in business, the boss has lost his son.

Finally, the boss drops one last load of ink on the fly. The fly does not move:

“Come on,” said the boss. “Look sharp!” And he stirred it with his pen—in vain. Nothing happened or was likely to happen. The fly was dead [...] But such a grinding feeling of wretchedness seized him that he felt positively frightened. He started forward and pressed the bell for Macey.

“Bring me some fresh blotting-paper,” he said, sternly, “and look sharp about it.” And while the old dog padded away he fell to wondering what it was he had been thinking about before. What was it? It was... He took out his handkerchief and passed it inside his collar. For the life of him he could not remember. (602)

The boss’s encouraging words (another sign of how he has personified the fly)

accomplish nothing: he has killed the fly that he originally saved from the inkpot.

The boss reacts to feeling frightened by calling in Macey, the “dog” who works under him. In ordering this man to obey his orders, the boss reinforces his position of power. The fly did not listen and respond as he had desired, but Macey will.

Asserting his authority causes him to forget the emotion that the fly had distracted him from: his grief.

This emotion is expressed through power and class. The boss’s position of power is clearly important, as his job title functions as his name. Examining power relations in this story is one way to enter Mansfield’s work. Similarly, power relations are one way in which our emotions are shaped into actions. The boss’s feelings are dealt with through his actions toward Macey and the fly. At some basic level, asserting one’s authority over others reinforces one’s own

power. Thus, the boss forgets about his sadness over his son after killing the fly and bossing Macey.

The character of the boss also figures prominently in the fragment “Six Years After,” which Mansfield began just a few months before “The Fly” (Alpers 350, 417).⁶ This fragment, in conjunction with “The Fly,” presents us with gendered readings of grief. In “Six Years After” the limited omniscience of the narrator portrays both the boss and his wife in their private lives. We can assume that the husband of “Six Years After” is the boss of “The Fly”; there are a number of details that point to this conclusion. In “The Fly” we repeatedly hear that the son has been dead for six years. In “Six Years After,” we know from the title that this is the same set of characters at roughly the same time. The husband spends an “enormous amount of time [...] cooped up in the office” (638), and the couple has lost a son in the war (642). We can also see that the husband has the same personality in “Six Years After” as the boss in “The Fly.”

“Six Years After” opens with the thoughts of the wife. She is traveling with her husband on a ship, and is enduring the unfavorable weather on deck in order to please him. She would not mind the weather if she were tucked up in the cabin with “a rug, a hot-water bottle and a piping hot cup of tea” (638). But she does not insist upon doing so; instead, she justifies his wishes, thinking of all the time he is cooped up in the office. She even performs for him, at some level adopting the attitude she knows he wishes her to take: “[...] and because he was looking at her, she smiled with bright eyes and blinked quickly, as if to say, ‘Yes,

⁶ Antony Alpers, Mansfield’s biographer, notes that although “Six Years After” is a “loving portrayal,” Mansfield wrote “Oh, my *hatred!*” at the end of the original manuscript (350).

perfectly all right—absolutely,’ and she meant it” (638). She gives her husband these physical signs to convince him that she agrees with the idea of staying up on deck. It is important that she seems to mean this by the end of the passage—as if she had convinced herself, as well. The husband’s domineering personality has an effect at deeper levels than just the surface of her actions: she wants to want what he wants.

They both know that this is an act, however, as the husband realizes she does not like to be up on deck:

He knew, of course, that she ought to be down in the cabin; he knew that it was no afternoon for her to be sitting on deck, in this cold and raw mist, lee side or no lee side, rugs or no rugs, and he realized how she must be hating it. But he had come to believe that it really was easier for her to make these sacrifices than it was for him. (638-9)

The husband is clearly the dominant person in the relationship; he not only accepts this, he perpetuates it. This is a different sort of privilege from that of class—the privileging of one person within a relationship. The wife even has her own opinions on how to do things, and may wish for the power to do them. She wishes that her husband would give the steward a more generous tip: “she wished it was the woman who controlled the purse” (639). There is a discrepancy between what the woman thinks and what she does—the dissociation is due to the man’s position of power.

The woman does not just suffer physically from being on deck, however, she also is thrown into memories of her son. She imagines a presence “far out there, between the sky and the water” that cries ““Mother!”” (641). In a vision or a dream, she sees the child she lost, and imagines what his future might have been.

This is halted when the dead son cries ““When I think of all I have missed, I can’t bear it!”” (642). She, too, repeats ““I can’t bear it!”” and “tosses the dark rug away” (642). In some way, going along with her husband’s wishes has prompted this scenario. The lonely picture of the sea causes the initial sadness, which eventually forces her to relive her grief. At some level, then, we can see that the husband is responsible for what she cannot bear—imagining the son and his death. She seems to be throwing off some of his authority in this passage. She tosses off the rug that is necessary to use in order to stay on deck in the cold. Although the story ends in a few more lines, we can see something of her personality coming out through these actions.

In “Six Years After” we are given a companion story to “The Fly” that prompts an examination of how grief is gendered and influenced by power. The boss/ husband never reaches tears—he distracts himself by torturing a fly. The woman confronts the loss as she sits on deck (the place her husband wishes her to sit at). “Six Years After” prevents us from reading the other three stories (“Revelations,” “Life of Ma Parker,” and “The Fly”) purely through the lens of class relations. There is something about grief, and particularly grief over a lost child, which necessitates our own emotional response. It is an idea that Mansfield manipulates in these stories, showing us how such a basic, universal emotion comes to be expressed in terms of power. This is not only the power of socio-economic position, however. Mansfield shows us this by examining the disparate power dynamic of the husband and wife’s relationship in “Six Years After.”

Class, then, has a significant influence on how people relate to one another (or fail to do so), but it is not the only factor.

These four stories are clearly related on a thematic level, but there is something deeper that they have in common. Through the motif of the dead child, Mansfield shows us the power inequities and emotional imbalances of the world she saw around her. People cannot share their grief in a constructive way—there is nowhere, or more importantly no one, to turn to. Monica suffers from her own sadness, but does not share this with George. She physically removes herself from his sadness, and considers sympathizing with him only in terms of flowers that she does not buy. The literary gentleman does not understand Ma Parker's life or grief. The boss refuses to see anyone while he grieves, and ultimately exerts his power over the fly and his clerk. The wife never tells her husband her opinion on tipping the steward, let alone her thoughts on the death of their son. This is a world in which people do not relate to one another; grief is a private experience that no one can alleviate. The characters do not seem to have the ability to transcend class and other power boundaries in order to relate at an emotionally authentic level.

THE POLITICS OF AESTHETICS AND SEXUALITY

Mansfield's later story "A Cup of Tea" elaborates upon the extent to which it is possible to transcend class boundaries. Rosemary Fell is a rich, but not beautiful, young married woman. She is accustomed to shopping and buying whatever she wants—whether it is flowers or antiques. A particular antique shop pleases her in large part because "the man who [keeps] it [is] ridiculously fond of serving her" (584).⁷ The salesman is adept at showing his pleasure at her patronage, emphasizing the differences between their roles. Although she realizes this is flattery (585), it does not deter her from taking part in the drama of playing the customer with discerning taste, who is shown the most special items available. The salesman is repeatedly described as having "pale finger-tips" and "pale bloodless fingers" as he presents the item (585). In contrast, Rosemary's hands are "charming" against the blue velvet that covers the enamel box; her hands live up to her name, as they are "rosy" as well as "flashing" (585). This is similar to her "dazzled, rather exotic way" of gazing about in the flower shop (584)—Rosemary is especially vital, especially bright, when she is shopping. This is a strikingly different image from the shopkeeper and the "thin shopgirl" who carries out her bundles of flowers (584). In her interactions as a consumer and customer, Rosemary is the one with both economic power and (therefore) vitality.

After one such encounter, Rosemary encounters a "battered creature with enormous eyes" who begs for a cup of tea (586). Rosemary considers—she sees

⁷ Rosemary's repeated patronage of a particular shop might remind us of Monica in "Revelations," as she too returns to the same business (a hairdresser's) repeatedly. These two middle aged women seem to build a rapport with the people who run these businesses.

this as an “adventure [...] like something out of a novel by Dostoevsky [...] It would be thrilling. And she heard herself saying afterwards to the amazement of her friends: ‘I simply took her home with me’” (586). Rather than empathizing with the young girl, she sees this as an opportunity for her to enjoy herself, to have a thrill. The word “thrilling” connotes an out-of-the-ordinary experience, something titillating and a bit dangerous. It will be something more similar to fiction than real life—something out of a novel, and something to be related to friends. She considers what value the girl can offer her: this is a transaction, not an act of charity. For these purely selfish reasons, Rosemary decides to take the girl home with her.

In the car, however, Rosemary seems to develop an intensely charitable attitude toward her “captive”:

She had a feeling of triumph [...] She could have said, “Now I’ve got you,” as she gazed at the little captive she had netted. But of course she meant it kindly. Oh, more than kindly. She was going to prove to this girl that—wonderful things did happen in life, that—fairy godmothers were real, that—rich people had hearts, and that women *were* sisters. She turned impulsively, saying: “Don’t be frightened. After all, why shouldn’t you come back with me? We’re both women. If I’m the more fortunate, you ought to expect...”

But happily at that moment, for she didn’t know how the sentence was going to end, the car stopped. (587)

Rosemary moves from a feeling of triumph—of getting what she wants from the girl—to a feeling of abundant generosity. The desire to “prove” something indicates that the girl will again be designated to a passive role. Hungry people “are easily led” the narrator tells us (587); we can imagine that Rosemary will get her way. She will force the girl to participate in this fiction she has imagined: the girl must play her part in relation to Rosemary’s “fairy godmother” role (much as

the shopkeeper played his part in the opening scene in relation to Rosemary's role as the buyer). In this passage Rosemary's thoughts are broken up by dashes. The dashes appear before each of her ideas on what she will prove to the girl. This punctuation device suggests a pause before each idea, as if Rosemary is searching for her vision of the world. This is not a doctrine Rosemary has always held; on the contrary, she is making it up as she goes along.

Rosemary's words to the girl are part of an "impulsive" action, an impulsive desire to say something to her. She trails off and cannot finish the sentence that explains what exactly the girl should expect from a more fortunate woman. The fact that she does not know how to end this particular sentence is telling—she has not seen it as her role to be charitable in the past. She has a "longing to begin to be generous" (587), again emphasizing the fact that Rosemary has not demonstrated this quality in the past.

When Rosemary's husband arrives at their home, however, this longing to act as a sort of fairy godmother dissipates as quickly as it began:

"But what on earth are you going to do with her?" cried Philip.

"Be nice to her [...] Look after her. I don't know how. We haven't talked yet. But show her—treat her—make her feel—"

"My darling girl," said Philip, "you're quite mad, you know. It simply can't be done."

"I knew you'd say that," retorted Rosemary. "Why not? I want to. Isn't that a reason? And besides, one's always reading about these things. I decided—"

"But," said Philip slowly, and he cut the end of a cigar, "she's so astonishingly pretty." (590)

Philip does not understand his wife's longing to do something that one "always reads about." Rosemary again searches for words, pausing after each fragment of what she imagines she can do. His questioning reveals again that she has no clear

conception of how her longing to be generous might translate into deeds. It is important to note that Philip says none of this can be done—even without hearing what it is she hopes to do. He seems to echo our own misgivings: isn't it impossible to bridge the gap? Is Rosemary too oblivious of the future—and her actions simply too small and inconsequential? It seems that an ethical and lasting association with this poor woman “simply can't be done.” When Rosemary does not accept his statement, he says perhaps the one thing that can obliterate her generosity: the girl is pretty. Obviously, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with being pretty; we might imagine that Rosemary befriends any number of pretty women. Rather, his aim is to cut off the improper relationship. The idea behind his words is reinforced by his actions: he “cuts” his cigar while cutting off his wife's desire to be generous.

The fact that Philip finds this bedraggled and poor woman attractive is important both within this story and within the context of Mansfield's other works. In “The Tiredness of Rosabel,” we see that the young gentleman is sexually attracted to the shop employee. Also, Rosabel buys violets instead of food; she clearly shares the same aesthetic response to flowers as that of the upper classes, which can afford such things. In both these stories, there seems to be something about aesthetics or sexuality that is pure of class: a pretty woman is a pretty woman, regardless of how much money she has or what her breeding is. Importantly, the poor woman does not seem to be aware of her potential sexual power—she makes no appeals to Philip, nor is she dressed in a scandalous way. Rosabel is similarly innocent of sexual ploys. This influences how we read these

characters. If they were sexually manipulative, we might condemn them; the fact that they are not encourages us to empathize with their characters all the more. However, the upper class's acknowledgement of these women's beauty is not enough to lift the women from poverty: Mansfield's worldview does not encompass the Cinderella story.

If anything, the impoverished woman in this story experiences an evil stepsister rather than a fairy godmother. All of Rosemary's talk about sisterhood is negated as she acts upon Philip's comment. The girl is paid off and gotten rid of after Rosemary sees her as competition. In Rosemary's desire to be generous toward a member of the lower class we could see at least a hint of a change in interclass relations. Although she first treats the girl as a transaction, there is something genuine in the impulse. By the end of the story, however, it is clear that there is little prospect of change: the feeling (which was a rarity to begin with) does not last.

Even if Rosemary were to decide to adopt the girl and take her into her home, however, we might still question what this action would accomplish. It would be a social change only on the level of individuals, rather like something out of a Dickens novel. The girl would be taken care of, but the social problem would not be solved. We would have to ask ourselves if such an action could ever be more than a pittance in the grand scheme of things. In some way, such an act might actually reinforce class roles. When one gives to charity, one becomes the benefactor of someone. The roles of giver/ receiver are set; there is no erasure of class lines. The lower class person might buy a pair of shoes, or eat for a week,

but he/she remains in the same socio-economic class. In the case of Rosemary's fantasy, the girl would become a pet—a character in the fairy tale that Rosemary narrates.

The final interaction between Rosemary and Philip paints a still bleaker picture of both class relations and the consumer lifestyle. She has “done her hair, darkened her eyes...and put on her pearls” (591), prettying herself and “putting on” her upper class status:

Then Rosemary said dreamily, “I saw a fascinating little box today. It cost twenty-eight guineas. May I have it?”

Philip jumped her on his knee. “You may, little wasteful one,” said he.

But that was not really what Rosemary wanted to say.

“Philip,” she whispered, and she pressed his head against her bosom, “am I *pretty*?” (591)

The pretty girl is gone, but her impact is felt in this scene. After asking if Philip “likes” her, Rosemary's thoughts return to the box she saw earlier that day. The girl's absence removes the discord between the couple—Philip “babies” her, holding her on his knee and using the diminutive “little” in teasing her. Philip's power is also restored: Rosemary relies on him to build her self-esteem and to sanction her actions. The undercurrents of this scene imply a father-daughter relationship. Although we earlier learn that Rosemary is accustomed to shopping in Paris “as you and I would go to Bond Street” (584), she asks Philip's permission to buy a trinket box. Clearly she is not just asking for the money—she is asking for Philip's sanction of the purchase. Philip gives her permission to buy the trinket and to do something selfish. Most importantly, however, we learn in this passage that Philip is also the arbitrator in aesthetics: she wants to be

classified as “pretty” (like the girl she has dismissed). She has recognized that the girl possesses a sexual attraction that her husband notices. In the passage quoted above, Philip uses the word “pretty” to describe the poor woman. Rosemary seems to want to appropriate this term to describe herself: she puts emphasis on this word as indicated by the italics.

Rosemary’s self-worth is wrapped up with all of her questions: being liked, being allowed to spend money, being considered pretty. Her request to buy the box is not “really” what she wants to say. It is instead an indication of her next question—as if being allowed to buy something is equivalent to being considered pretty (and therefore “liked”). Buying, as we see earlier, is associated with her “exotic gaze” and rosy coloring. Here again she turns her “exotic gaze” (her “buying gaze”) upon Philip; she has used make-up and expensive jewelry to raise her value, and she now asks for him to invest in her. After the threat of the girl’s prettiness, Rosemary seems to feel a need for Philip to pay homage to her (both in compliments and in sanction). Rosemary plays into a different type of transaction—a relationship intertwined with the politics of economic exchanges. As we have seen in “The Tiredness of Rosabel,” the economic class system inherent in capitalism will not be transcended in relationships between the classes. In “A Cup of Tea,” we are taken a step further: the politics of economics will not be transcended in romantic relationships, even between members of the same class.

These stories seem to suggest that the class system and capitalism complicate or prevent human relationships. All the characters seem to be more

concerned with owning beauty than understanding another human being. Harry solicits Rosabel through the idea of owning a representation of her (a painting); Rosabel is more concerned with Harry's outward appearance and money than his personality; Philip does not seem to see anything in the poor woman beyond her prettiness; Rosemary's main amusement in life is shopping for beautiful objects.

**ACTING THE PART:
PERFORMANCE VS. INNOCENCE IN CLASS RELATIONS**

The completely bleak state of the world that we find in stories such as “The Child-Who-Was-Tired” and “A Cup of Tea” is tempered in part by Mansfield’s “The Doll House” and “The Garden-Party.” Both written in 1922, these stories are more than examinations of the lives of children and families—they are harsh indictments of the insensitivity of persons of the upper and middle classes. The ray of hope comes in the character of Kezia Burnell/ Laura Sheridan, who belongs to a family much like Mansfield’s—what Rhoda Nathan has described as “secure and privileged” (Nathan 4). Nathan, in her essay exploring how Mansfield incorporated elements of her life into her stories, notes that Mansfield’s “mother, grandmother, and young maiden aunt also appear frequently in her fiction, presented as the Sheridans and the Burnells in the New Zealand stories” (4). In her essay, Nathan concludes that, if the Burnell/ Sheridan family is modeled after Mansfield’s, then Kezia/ Laura is surely Mansfield herself.

The implications of these two stories (“The Doll’s House” and “The Garden-Party”) are important to Mansfield’s stance on class relations, and the extent to which she sees a possibility and hope for change. An earlier story, “Prelude” (1918), centers upon Mansfield’s fictional double (Kezia) and her awareness of what Jeffrey Meyers has termed the “evil in human life” (vii). Meyers, in his introduction to a collection of Mansfield’s stories, suggests that this title, in paying homage to Wordsworth, also points to the story’s purpose: to “[portray] an imaginative awakening and the ‘growth of a poet’s mind’” (vii-viii).

If this is true, and Kezia is the character within a fragmented *Bildungsroman*, then it is the poet who has the sensibilities to overcome class divisions. In her earlier stories Mansfield describes the imbalance of the class system. In these stories, however, she seems to suggest an answer to this imbalance. If we take such autobiographical liberties, then we might extend this conclusion to speculate that poets seek to enact change through the act of writing. This suggests a literature informed by and informing politics—a significant break from the art-for-art’s-sake school of Oscar Wilde.⁸

In “The Garden-Party” the narrator focuses most closely on Laura’s consciousness. Unlike Monica and Rosemary (of “Revelations” and “A Cup of Tea,” respectively), Laura is not treated ironically. The reader can sympathize with her struggle to overcome her family’s conditioning, and to see members of the working class as individuals worthy of the same consideration given to their upper class counterparts. Pamela Dunbar points out that:

The concern in the story is whether the daughter Laura will in maturing grow into a replica of her superficial and insensitive mother, or whether her own better nature—evident in her less prejudiced (though sentimental) attitude towards the workmen [...] will prevail. (167-8)

After her initial encounter with the workmen she concludes that workmen are “very nice” (535)—a warning sign that she might lump all workmen into one category just as easily as the other members of her family do. Although this would, of course, be a more positive category, it still denies an entire group of

⁸ Sydney Janet Kaplan has written extensively on Wilde’s influence on Mansfield. She notes that in 1906-7, Mansfield copied two quotations from Wilde into her notebook and even tried her hand at some of her own epigrams in his style (19). For example, Kaplan cites that Mansfield composed the following: “Happy people are never brilliant. It implies friction” (19).

people the agency to be human: to be an individual rather than a representative of a “type.”

Mansfield captures the moment when Laura separates herself from her upper class upbringing and imagines being a member of the working class:

It’s all the fault, she decided [...] of these absurd class distinctions. Well, for her part, she didn’t feel them. Not a bit, not an atom [...] Just to prove how happy she was, just to show the tall fellow how at home she felt, and how she despised stupid conventions, Laura took a big bite of her bread-and-butter as she stared at the little drawing. She felt just like a work-girl. (536)

In pointing out the fact that there are class distinctions that cause a “fault,” Laura demonstrates that on some level she *does* feel them. Similarly, her need to act a part separates her from the workmen. She proves how happy she is by trying to act in a manner that she thinks will mark her as a work-girl. Again, if one is truly at home, there is no need to act deliberately, or to modify one’s behavior. Laura is role-playing the part of a work-girl in this passage. But she as quickly slips out of this identity when, a moment later, she is called back into the house to talk on the phone with a friend (537). On the phone she switches back into the role of the socialite before a party, conveying her mother’s comment to her friend concerning which hat the friend should wear to the party.

There is true sentiment behind Laura’s momentary self-identification as a member of the working class, however, as we discover when she hears about the death of a poor young father. Her first reaction is one of horror; her only concern is how the Burnells can stop the preparations for the garden party (541). Her sister calls her “extravagant” (541), and her mother twists the situation to suit her own interests, calling Laura unsympathetic and claiming that “[people] like that don’t

expect sacrifices from us” (543). Her mother effectively distracts her attention with a hat that is “made for [her]” (543). This hat reminds us of the hat that Rosabel sells to the girl with red hair in the early story “The Tiredness of Rosabel.” This hat stands for an identity that Laura can appropriate. Much as the hat “suits” Rosabel, Laura’s image is positively changed when she puts on the hat: “the first thing she saw was this charming girl in the mirror, in her black hat trimmed with gold daisies [...] Never had she imagined she could look like that [...] And now she hoped her mother was right” (543). She does not immediately recognize that the girl in the mirror is herself—just as the death of the man down the road has divided her feelings, so it seems to have split her image of herself. She is unsure of how she ought to feel, since her immediate reaction is ridiculed and unaccepted by her family. Laura seems capable of occupying two different roles, depending upon how she acts and dresses. In this scene she switches from sympathizing with the dead man’s family to identifying with her mother’s point of view. She does not feel like a work-girl now: she sees what a pretty picture she makes (literally) in the hat. By putting on the hat she has stepped back into the role of an upper class girl. This hat, moreover, is trimmed in gold—a sign of the richness of the upper class identity it represents. Laura can acquire this identity from her mother, and likewise adopt her mother’s attitude that she is a different sort of people from the working class. Dunbar suggests that Laura’s mother “symbolically hands on her own values and lifestyle” (169). When her brother, Laurie, comments on the hat, she “[doesn’t] tell him after all” about her qualms.

He says the hat makes her look “stunning,” and that it is “absolutely topping” (544)—her brother clearly approves of the hat and the perspective it represents.

Besides putting on a class identity, we might question to what extent Laura puts on her womanhood in this scene. She is not a cute little girl, but a “charming girl.” This is, after all, her mother’s hat—Laura seems to step into the role of a woman of society by wearing the appropriate costume. With this comes the possibility of being seen as a sexual being. Her mother facilitates this transition, almost as if this were a coming of age.

There are hints, however, that Laura is not completely swayed by her family’s class sensibilities: she wants to offer the workmen a drink, and she questions her mother’s decision to send leftovers to the bereaved family (544-5). She finds it “curious” that she “[seems] to be different from” the rest of her family (545). Even after “putting on” the identity of her mother, there is something that does not mesh with her mother’s perspective. As she brings the food to the poor family, she feels her difference from the people who live down the lane: “How her frock shone! And the big hat with the velvet streamer—if only it was another hat! [...] It was a mistake to have come” (546). The clothing is now stunning in a negative sense, as it prevents her from fitting in. The upper class is generally expected to have the appropriate clothes or costume for each situation; here Laura breaks the rules of both etiquette and her class by wearing a party dress to a funeral. This is interesting, as Laura has previously wavered between a work-girl and her mother’s girl. Here she seems caught in the middle: not in agreement with her mother, but out of place in the working class context.

As the story ends, it is difficult to discern which of these two roles Laura adopts. Laura cries over the dead man, and says to his body only: “Forgive my hat” (548). She has worn the wrong thing, which carries meaning beyond the initial *faux pas*. This hat, previously the sign of her family’s wealth, is a source of shame—she seems to be asking forgiveness for a lifestyle and perspective that keeps class distinctions so clear and sharp. We might also read this plea for forgiveness as upper class guilt, which, much like original sin, is passed down from one generation to the next by the mere act of being born. Laura is guilty in some way for the death of this man. The hat is also the presumably expensive object that distracts her before the garden party. We might therefore interpret the hat as a symbol for all the lovely things that literally blind the upper class from seeing the problems of the lower class (we might remember that it is not wearing the hat, but rather seeing the mirror image of herself in the hat, that distracts Laura most effectively).

Laura’s thoughts on her clothing indicate her feeling that, without the hat and dress, she would fit in to some degree. She is not in fact unable to relate to or fit in with the members of the working class. There is an aspect of performance to class: one dresses and plays a part that demonstrates one’s class. Class is therefore not an inherent quality, but rather a learned construction. This realization expands her previous sentiment that she can feel like a work-girl.

If we compare this story to “The Tiredness of Rosabel,” Mansfield seems to be proposing that the crown makes the queen. The only thing separating Rosabel from the rich girl in the shop, or Laura from the workmen, is a hat. The

idea that we all have the potential to be the queen is a democratic ideal that subscribes to the belief that all people are created equal. The disparity between this ideal and the reality presented in Mansfield's stories thus points out the structure by which this inherent equality is broken down and negated: capitalism and socioeconomic class. Rosabel's story does not have a Cinderella ending, nor does Laura somehow become a workgirl. The system is not changeable, although Laura seems to be affected by seeing its consequences.

For a moment Laura is made aware of the reality of all death, and of the pain this particular man's death has caused—yet she sees the body as “wonderful, beautiful” (548). Jayne Marek, in an essay on this story, has identified Laura's vision of the body as a projection of “her own wishes on the dead face in order to create an artificial peace in which her mind can rest” (39). This reading seems accurate in light of the fact that this man's death is anything but wonderful—his family is in poverty and grief. The only good that could result for the man is an escape from poverty and worries, but this does not console the reader. The rationalization is too similar to the reassurances offered by various religions to the toiling classes: behave now and after death you will be rewarded. Laura's perception of the dead body's beauty in fact serves to reinforce the vision of the world that she inherits from her family. She imagines the sleeping face's words to her: “All is well, said that sleeping face. This is just as it should be. I am content” (548). Laura's ascribed thoughts seem a convenient way to reconcile one's feelings of guilt for enjoying a garden party all day while this man was laid out; she imagines that he is content in death, and that no changes need to be made to

the current system. That this man's death, and by extension the world in which it happens, is "as it should be," is rightly disturbing.

Mansfield creates an ambiguity in this scene that rightly gives the reader pause in reconciling Laura's actions. Laura cries but finds the body beautiful; she asks the corpse to forgive her hat, but seems to conclude that all is "as it should be." She tells her brother that her experience was "marvelous," and seems on the edge of completing a grand epiphany: "'Isn't life,' she stammered, 'isn't life—' But what life was she couldn't explain" (549). Sherry Lutz Zivley has identified this as a moment at which Laura "has no language with which to complete her statement" (75). Laura's language—what Zivley identifies as a sociolect of the upper class, "provides [Laura] with no way of describing death" (74). Although Laura has failed to communicate her experience, the narrator continues: "No matter. He quite understood" (549). But this does not necessarily mean that Laurie understands his sister. Mansfield's third-person narrators are often entrenched in the consciousness of one character, relying upon his or her thoughts to describe the scene. The fact that Laurie answers in the tone and diction of their mother seems to point to a disparity between their perspectives ("'*Isn't it, darling?*' said Laurie" (549)).

Thus far in the story, Laurie has been the genteel and more grown up male counterpart to Laura. When no one else agrees with Laura's perspective on the man's death before the party, Laurie is the moral sounding board that she plans to question. Interestingly, in this prior scene, he effectively prevented Laura from speaking about the death by complimenting her hat (544). With his final line of

dialogue, he again cuts off Laura's words. Given Laurie's actions throughout this story, we must conclude that he neither wordlessly understands Laura, nor that he already holds a similarly sympathetic viewpoint toward the lower class. Marek has read Laurie's response as seemingly placatory, but actually concealing his "true opinion" (40) by "[sealing] off the rapport Laura thought she had, by implication denying the rapport she felt at the dead man's house" (40). Such a reading seems accurate, in that Laurie anticipates that Laura experienced something awful when he questions her ("Was it awful?" (548)). When she does not comply with his expectation, he seems to shut her off by agreeing with her before she has actually said anything meaningful. From what we see of Laurie, he is complicit in the economic system that privileges their family. He does not go with Laura to the house—he only comes to fetch her because their mother is "getting anxious" (548). Moreover, he does not approach the house, but waits in shadow at the corner of the lane. His complacency results in a seeming apathy toward Laura's experience in the bereaved home. It is telling that he does not even wait for Laura to articulate what she means—he avoids hearing it by preemptively agreeing with Laura.

Laura has had her epiphany, and seems to have some sort of unique sympathy despite class distinctions. But her view of the working class is comparable to that of the literary gentleman in "Life of Ma Parker"—there is something "beautiful" in the dead man and something "very nice" about workmen. Laura sentimentalizes the working class, and seems to categorize the group in a similar (although more positive) manner. Laura is a step closer than

Mansfield's other characters to becoming an individual of the upper class who possesses an ability to transcend class distinctions.

In "The Doll's House" we find an individual even closer to this ideal. This is perhaps due to the main character's age: Kezia is young and not yet set in her perceptions of the world. The idea of being molded—both in one's behavior and in one's class—is prominent throughout the story. The Burnell children are not allowed to interact with the washerwoman's two children, and since the Burnells "set the fashion in all matters of behaviour" among the schoolchildren, the Kelveys are "shunned by everybody" (573). The Kelveys literally live on the margins: they are dressed in "bits" given to their mother, and they "[hover] at the edge" during lunch to catch the leftovers of the other children's conversation (573-4). These children are at the bottom of what we would now call "trickle down" capitalism; they receive what is left over. Interestingly, they are dressed in the scraps of the more privileged children. In this story, the construction of class by costume is complicated. These children wear what once belonged to and in some way symbolized a different class. But this clothing does not have transformative powers; there is something about the ridiculous juxtaposition of these scraps that negate the possibility of appearing to belong to a different class. They are set apart by their "conspicuous" costume, which is made up of such items as a dress made from a tablecloth and a curtain, and a hat with a large scarlet feather (573). Even if they wore hand-me-down dresses from the Burnells, however, we sense that something else sets the Kelveys apart. In this story, one needs both learned behavior and a pedigree to be part of the upper class. The

setting here is not the city that Rosabel lives in (“The Tiredness of Rosabel”); this is the country, where everyone knows one another’s background. The fact that the Kelveys have a washerwoman for a mother and a convict for a father counteracts any costume (no matter how creative or expensive) that they might wear.

The Kelveys are not only isolated, however, but also harassed. One day the children have the sudden urge to be “horrid” to the Kelveys:

“Lil Kelvey’s going to be a servant when she grows up.”

“O-oh, how awful!” said Isabel Burnell [...]

Emmie swallowed in a very meaning way and nodded to Isabel as she’d seen her mother do on those occasions [...]

“Is it true you’re going to be a servant when you grow up, Lil Kelvey?” shrilled Lena. [...] “Yah, her father’s in prison!” she hissed, spitefully.

This was such a marvelous thing to have said that the little girls rushed away in a body, deeply, deeply excited, wild with joy. Some one found a long rope, and they began skipping. And never did they skip so high, run in and out so fast, or do such daring things as on that morning. (575)

The children’s actions revolve around those of their parents. Emmie models her behavior upon that of her mother; both Emmie and Lena refer to the Kelveys’ parents in order to place the two children within the class system. Lil Kelvey is expected to follow in her mother’s footsteps and become a servant. In this scene Mansfield clearly provides a critique of the class system and how it is reproduced in each successive generation. The symbol of the doll’s house also perpetuates this idea of modeling behavior; the toy that the children so enjoy playing with is in some way encouraging them to step into the roles of adults. There is nothing inherently different about the Kelveys—the other children’s discrimination arises merely from the orders and actions of their parents.

The purpose of class divisions is suggested by the children's imitation of the structures of the "grown-up" world. The urge to be horrid arises out of boredom—the subject of the dollhouse "flags" (575) and it is time to find a new thrill. The children's reaction to boredom is reminiscent of Rosemary's desire (in "A Cup of Tea") to have an adventure after her shopping trip by being kind to the pretty girl begging on the streets. In both cases the members of the working class are treated as a means to add excitement to the middle and upper class members' lives. After the allure of the dollhouse (surely an expensive object) ceases to move the children, they turn to the lower class Kelveys. Taunting the Kelvey girls is a form of entertainment. The children have the power of a group behind them, as well as the thrill of doing something naughty. Lena's first insult gets only a "shamefaced smile" from Lil Kelvey (575), and so she tries again to illicit a negative reaction from the two girls. It is crucial to analyze the reaction of the group: they are not the least bit ashamed, but rather "deeply excited" and "wild with joy" (575).

This passage has been read as an examination of how the forbidden can result in such joy. I would argue, however, that the children are not transgressing the rules so much as pushing their limits. We learn earlier that Kezia's mother will not invite the Kelvey children over to see the doll's house (574), and even the teacher has "a special voice for [the Kelveys], and a special smile for the other children" (572). The adults around these children reinforce class distinctions in subtle ways. Often, the adults actually act much like the children do in this passage, overtly calling attention to class. For example, Aunt Beryl yells at the

Kelvey children and shoos them out of the yard later in the story. Clearly, then, this is not so much a forbidden activity as learned behavior pushed to its logical limits.

Rather than finding pleasure in the forbidden, the children seem to be reacting to the fact that they have lowered the Kelveys in relation to themselves. Putting the Kelveys “in their place” in the class system elevates the other children: they literally skip highest on this morning. The old belief that bullies act out of a need to elevate their own self-esteem might be demonstrated by this passage. The fact that class provides a basis for the denigration shows that deeply set human drives (to satisfy the ego, in this case) take root and flourish in the terms of the class system.

Further evidence for this interpretation comes at the end of the story. Kezia invites the Kelveys to see the doll’s house after a moment of hesitation (576). This generous gesture and possible moment of transcendence over class divisions is halted, however, when Aunt Beryl shoos the Kelveys out of the yard “as if they were chickens”: “The afternoon had been awful [...] But now that she had frightened those little rats of Kelveys and given Kezia a good scolding, her heart felt lighter” (577). Beryl relieves her own discontent by increasing that of the children. She reinforces the division between the Kelveys and the Burnells in the eyes of Kezia and the Kelvey sisters. Again, this deep-set human inclination to lash out against others in an effort to improve one’s own state of mind is acted out in the context of the class system.

Beryl's actions show that it is acceptable (and perhaps even expected) to shoo the washerwoman's children out of the yard in a rude manner. Although her actions seem cruel, Mansfield gives us just enough information about Beryl to create a complex sympathy. Beryl has suffered through receiving a "terrifying, threatening letter" (577); we cannot entirely blame her for lashing out. This complex sympathy for her characters is common throughout Mansfield's work. The above scene from "The Doll's House" is particularly reminiscent of that of the boss torturing an insect in "The Fly." In that story we are given even more background information on the boss—we cannot villainize him when we know how he, too, has felt pain. The boss copes with pain by hurting something else, just as Beryl's tension is relieved by yelling at the Kelveys. Clearly, the upper class characters are not the villains—Mansfield portrays them simply as human beings. We may hope that they display more sympathy for weaker characters (whether they are poor children or flies), but we understand when they do not. If we understand and sympathize with Beryl, however, we might wonder what hope there is for changing the system that produces such class disparities.

The hope in this story comes from the actions of Kezia. She resists her family's conditioning and seems not to accept the division between herself and the other two girls. She asks her mother to let the Kelveys see the dollhouse (574), and when this does not work she violates her parent's rules (and class rules) by inviting them without permission. There is also a parallel involving the dollhouse lamp, an item that is "perfect" and "real" (571). Kezia likes this lamp the most out of everything in the doll's house (571), and it is in response to this lamp that Else

“[smiles] her rare smile” (577). This lamp seems to symbolize an enlightenment (a word that carries literal as well as figurative meaning in this case) that relates Else’s and Kezia’s perspectives. The two girls seem to understand something more about one another and their places in the society. In an essay on Mansfield and the aesthetic object, J. Lawrence Mitchell has singled out the lamp as an object that also elicits an “aesthetic response—an intuitive grasp of the importance of the little lamp” in both the children (37). Although the story ends with reinforced class divisions, it is clear that Kezia is both capable of fine aesthetic responses and resistant to the class boundaries that bind the other characters—there is hope for future generations to overcome class constructions.

Even within this hope, however, we might harbor some resistance to the idea of Kezia acting as a uniting force. Kezia is benevolent, but is it only within the terms of her own class? In the end, she does not have the power to contradict other members of that class (i.e. her mother and Aunt Beryl). The same problem arises that we confronted in “A Cup of Tea,” in which Mansfield effectively asks us: how much can one act accomplish? Is this act of charity a uniting force, or does it point out the division between the haves and the have-nots?

Despite these legitimate questions, I still find that, of all her stories involving a critique of capitalism and the class system, Mansfield offers the most hope for change in “The Doll’s House.” Kezia is younger than Laura of “The Garden-Party,” and has not been molded into a perspective that sees the working class as irrefutably different. Nor does Kezia sentimentalize, as Laura and the literary gentleman (“The Garden-Party” and “Life of Ma Parker,” respectively)

are prone to do. Kezia is free from the jealousy that prevents Rosemary from genuinely reaching out to an impoverished woman (“A Cup of Tea”), and from the egotistically driven actions of the other children and Aunt Beryl. This story, written toward the end of Mansfield’s life, contains an optimism that is absent in her earlier stories, “The Tiredness of Rosabel” and “The Child-Who-Was-Tired.” The lamp itself seems to offer a ray of hope. These early stories demonstrate the impossibility of escaping class roles and labor without the destruction of other lives (the Child must kill the baby to return to her dream). In the figure of Kezia, however, there is hope that a younger generation might awaken a genuine sympathy between economic classes.

BEYOND CLASS: MANSFIELD'S OVERARCHING CONCERN

As shown in the previous chapters, many of Katherine Mansfield's stories clearly address issues of socioeconomic class. But this is not the only problematic aspect of modern society that Mansfield addresses. Class is one point of entry into the larger concerns that she conveys in her work. These stories ultimately seem to be using class as one example of the imbalances of the modern world. In "The Tiredness of Rosabel" and "The Child-Who-Was-Tired," we see two working class characters who dream of an easier life. These fantasies are the result of a class imbalance that presents the two with an idea of what a more privileged life would look like, but not with the resources to attain that life.

In "Revelations," "Life of Ma Parker," and "The Fly" we see how various characters express their grief over losing a child. Here, too, there is an imbalance—certain characters have far more socioeconomic power than others (Monica and the boss, for example, in comparison to Ma Parker and George). This imbalance reveals itself in how the characters respond to grief. George and Ma Parker tell Monica and the literary gentleman, respectively, about the loss. In contrast, the boss kills a fly and orders his steward to bring him more blotting paper. From these examples we might speculate on power's influence on sadness; when one has power and uses it, the grief is alleviated.

In "The Garden-Party" and "The Doll's House" we see similar examples of socioeconomic imbalance. More importantly, however, in "The Doll's House" we see how this imbalance is perpetuated by the exertion of power. Aunt Beryl

feels better about her own life after yelling at the Kelvey children. Throughout all these stories, a complex sympathy is developed that demands we empathize not only with the most obviously pitiful characters, such as the Kelveys, but also with characters such as Beryl. If we are not meant to condemn the upper class characters who seem to perpetuate the system that keeps them in power, then whom are we to blame?

To answer this question, we might look for what is missing in Mansfield's stories. In her stories we see a world ruled by imbalances of time, resources, love, and money. There is no God mentioned—not in her seventy-three stories nor her fifteen fragments collected. Throughout the stories covered in this work, the characters never appeal to a higher being or force. Rosabel gets on her knees at night not to pray, but to fantasize about being rich. When the Child kills the baby, we feel no moral outrage—there is no objective set of values by which to judge the act. Ma Parker has no one to cry to, and does not even contemplate visiting a church or praying. The boss plays God to the fly, as he gives it obstacles until it eventually dies. There seems to be no being who can fix the imbalance in these stories, nor anyone to pray to.

Mansfield did not include a god or a religion in her stories. Such sources of higher authority give us, among other things, an entity to explain the world by. A god is someone that we might call upon for help or, alternatively, blame for creating the world as it is. Instead of asking how our actions throughout history have shaped the world we live in, we might simply leave things up to our gods and rescind any responsibility. If Mansfield brought God into her stories, then,

especially the God of Christian doctrine, she would introduce the possibility that people are not responsible for the topsy turvy world. By leaving humankind alone on the stage, Mansfield effectively hands over the reins. If we have invented capitalism and class disparity, then we should have the power to change it.

The imbalanced class system is clearly one of Mansfield's main concerns in these stories. It would be reductive, however, to claim that this is the one message that Mansfield relates. Although imbalance is often expressed in terms of class, we can find numerous other examples in her writing. In "Daughters of the Late Colonel" we find two middle-aged sisters who are dominated by their father. The power relations in this story are explicit: the imbalance of power results in the two women living without romantic love or families of their own. They seem stuck in a child-parent relationship, even after the father's death. In "The Little Governess" we see an imbalance in the form of an experienced and manipulative old man and the young girl he preys upon. She is entirely naïve and taken in by his initial friendliness when she meets him on the train, while he is set upon making a sexual advance (which causes her to lose her job as a governess). It is not only the capitalist system that causes imbalance in the modern world—there are harmful inequities in familial relationships and even between strangers on the train.

We can find examples of this godless, topsy turvy world in any number of Mansfield's stories, but one of the best examples, perhaps, is "Sun and Moon" (1918). Mansfield composed this story after a dream in which she was both invisible to the action as well as able to see the table through the eyes of Sun, the

little boy upon whose consciousness the story depends.⁹ This story therefore seems to hold an even deeper symbolic value. In the first scene, Sun and his sister, Moon, watch the preparations for their parents' dinner party. Importantly, it is the little boy who seems to possess a unique perspective on the world, which isolates him from the rest of his family.

The fact that the main character in this story is a misunderstood boy is important when comparing this work to Mansfield's other stories. All of the characters entrapped by the class system that we have seen thus far are either poor or female. Women like Laura of "The Garden-Party" and Rosemary of "A Cup of Tea" cannot solve class disparities. Their epiphanies or acts of kindness are subsumed by the overwhelming power of class—nothing is radically changed at the end of any of these stories. We see few characters with the power to change things; perhaps the boss in "The Fly" and the husband in "Six Years After" possess such economic and social power, but they do not have the desire to change their privileged status. In "Sun and Moon," we see that children, even those of the upper class, are vulnerable to the imbalance of this world. With the first paragraph, we perceive the transformation of the home into something new and unknown to Sun: "In the afternoon the chairs came, a whole big cart full of little gold ones with their legs in the air. And then the flowers came. When you stared down from the balcony at the people carrying them the flower pots looked

In a letter to her husband written in February of 1918, Mansfield describes the origin of "Sun and Moon":

I dreamed a short story last night even down to its name which was *Sun & Moon*. It was very light. I dreamed it all—about children. I got up at 6.30 & made a note or two because I knew it would fade. Ill send it sometime this week. Its so nice. I didn't dream that I read it. No I was in it part of it & it played round invisible me. But the hero is not more than 5. In my dream I saw a supper table with the eyes of 5. It was awfully queer—especially a plate of half melted icecream... (O'Sullivan 66)

like funny awfully nice hats nodding up the path” (378). On the simplest level, new furniture and decorations are being brought into the household, presumably displacing the familiar items in the home. These chairs are also upside down, producing a topsy turvy image that is both unusual and impractical—one cannot sit in an upside down chair. They are also “little” and “gold,” suggesting that these chairs are opulent and dainty. The flowers are likewise disorienting—they look like hats from the children’s vantage point on the balcony. This way of perceiving again makes the objects strange: they do not look like what they are when viewed from a different perspective. More importantly, there is a minimization of objects, which might remind us of the imbalance in “The Doll’s House” between the miniature house and the reality of society (an idea further explored throughout “Sun and Moon”). From the start, we are asked to see the normal in a new way. The deceptive nature of appearances is hinted at, and later more fully developed.

The children enter the kitchen to watch the preparations for the fancy dinner. The ice pudding is in the shape of a little house—a similar symbol to that of “The Doll’s House.” Here, too, the children are fascinated by the miniature house, although Sun and Moon view the object in different ways. Moon wants to touch the roof: “She always wanted to touch all the food. Sun didn’t” (379). Moon experiences the house through direct contact with it, while Sun has his most powerful experience through seeing it. Sun is especially fascinated by the nut handle on the door: “When Sun saw the nut he felt quite tired and had to lean against Cook” (379). Sun is physically weakened by the excitement of viewing

the house. When the children are shown the dining table, Sun cannot imagine the scene being altered or the food consumed. He asks: “Are people going to eat the food?” (380). This might strike us as a naïve question, as it does Cook, but there is a logic to Sun’s question. He walks around and around the table, presumably admiring the perfection of the red roses and shining place settings. The table makes such a pretty picture, we can imagine that Sun would rather preserve it than eat the food or unfold the napkins.

Nurse takes the children away from the dining room and prepares them to participate in a similar performance. The children are washed and dressed, Sun in his “Russian costume” and Moon in a white dress (380). The word “costume” here puts emphasis on the fact that the children have a role to play at the party, as part of the performance. They are allowed to play only “clean tidy games” (381) until the guests arrive and they can be put on display. The children are invited to come to the party for only a few minutes, so that the guests can admire them and kiss them. After they are supposed to be asleep, Sun and Moon sneak out onto the stairs to see what is happening downstairs:

They had just got settled on the top step when the drawing-room door opened and they heard the party cross over the hall into the dining-room. Then that door was shut; there was as noise of “pops” and laughing. Then that stopped and Sun saw them all walking round and round the lovely table with their hands behind their backs like he had done...Round and round they walked, looking and staring. The man with the grey whiskers liked the little house best. When he saw the nut for a handle he rolled his eyes like he did before and said to Sun: “Seen the nut?” (382)

After the door is shut, Sun impossibly “sees” a scene within the dining room.

Immediately following this passage we learn that Sun is starting to fall asleep on the stairs, which partially explains his vision. He imagines the adults acting in the

same way that he did upon seeing the decorated dining room. The adults only look, and do not touch (a common command given to young children by their parents); the man with the grey whiskers only observes the nut—he does not eat it.

When their parents find Sun and Moon sleeping on the stairs, Sun is surprised that his mother is not “dreadfully cross” (383). When she says “Oh, you dreadful boy!” Sun realizes that she does not mean him, but his father (383). The party and alcohol have changed the parents, setting things on their heads. Mother’s dress is coming off one shoulder, and it is Moon who tries to correct it (383). We can imagine that, usually, it is Mother who instructs Moon on her dress and appearance, not the other way around.

The most significant change is not in their parents, however, but in the dining room:

But—oh! Oh! What had happened? The ribbons and the roses were all pulled untied. The little red table napkins lay on the floor, all the shining plates were dirty and all the winking glasses. The lovely food that the man had trimmed was all thrown about, and there were bones and bits and fruit peels and shells everywhere. There was even a bottle lying down with stuff coming out of it on to the cloth and nobody stood it up again.

And the little pink house with the snow roof and the green windows was broken—broken—half melted away in the centre of the table. (383)

Sun is not prepared for the scene, as his vision of the adults in the dining room would not result in this destruction. The idea of his home is broken, much as the little pink house is destroyed. The ribbons and roses are “pulled untied,” suggesting that the adults have let loose and undone the restraints that normally hold them back. The food that Sun could not imagine anyone actually eating is

strewn about or consumed. Sun notices the bottle lying on its side—a sign of the sort of behavior that is not tolerated in the children. As his sister did before him, Sun notices what corrections should be made. He does not join his sister at the table for leftovers. His enjoyment comes from viewing, not touching or eating. Of course, now there is nothing to see. Moon is predictably pleased, as we know from earlier scenes that she is more interested in touching (tasting) than seeing.

The final straw seems to be when Moon sees that the nut on the door has been left behind, and bites into it: “But Sun did not move from the door. Suddenly he put up his head and gave a loud wail. ‘I think it’s horrid—horrid—horrid!’ he sobbed (383-4). Sun does not explain what is so “horrid,” but we can assume that the entire situation, especially the destruction of the dining room, has brought on this reaction. His dream of adult behavior has been exposed as an illusion—the adults have acted as we might expect children to, spilling liquids, pulling ribbons, and flinging food about. The beautiful scene that Sun expected to take part in is gone. He does not articulate his feelings to his parents, but instead, “wailing loudly,” he “[stumps] off to the nursery” (384).

In this story everything has been turned on its head: the parents have become the children, Sun’s expectations are the opposite of reality, and the lovely dinner has been eaten and smashed. Mansfield portrays a godless world: the parents—the figures of authority—have become destructive and irresponsible in the eyes of the child. Part of Sun’s horror seems to be that he anticipates a different scene than that which he is presented with. He does not have the cultural experience to know what happens at a dinner party. Linda Pillière has noted this

lack of a sense of cause and effect in the story. She has extensively examined how the narrator's language imitates that of a child, and identifies a number of similarities between this language and children's speech: "The lack of causal relationships is another aspect of this text, which suggests that we are seeing events through the eyes of someone who does not have a total understanding of reality" (149). Sun has a more idealized vision of the world. The name Sun is not only a pun on the word "son," it also connotes enlightenment and knowledge. Sun seems to be the character through whom we see the world—and what he sees causes him to wail.

The story "Sun and Moon" captures the imbalanced world that Mansfield shows us in many of her stories. The only character that perceives this imbalance, however, is Sun. In Sun, we find a character similar to Laura of "The Garden-Party" and Kezia of "The Doll's House." Much as Laura is isolated from her family by her unique perspective, Sun is unable to understand his surroundings. He inaccurately perceives the events of his parents' party, and does not anticipate the destruction of the dinner. In Mansfield's other stories, we repeatedly sympathize with the disenfranchised characters, many of which are female, lower class, or both. In this story, however, the main character is both male and upper class—what disadvantages Sun is his youth.

Repeatedly, then, Mansfield validates the voices of those characters who are outside of the system. Class, sex, and age all determine the extent to which the characters are able to relate to the world around them. Mansfield seems to value the individual voice throughout her stories, as her main characters have

perspectives that set them apart from everyone else. Such unique perspectives tend to isolate characters; this is particularly true in the cases of the Child, Ma Parker, Laura, and Kezia.

For Sun, this isolation comes in the form of an unarticulated vision of the world, which is at odds with reality. The aftermath of the dinner table that upsets Sun works on at least two levels. The table is an item of beauty in Sun's eyes, and it is not treated as such by the adults. Unlike Kezia and Else in "The Doll's House," no one seems to share Sun's aesthetic response to the centerpiece of the little house; instead, he is isolated in his appreciation of the object. The idea of consumption is also important here, as the men and women destroy the beautiful dinner. There is something about the world that is ruined when we try to take its beauty as a possession or as something to incorporate into ourselves. Sun never reveals to his parents and sister what has caused his reaction, and there is no hope of restoring the table to its pre-consumed state. This story leaves little hope for bringing that beauty and light back into the world.

In all her stories, we have seen how Mansfield addresses the social problem of economic disparities. Class is an issue that divides her characters and prevents authentic interaction. To some extent, capitalism—a system that relies upon us to find fulfillment in material goods—even prevents authentic relationships between people of the same class. Mansfield's development of complex sympathy for her characters, however, discourages us from simply villainizing the upper class. There is no one to blame in entirety for this seemingly entrenched system. Our attention is instead drawn to the possibility of subverting

the system: Kezia's kindness to the Kelveys and the admiration for the lamp that they share, for example, or Laura's initial desire to halt the garden party. Children who have not yet been molded into the class system (Laura, Kezia, and Sun) seem to possess the unique perspectives necessary to see and question the injustice of such economic disparities. Inter-class sympathy, such as that between Else and Kezia, seems to be the beginning of the solution. This is especially interesting in light of Mansfield's own manipulation of our sympathies for all of her characters—even the boss who tortures a fly. Her characters encourage us to have sympathy even for those who appear the least deserving of it. Mansfield makes no bold declaration of how we can overturn economic disparities. Instead she suggests that only here and there, in the form of small acts of charity, do we find a possible hope for change.

PART II:

“A SURPRISE” AND OTHER ORIGINAL SHORT STORIES

A SURPRISE

It really was a most repugnant smell when one noticed it. And she couldn't help but notice it each time she entered the room. The bouquet of lilies had been delivered in the morning, and ever since then the smell had been grating on her nerves. Oppressive and cloyingly sweet—like sitting in a field of flowers after a heavy rain. No, she simply could not imagine someone enjoying this smell, certainly not enough to actually buy the bouquet from which it emanated. But that was exactly what her husband had done. And for Valentine's Day. This was the first Valentine's Day that he hadn't bought her a dozen roses. Always the same bouquet, down to the baby's breath and red velvet ribbon. It made her wonder how well she really knew him, despite three years of marriage and two more of dating. What hidden parts of him liked these flowers? Were there larger parts of his personality that she didn't know about?

But of course Chris didn't have any secrets, she reasoned. He was far too honest—transparent really—to keep a secret, especially from her. Like last Valentine's Day, when she'd known that he would buy her a gold bracelet studded with little diamonds. She'd seen one just like it in the window of a jewelry store that they passed one Sunday afternoon at the mall. She had allowed her gaze to linger, knowing he would notice. Even before she found the little box hidden in Chris's dresser drawer, she'd known that he would buy her that bracelet. This year she predicted that he would buy her lingerie. Last week she had commented on a commercial on TV, which featured scantily clad women in

Cupid outfits. Chris was more than honest—he was eager to please her. It was wonderful, really, to have such an attentive husband. A little predictable, perhaps, but what woman wouldn't want a man whom she could control a little?

Alice reached for the vase that sat on her nightstand. She would never fall asleep tonight if she left them there. Better to take them out—perhaps to the kitchen. They wouldn't be cooking tonight; she'd ordered take-out from their favorite restaurant downtown. No other reason to spend time in the kitchen, she'd be free of that stench. And maybe by tomorrow the smell would dissipate, spread so thinly that she wouldn't notice it. She marched barefoot across the soft carpet, down the hallway, and into the kitchen, holding the vase at arm's length. The heavy blossoms bobbed as she walked, and for the first time she realized how extravagantly beautiful they were. Good thing he wasn't home yet—she wanted him to feel appreciated for his gift. No use in giving him a bad memory of buying her flowers; she usually loved seeing that he had bought her flowers for no particular reason. Returning to their bedroom, she again noticed the smell—lingering in the air like heavy perfume.

Alice undressed, and then threw her clothes into a corner of the room. In the bathroom adjoining the bedroom she ran the water in the shower, waiting for it to warm up. She stared at the white wallpaper with little rosebuds bursting out of weaving vines. It gave the place such a delicate, feminine atmosphere, she thought. Chris had wanted to repaint the bathroom in a solid color, none of these patterns that made the walls look so busy. Luckily she'd convinced him that the flowers were a nice touch. Her breath rushed out in a sigh. But suppose Chris

really surprised her tonight—did something really crazy, like get her name tattooed in a heart on his arm. She giggled at the thought. He was so tall and thin. The ink would seem ridiculous on his soft white skin—he wasn't even very hairy. As a teenager she'd always thought that men were hairier. But he didn't even have any hair on his chest.

After showering, she squeezed the water from her long hair and wrapped a towel in a turban around her head. She decided to wear soft cotton sweats—perhaps they could curl up tonight and watch a scary movie after dinner. Alice walked back out toward the kitchen, combing her hair and looking out the window for his silver sports car. When Chris bought that car last year she'd rolled her eyes—premature middle age crisis, she'd said. Finally she saw him rounding the corner, just as she got the last of the tangles out. Alice waited in the kitchen, listening for the slam of the car door, the key in the lock—

“Hey honey!” she called.

“Hell of a day!” he yelled back.

“Was there a hold-up at the bank?” she quipped, walking toward the mudroom where Chris was removing his loafers. How do men keep their suits so crisp looking, she wondered, watching him as he hung up his overcoat. His brown eyes were just as fresh, but Alice could see the five o'clock shadow cropping up on his cheeks. Impulsively, she leaned in to kiss him. It was so nice to be able to kiss that easily—one benefit to Chris being close to her own height.

“Not quite,” he answered. “Did you enjoy your day off while I was slaving away?” he asked.

“Oh yeah—I slept in, watched TV—it was wonderful. I was due for a sick day.”

“Ahh that’s the girl I married! Playing hooky!” he joked. Alice smiled faintly, wondering if she should pretend to have a lingering cough on Monday.

“You know, though, this just makes up for last month, working late for the publishing deadline,” she said, suddenly serious.

“Oh yeah, I miss coming home to a quiet house,” he said, and then leaned in to kiss her.

“Very funny,” she said, and looked down at Chris’s feet. “Chris, you should change, you always look ridiculous walking around in stockings and a suit.”

“Right-O.” Chris ambled toward the hallway and the bedroom. Alice twisted her damp hair around and around her finger, staring at the mudroom. How predictable—the mudroom was once again messy. She went to straighten Chris’s coat on its peg, and then paused. She slipped her hands into each pocket—nothing. Looking over her shoulder, she tried the inside breast pocket. Something—paper—she pulled it out, imagining a dangerous affair with a red haired woman. But it was just a receipt for one entrée from a restaurant near Chris’s bank. She sighed. What a disappointment, after all that! She hurried out toward the living room. By the time Chris reappeared in a sweater and jeans, she was idly flipping through the TV channels.

“I ordered take-out from that Italian place you like,” Alice remarked, pausing at a commercial.

“Perfect—what did you order me?” Chris asked, plopping down beside her on the couch.

“That chicken something or other that you *always* ask for,” Alice said, completing a full perusal of the channels. “Over a hundred channels, and nothing’s on,” she huffed, handing Chris the remote.

“Hey, we could watch *When Harry Met Sally*—remember how funny it was? And perfect for Valentine’s Day.” Chris put his arm around her, and kissed her cheek.

“I’d rather not—don’t you think it’s boring to watch the same movie over again?” Alice asked. What was the use in watching if you knew what was going to happen?

“No way! It’s not like I remember it line for line—and at least this way we know we’re watching something good. When you sit down to a movie you’ve never seen, how do you know you’ll like it?” Chris put down the remote. Alice settled back into his arm, unconvinced.

“Oh I remember all these lines!” she said, as the first scene in the movie unfolded.

“Shh! I don’t!” Chris reminded her. Alice sat, trying to appear bored, until the doorbell rang.

“That’s got to be the delivery—I’ll get it.” Alice stood, smoothing her blouse, and went to the front door. In the mudroom she grabbed her wallet from the pocket of her overcoat. As she pulled the door open, she caught sight of the deliveryman, surely young enough to still be in high school. Funny that his

parents let him work—kids that age ought to be studying, not running about at all hours—

“Weathers residence?” He asked, holding out a plastic bag.

“Yes, thank you very much—” she counted out his tip.

“Thanks,” he smiled. Her hand bumped into his arm as she reached for the bag.

“Oops,” she apologized.

“No problem.” He winked as she took the bag from his hand. Alice realized, suddenly, that he was attractive. She slowly closed the door as he turned away and went back down the steps. Her reflection stared back at her in the glass window of the door; her hair, still damp, framed her face in loose ringlets. Before turning away, she winked at herself in the window—just to see what she would look like.

“Food’s here!” she called out, heading to the kitchen for utensils.

As the credits rolled down the screen after the movie was over, Alice suddenly realized that Chris had fallen asleep on the couch. His head rested on the back of the couch, his mouth slack and half open. Alice grasped his limp arm, and gently shook him.

“Honey, get up now, wake up,” she said in a low voice.

“What?” Chris flinched, raising his arm to cover his eyes. “It’s so bright in here.”

“Looks like it’s bedtime for you. I’ll get started.” Alice stood slowly, stretching her arms above her head. “And don’t fall back asleep!” she commanded on her way out of the living room.

Before getting ready for bed, Alice fastened a clip in her hair. Otherwise it was such a hassle trying to keep it out of her way while she brushed. As she rinsed the toothpaste foam off her chin, Chris walked into the bathroom and took off his shirt.

“Mind if I shower before bed?” he asked.

“No prob—I’ve already used it,” she answered, drying off. “See you in bed, love,” she added, winking at him as he stepped into the shower.

Chris laughed and gave her a squinty blink in return before sliding the shower door shut. Funny she’d never noticed he couldn’t wink before. Maybe it was one of those traits determined by genes, like being able to curl one’s tongue. She’d always been able to do all those tricks.

In their bedroom, Alice stripped to her underwear, decided to leave it on, and grabbed her nightgown from the “reading chair” that she had gradually turned into a catchall for her discarded clothing. She poked her head through the nightgown, and then pulled it down over her body. Catching sight of herself in the mirror, she straightened up and undid the hairclip, letting her hair fall down over her shoulders. I really ought to cut it, she thought, realizing that she had been growing it out for nearly a year. Things always happened this way—by the time her hair grew out, she was already bored with it.

She slipped into bed. The sheets were chilly, so she kicked her legs back and forth, like a pair of scissors, trying to warm up. If only she hadn't slept in quite so much this morning—it was difficult trying to will oneself to fall asleep when one was ready to stay up another few hours. Alice sighed, settling into her pillow. Staring at the white ceiling, she looked for cracks in the plaster, perhaps a thumbtack left over from the previous owners. The ceiling was blank and perfect, only one small spider web, faint and wispy, spanned across a corner. Luckily that's not right above the bed, she thought. She glanced at the nightstand on Chris's side of the bed. Propping herself up by her elbow, Alice slid the drawer open, rifling through the papers and misplaced objects in a determinedly casual way. Surely he was up to something, and the evidence had to be somewhere. She could always say that she was looking for a book of matches—something romantic about lighting a candle—

There was nothing. Only receipts from dinners out that she distinctly remembered, a few shopping lists that she had dictated to him, even an old credit card statement with no surprises. Alice sighed, plopping back onto the pillow. Finally the water stopped, and she shut her eyes, pretending to be asleep. She could hear the slight squeak of the door opening, and then Chris shuffling about the room. She could even hear the swish of the towel as he vigorously rubbed it over his hair. Then a click as Chris flipped the light switch—and the pink color of her inner eyelids went to black.

“Honey?” Chris whispered.

“Yes?” she whispered back.

“I just wanted to ask you—”

“Ask what?”

“Well—what time do you want me to set the alarm for?” he asked, sheepish.

“Oh, I don’t know, eight on the dot—I won’t need to shower in the morning,” Alice said, shifting to rest her head on the familiar warmth of Chris’s shoulder. “Is that all?”

“I think so...” he said, trailing off into a yawn.

“Oh, thanks for the flowers, honey,” Alice raised herself to kiss him.

“No problem—you’re my best girl... I bought something slinky for you, too. I’ll show it to you tomorrow. Sorry I got so tired all of a sudden... Where are those flowers, anyway?”

“I put them in the kitchen,” she answered.

“Oh yeah, I think I smelled them earlier. Not quite the scent I imagined.”

Alice waited a moment before answering. “Well, no, they’re a tad—strong.”

“Not just strong—kinda gross. Sorry honey. Next time I’ll be more careful what I order.” Chris kissed the top of her head.

“Yes, no surprises, right?” Alice mumbled into his shoulder, flinging her arm across his chest. Chris didn’t answer, and she realized that he was already half asleep. She became aware of the sounds she never noticed during the day: the hum of electrical appliances, the drip of the shower faucet, and the swoosh of cars that sped by outside. The maddening regularity of background noises kept her

awake. She turned her head and caught sight of the digital clock. She counted as the clock's display consistently gave way to the minutes, and waited to fall asleep.

STREET SMARTS

The snow began to fall at a quicker rate as the last light faded on the horizon—lightest yellow to deepest blue. Stepping out of Adam’s car, Meg realized that the snow would pile up at least another inch before they were done with dinner. She walked hand in hand with Adam out of the parking garage, past all the cars gleaming in the hazy yellow light of the streetlamps. The feel of snow compacting underfoot as they hit the ground was satisfying—it reminded Meg of when she ran about in snow boots as a child. Meg tucked her chin into her scarf as they walked against the wind. She tried to avoid the mounds of snow shoveled up along the edge of the sidewalk. Still, the snow somehow reached above the tops of her shoes, chilling her ankles.

“Did you hear about the man who got killed by a snowplow?” Meg asked suddenly, rousing herself from watching her sneakers sink into the snow.

“No, what happened? Was it on the news?” Adam asked.

“Yeah, I guess this guy was wearing a brown jumpsuit and a snowplow hit him and pushed him along with all the snow. They thought they just hit a deer and didn’t think anything of it, left the place and went home. It wasn’t till the next day that people discovered the guy was missing—because he didn’t show up for work.”

“That’s awful,” he said, intently watching the traffic pass as they stopped at a crosswalk.

“Happens everyday.”

“I’d imagine,” Adam said.

“So, where are we going for dinner? Or are you going to keep the surprise until we walk in the door?” Meg asked.

“Oh, walk now,” Adam ordered, squeezing Meg’s hand. “And I guess it’s okay to tell you now—we’re going to that Thai place where we went on our first date.”

“That’ll be great.” Meg rubbed the palm of his hand with her gloved fingers.

They rounded a quiet corner—the streets were strangely deserted due to the falling snow. Everyone was probably taking cover, Meg thought, wishing that she and Adam were already inside the restaurant. Up ahead, under a streetlamp, three figures loitered in a circle. As Meg and Adam approached, Meg saw that two of the figures were boys—probably high school age, she thought, judging from the baggy jeans and oversized puffy jackets. A girl stood between them, turning back and forth to watch each speak as they argued. Meg was always startled to realize that she could surmise an entire situation from a distance. Just from the exaggerated gestures and their posture—the boys arched toward one another, their arms swinging in the air periodically—she knew they were fighting over something. It would be embarrassing to be seen like that, really; it was a good thing that she and Adam never fought. Especially in public—

As they got closer, Meg could see the instant that the group noticed them. Meg stared. The other girl looked down, drawing a cell phone from her coat pocket. The girl’s eyes were darkened with makeup, which seemed even darker as

the streetlamp threw shadows into the hollows of her eyes. The boys' mouths stopped moving. A moment of sizing one another up—Meg stood up straighter. Adam tugged her hand, pulling her farther from the group of young teenagers.

“Hey, you,” one of the boys called to them, taking a step away from the streetlamp toward them. His brown hair was stringy with melted snow, and the skin of his cheeks seemed covered in red pimples. “Know where things are around here?”

Adam stopped, as the boy had intercepted his path. “Look, I don't really know this area...”

Meg watched—if she'd been alone, she'd have played nice—given them time to tell her where they were headed, then some typical response, like “three blocks that way,” anything to avoid rousing them here, on this less populated street.

The boy scowled. “You didn't even wait to hear. The T stop. Where is it,” he demanded.

“I don't know,” Adam said tersely. His grip on Meg's hand tightened, and he sidestepped the boy.

“Whatever.” The boy turned back to his group, and then started off, turning his back on Meg and Adam. “Let's get the hell out of here,” he said. The other boy and the girl moved from under the streetlamp, following.

Adam set off down the sidewalk, pulling Meg along.

“Whatever, 'cause your girlfriend looks like a whore!” the boy yelled. Meg turned to see—she could see him punch the air. The other girl didn't turn

around. But really, that was ridiculous. Meg made a mental picture of herself: well-groomed, her hair smooth and clipped back from her face, her peacoat and matching scarf and hat—really, she had less makeup on than that other girl, and she was older— a junior in college; surely that girl was the sort that would drop out of high school after a year or two, maybe even because she got pregnant.

Adam said nothing, just kept walking. She watched him from the corner of her eye. “Well, that was awkward—rude—”

“Lowlifes,” Adam said.

“Well, but, why didn’t you just point them in the right direction?”

“You can’t reason with people like that. They were looking for a confrontation.”

“How do you know?” Meg demanded.

“I think it was pretty obvious, Meg. You’re not from a big city. You don’t know this stuff.” Adam quickened their pace, and they finally hit a busier road. The sidewalk was better here—the snow already packed down underfoot from the many passersby. Meg said nothing, concentrating on the crunch of snow.

The restaurant was downstairs, half below street level. Meg remembered feeling romantic that first night. Something about escaping from the streets—and the setting itself was rather like a secret hideaway for ardent lovers with its deep red carpets and low lighting. The waiter seated them beneath a window that looked out at the street. It was odd to be able to see people only from the knee down, as their legs scissored by the garden-level window. Meg flipped through

the menu, running her finger over the laminated photos of various rice and noodle dishes. What would mango taste like in a curry sauce?

“I’m so glad we’re here—three months!” Meg smiled, looking up from her menu. What had she ordered that first time? Something difficult to eat neatly, she remembered—perhaps noodles or spring rolls that fell apart as she ate them. Funny that it had taken her so long to warm up to Adam; that first night she hadn’t expected ever to go out with him again. He’d kept sending her emails and phoning her, though—how could she turn him down?

“Are you ready to order?” The waiter appeared at her right side, smiling and tapping his pad of paper with a pencil.

“We’re ready, right Meg?” Adam said, closing his menu. He let Meg order first, and then stumbled in pronouncing the dish he had chosen. As the waiter left with their orders, Meg racked her brain for something to start up a conversation.

“So,” Adam said, dragging out the word. “I’ve been thinking, Valentine’s Day is coming up, and I think we should do something special.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I think a ski trip would be great. I’ve been wanting to go skiing for months, and it just seems like this would be the perfect excuse to finally hit the slopes. We could even go up to Vermont—” Adam spoke rapidly, gaining excitement by the moment.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Meg said. “I’d just want to sit in the lodge all day. Aren’t you tired of all the snow?” Meg asked, watching the snowflakes swirl outside of the window above them.

“Nah, I’m sure you’d want to get outside,” he said.

“I don’t think so, really.” The wind would chap the skin of her face; trudging through the snow would make her thighs ache. “Actually,” she said, “I really don’t think it would be much fun.”

“Well, I’m sure you’d learn to love it if we went together,” Adam said.

“No, I don’t think I’d *learn* to love it,” Meg said, tapping her feet under the table. What a plan! She couldn’t ski, hated it—it wouldn’t be romantic; it would be a disaster. She would fall down; her skis would slide out from under her. The cold was unbearable, the feel of wet wool socks against her skin, the unpleasant shock when she stepped in puddles of half melted snow on the tile after taking her boots off inside...

“Then what *would* you want to do?”

Meg didn’t answer, as the waiter had suddenly appeared at her side. She instead rearranged her utensils to make room for the plate. Steam rose from the food and tea, creating wispy patterns in the air. Meg gripped the teacup, warming her palms.

“Never mind, Meg. We don’t have to go, if it’s not fun, obviously.” Adam resumed eating, his gaze on the wall hangings. It was always the low point in the conversation when he wouldn’t even look across the table— To avoid the awkward moment of renewed eye contact, she concentrated on her food, pushing the rice around and picking out the pieces of mango. As she chewed on the last of the fruit, Meg quickly looked above Adam and stared out the little slit of a

window. The snow still fell; the accumulation obscured half the window. Now she could see only the calves of legs crisscrossing by.

Meg sighed. She would have to say something. This couldn't go on like this, neither of them wanting to speak again first. "Anyway, I still don't understand why you couldn't just give those kids directions," she said tiredly, as if resuming a conversation.

"What?" Adam asked—more a note of surprise than a question.

"The kids, up there, by the streetlight on our way over. Why did you act like that, you just got them riled up." Meg made eye contact.

"I told you. They were obviously going to mug us or something. These ploys to get you to stop somewhere...and they're just waiting to pinch your wallet..." Adam's voice rose, became more assured, as he continued.

"Well, I really don't think they were trying to get anything from us. You're so paranoid," Meg said.

"Come on, Meg, those kids looked like trouble. I was just trying to keep us safe. Truce, OK?"

"I guess I understand what you were doing," Meg said, and then continued eating.

Of course, Meg thought, now there's nothing more to be said. And she had only onions and rice left on her plate now, but it was better than sitting silently while Adam ate. If one counted to ten while chewing each bite...she couldn't remember if it fooled one into eating less, or if it just helped digestion. Regardless, it slowed her progress. Adam finally finished, shifting in his seat.

Such an awkward moment—more awkward than all the others put together. Meg hated to pay for their dates—she was all for feminism and all that, but why did this have to pervade even dating etiquette? Normally Adam paid; but every once in awhile he would tease her, saying that she should treat him. That was awful, really. She would rather be asked politely, than have a joke made out of it. And anyway, she knew Adam received a monthly allowance from his parents—that letter he was always so worried about getting at the end of each month—She deliberately chewed two more forkfuls of rice, waiting for a sign from Adam. Finally, he reached for his wallet. Meg put down her fork.

“Yum, someday I want to learn how to make this,” she said. Funny, the rhythm of a date—and one reconciles and tries to leave as a happy couple—Adam slipped his credit card into the holder.

“Hey if you do, promise you’ll invite me to dinner,” Adam joked. The waiter picked up the folder, and they sat in silence as they awaited his return. Adam filled in the tip, and then straightened up in his seat. “Now let’s get out of here before we’re buried in the snow.”

“Definitely.” Meg looked up at the small window above their table—it was now nearly obscured by packed snow. She slowly stood up from the table, and slipped back into her coat. Adam took her hand as they headed out the door and ascended the stairs. As they returned to street level, Meg saw that the snow hadn’t piled up as much as she had thought—it seemed that the wind had just blown it all up against the walls of the buildings. She could imagine the rest of the

evening: a slow accumulation of awkward moments, and no polite way to leave his room.

“Adam?” Meg asked, as they shuffled through the snow. “I’d kind of like to just walk back to my dorm if that’s OK with you. We’re so close to my campus—and I should probably get started on all my reading. If you wouldn’t mind...” she trailed off, stopping in the snow.

“Oh, really?” he said, letting go of her hand.

“Yeah, I know it sounds silly, but—”

“No, whatever, it’s OK I guess. I thought we’d get a chance to hang out tonight, just us, but we can do that tomorrow,” he said.

“Yeah...” she said, looking off toward campus.

“Call me on my cell when you get in?” he said.

“Yes, Adam—I know, you’re probably worried about high school thugs attacking me with their backpacks or something.” She smiled, tiredly, as she teased him. Then he leaned over to kiss her. He pulled her in, his hand on the back of her neck. She stepped back when he released her.

“Talk to you soon, and thanks for dinner,” she said, before heading off down the street.

“No problem sweetie, I’ll be waiting for your call!” he yelled in her direction.

Meg hurried off, sure that everyone was looking at her after Adam had called out to her so loudly. She couldn’t possibly call him later; there was nothing to talk about. Snow blew into her face, and she pulled her scarf closer around her

neck. She could see only through squinted eyes as she avoided the stinging wind. The yellow light from the streetlamps glittered on the snow, blurring into halos as her eyes began to water. Finally, up ahead, she saw the fenced campus with its sturdy brick buildings.

THE SUN ON CLOUDS

Beatrice was unhappy. Well, not exactly unhappy, she thought, correcting herself, but not happy, either. Somewhere in the space between. Maybe “not happy” would be better. Yes, she was “not happy.” That left some wiggle space. But why wasn’t she happy? It was hard to pin down a reason. She was thirty now, a week ago she had left the age of the twenty-something and had entered the realm of the mature adult. Another gray area, the space between twenty-something and middle age. She wondered if this birthday meant that she needed to stop putting bright colored barrettes in her hair, or if she should wear only earth tones. Should she buy a suit for her job at the office?

Beatrice sighed and rolled over in bed. Her husband shifted in his sleep next to her. She looked at him and sighed again. Charlie. Her husband. Five years now. That seemed like a long time, and even longer when she counted how long they’d been dating, how long they’d known each other. They’d met in college, in a sociology class. He’d asked so many questions, Beatrice couldn’t help but notice him. She kept noticing him until she couldn’t stand it any longer and had to ask him out to coffee. Then he had invited her to dinner. A good story, it always had been, how she approached him first. And now he loved her, and she loved him too, she supposed, though she really thought about it only when the possibility of losing him came to mind. She supposed that was love.

Kicking her feet out from under the bedspread, Beatrice fell into a light slumber. She began to dream, and was aware that her dream was not reality, but

something she could end if she chose to wake up. She was back in college, in her old dorm room. She was naked, lounging in her dorm bed with Charlie, who was smoking pot and flipping through the late night shows on her small television set. Suddenly, Beatrice remembered that she had a job interview that she had to get to. In the dream it seemed perfectly logical to have an interview well after midnight. In a panic, she threw a coat on over her nakedness, and put shoes on without socks. Charlie drove her, but he was so high he kept forgetting to watch the road and stared at her, flashing her a goofy grin. During a particularly dangerous swerve, Beatrice remembered that she was dreaming and made herself wake up. A strange desire lingered in the back of her mind, to fall back into the dream and finish it. But before she could return to the car and Charlie, the alarm went off.

“Ah what? Time already?” Charlie groped for the clock, knocking over a framed picture on the bedside table. Beatrice sat up and watched him fumble for the snooze button. His eyelids were stuck together; he could hear only the beeping. Beatrice sighed, reached over him, and hit the off button.

“Thanks honey, I needed that,” Charlie mumbled, as he resettled himself and dozed back to sleep. Beatrice reset the alarm. He always looked like a child when he slept—it was tempting to let him sleep till noon.

She walked to her dresser, peeling off her pajamas. She tossed the silky material into a drawer, and opened the closet. Charlie had organized the closet. It would have been easier to have separate closets. Then she could have been more haphazard without noticing the mess she made. But next to his orderly suits, ready for courtrooms and law offices, her pastel blouses and soft sweaters had to be

neatly hung on their hangers. So many suits, and all those slacks—everything the same few colors. Charlie being a paralegal still seemed incongruous with his character— that seeming child, sleeping still, working with lawyers to defend people that likely were guilty of whatever they'd been accused of. Beatrice pulled a cream colored blouse off its hanger and slipped it on. When wearing this blouse she always remembered to straighten her back, and hold her head up.

As she munched on toast downstairs in the dining room she heard the water begin to run in the upstairs bathroom. Charlie must have finally gotten out of bed and into the shower. It was half past seven in the morning. She had to be at her desk in the publishing office by eight. While gulping down orange juice she put on her coat and shoes.

It was breezy outside, and gray— the orange and yellow leaves on the trees in the yard seemed to emit more light than the sun. Sliding into the car, Beatrice felt the workday routine taking over.

Beatrice pulled back into the driveway at a quarter to six that evening. She always arrived home before Charlie. Sometimes it was lonely returning to an empty house, but today wasn't one of those days. The office had been crazy— deadlines were coming up and people were growing irritable. Just a few minutes alone in a quiet house without anyone or anything clamoring for her attention, that was all she needed. The sun had broken through the gray clouds, but only long enough to set. The bricks of the house seemed to glow in these slanting rays of sun.

Walking up the steps to the front door, Beatrice remembered when Charlie had carried her past this “threshold.” It was two years ago, and summer. They had paid the down payment, and had just finished moving the last of their things into the house. Charlie had suddenly caught her around the waist and lifted her—he had practically dropped her. They had fallen down together in the mudroom, laughing. She smiled and hung her coat up in the mudroom. It was dark in the kitchen, but she didn’t turn on a light. The house retained its feeling of emptiness, of peace.

Beatrice climbed the stairs to the bedroom, and took off the filmy blouse. She pulled an old t-shirt over her head and kicked off her pumps. On her way to the bathroom she nearly tripped over the picture frame Charlie had disturbed that morning. It was a picture from their wedding—he was smearing white frosting on her nose while she scrunched her face up, laughing. So unlikely, the way memories worked. That scene was engrained in her memory—how the frosting felt on her face, gritty with sugar—yet she couldn’t remember what she had eaten for dinner last night. She placed the picture back on the nightstand.

In the bathroom she washed her hands and splashed her face with water. Brushing her hair back into a ponytail, she noticed something glinting in her hair. One strand of hair refused to lie flat with the rest and curled up from her scalp. It was gray. Beatrice held her breath for a moment. How strange. When had her mother’s hair gone gray? When had she started to dye it a darker shade of brown? Impossible to remember. She didn’t want to pluck it. She tied back the rest of her hair and let the one strand remain, standing apart. It would be silly to dye just one

strand of hair, and yet, how could she allow it such a conspicuous position. Beatrice opened the medicine cabinet. All the products she had bought over the last couple of years. So many half empty bottles of different colored liquids. There the hair gel was—behind the eye makeup remover that stung and brought tears to her eyes whenever she used it. She squeezed out a dollop of gel, and smeared it over the renegade hair.

The front door thumped shut. Beatrice straightened up, listening.

“Hey Bea, where are you! I’m starving!” Charlie called.

“I’m upstairs!” She called back, walking out of the bathroom. His footfalls could be heard on the stairs. “Hey honey.”

“Hey! You look comfortable, are you wearing one of my shirts?”

“Oh, I might be. I just threw something on when I got home from work. Everyone’s so stressed out at the office, it’s lovely to be home again.” She sat down on the bed and kicked her feet back and forth over the floor—that tickly feeling of the carpet fibers sliding between her toes.

“Yeah, ditto that—” Beatrice watched her husband as he took off his suit jacket and dress shoes, and put them back in their places in the closet. He then plopped down next to her on the bed, and kissed her lips. “Your hair looks different,” he said, frowning.

“How so?” It was a leading question. She didn’t want to tell him about the gray hair, she wanted him to discover it on his own.

“I don’t know, the ponytail thing is so—youthful and fresh looking.” He looked at her more closely. “Oh look there—you have one gray hair. Hold still.”

Beatrice tensed her muscles and furrowed her brow as she felt him grab the hair, and pull. It detached painlessly.

“Thanks.” The wrinkles on her forehead disappeared, and she could feel the muscles in her back and shoulders relax and expand. The question of the gray area between twenty something and middle age was so easily averted by the plucking of a hair. Charlie held it out to her, now a harmless, insignificant anomaly. He grinned. She took the hair and tossed it in the sink.

“Let’s get dinner going! Aren’t you starving?”

“Always.” Beatrice bounced to her feet. Going down the stairs she was tempted to slide down the thin banister. The blinds were closed over the kitchen window. When had she done that? Charlie never bothered with the blinds, never worried about people seeing in. She hurried across the linoleum to open them. “No wonder it was so dark in here earlier—there, look at the sunset!” Sunsets were always prettier when there were clouds to be stained with color. If one looked long enough, really drank this image in, could it be burnt into memory? Impossible to turn away when faced with something beautiful.

“Very impressive.” Charlie rubbed the back of her neck.

“Whatever we’re fixing, I’m in charge of chopping the vegetables—assuming that dinner involves veggies.” Beatrice planted herself in front of the window, and Charlie brought her onions to chop. She peeled off the papery layers—always hard to figure out where the outside stopped and the inside began. The first layer, thin and moist, came off with the crackly covering. Taking her time, she reduced the onion to a pile of semi-transparent cubes, pausing at times

to watch the clouds turn from pink, to orange, to purple. Even after the rest of the sky had turned to a deep blue, the clouds seemed to retain some color. She relaxed with the sounds of the kitchen—the fridge humming, water boiling on the stove, Charlie scratching the sides of the pot with a metal spoon as he stirred pasta into the boiling water. The same sounds every night. No ruptures, no milestones, change was slow and disguised by these routines. Time would slip by, but slowly. Not everything was black or white, and everything in between was much more than just gray.

FIRST GRADE

Nothing had changed between yesterday and today, except, of course, for the school buses. Kit spotted the yellow bus while it was still half a mile down the road, stopping what seemed to be every few inches to pick up another miniature child. Today was all blue and green like yesterday, the sky wide and welcoming. But yesterday was summer, and today was fall. Mom had told her so. Kit looked behind her, up the driveway to her own house, tucked in behind the bushes. She waved to her mother, who was just walking out the door on her way to work. And now the bus was nearly here; it cut through the landscape and hid the shimmering pavement. The squeak of the breaks as the bus lurched to a stop startled Kit, and she dropped her lunchbox. She stooped to pick it up and then she stepped up the high stairs of the bus.

“Good morning,” the driver greeted her, and turned back to the road. Kit walked down the aisle, her lunchbox hitting the sides of the seats. The boys who lived down the street were sitting together, and Kit didn’t know any of the other kids. They all seemed to be busy, showing off new toys or pushing the buttons of video games. The bus rumbled into motion, throwing Kit off balance. She stumbled and sat towards the back in an empty seat, puffing out her breath as she plopped onto the green vinyl. It smelled like school, like last year when she rode the bus home every day after kindergarten. Everything out the window was a blur—Kit tried to focus and follow one tree here, one person walking a dog there, but it made her eyes hurt.

As the bus pulled up to the school, it seemed like everyone was talking at once. All the kids on the bus started to stand up, hastily thrusting arms through backpack straps and searching under the seats for lunchboxes that had shifted during the drive. Kit tried to get into the aisle of the bus, but it was crowded and no one would let her in. She waited as everyone else merged into the aisle and jumped off the bus. Kit was the last one to leave the bus, as she filed out behind the quiet boy who had been sitting in the seat across from her.

The lawn in front of the school was cropped short and thick—it smelled freshly mowed. Kit wanted to walk barefoot in the grass, as she had all summer in the backyard. But her new tennis shoes would be difficult to put back on, and everyone else was going into the building.

“Kit! Kit! Wait!” Kit turned and saw her friend, Madison, running up to meet her. “Who’s your teacher going to be, Kit? Do we have the same teacher? Mine’s Miss Valentine.”

“Nope, my teacher’s Mrs. Topsfield. My Mom told me she’s in room thirty-four, so I’ve got to find her.” The two girls hurried inside, Madison down one corridor, and Kit down another. She looked for someone tall, any adult, who could tell her where room thirty-four and Mrs. Topsfield were. She saw a room filled with older kids settling into their desks, and a nice looking man with black hair in front of the room. Kit wandered into the room and approached the man. He saw her and smiled, friendly, with his teeth showing. Kit asked him where room thirty-four was, and he led her out the room and down the hall. Here the children were all her age, and busy packing their school supplies into their desks.

“Mrs. Topsfield,” the man said, smiling as if he were telling a joke, “I found a student of yours in my classroom.” He pushed Kit forward. Mrs. Topsfield was pretty and tall, dressed all in blue and black with her straight black hair clipped behind her ears. For a moment she looked tired, but then she smiled and her face was instantly reassuring and welcoming.

“And what’s your name?” Mrs. Topsfield asked.

“I’m Kit, I’m in your class.” Kit looked around, realizing that many of the other children had their parents with them. She felt alone when she saw that—but only for a moment.

“That’s great! Let’s find you a seat.” Mrs. Topsfield steered her toward a desk in the front row. “There you go, honey, you can sit right up here and be my special listener.”

The man lingered at the front of the room, speaking quietly with Mrs. Topsfield. Then he nodded and turned to leave. She watched him go, the corners of her mouth pinched into a frown. She paced to her desk, leaning on the back of her chair for support. Another student entered the room, clinging to his mother’s hand. The stout mother led her son to an empty desk, and then shuffled to the teacher’s desk, her purse swaying from side to side.

“And you must be Mrs. Topsfield?” she inquired. “My son is in your class—his name is David Twining.”

Mrs. Topsfield shook herself slightly, looking up. “Oh, yes, wonderful.”

Meanwhile, Kit beamed at her new desk. She took her pencils, crayons, and other supplies out of her backpack and put them in the desk. The lid lifted up

easily, and stayed in place when she opened it fully. There was a wonderful little holder inside her desk for her pencils, and a divider to keep things in their places. The girl on Kit's left was prattling away with her neighbor, a blond boy in overalls. Kit looked to her right. A boy was staring down at his desk, quietly drawing shapes on a piece of paper with a small stub of pencil. Shyly, Kit opened her desk again and rearranged her supplies. Mrs. Topsfield went back to the front of the room and told the parents that, since school was beginning, they should say their good-byes and depart. The parents blew kisses to their children and retreated out the door. Kit saw that Mrs. Topsfield was looking sympathetically at her and the other students without their parents. But her parents had work, and she was old enough to go to school on her own—she wasn't a baby. Kit grinned; after all, she thought, having the teacher as a friend is better than bringing your parents to school with you.

Then Mrs. Topsfield welcomed everyone to the class, periodically glancing at Kit and flashing what Kit supposed was an especially bright smile. The day flew by, as they played games to get to know each other's names, went outside to play in the grass during recess, and reviewed the most important things they learned in kindergarten—the alphabet, numbers, and how to write their names and addresses.

Over dinner that night, Kit told her parents about Mrs. Topsfield. She was excited to climb onto the bus the next morning. That day in class Mrs. Topsfield reviewed numbers, showing the students how to add and subtract. She used drawings on the blackboard of little animals that she would add to with chalk in

hand, or subtract with the eraser. Kit thought it was marvelous—like adding horses to a stable, or subtracting the spiders from beneath her front porch at home. She imagined three spiders when she saw the number three on the board, five horses when Mrs. Topsfield wrote the number five.

Mrs. Topsfield handed out practice questions so they could see the numbers and try some examples for themselves. She told the class to remain perfectly quiet, as it was merely a placement quiz so she could see where everyone was at in the subject. Kit covered her mouth with her left hand to remind herself to be quiet. In her right she grasped her pencil and began marking on the paper. Occasionally she looked up, and saw that Mrs. Topsfield's brows were furrowed, with her eyes concentrated on a piece of paper in front of her. Kit smiled when her teacher looked up, but Mrs. Topsfield seemed to have forgotten about her. She looked back, and nodded slowly after a moment of hesitation. Kit turned back to her paper, keeping her mouth covered to remind herself.

The girl to Kit's left started whispering to the little boy, and then turned to Kit. She leaned over and asked Kit for the answer to the third problem. Kit shook her head and kept looking at her paper, even as the girl gave her ankle a little kick beneath their desks. A moment later Kit heard the girl whispering to the boy again.

"Who's making that noise?" Mrs. Topsfield demanded suddenly. Kit felt a flush of anxiety, and straightened her back in order to sit up straight. "You, Kit, I heard you and your neighbor whispering. Names on the board. Now. No questions!"

“But Mrs. Topsfield I didn’t say anything—” she stuttered, suddenly feeling that she didn’t know Mrs. Topsfield at all.

“Names—on—the—board.” Mrs. Topsfield said each word slowly, sitting at her desk and glowering at the two girls. Kit frowned at her neighbor and marched up to the white board. She grabbed the big, red marker and slowly wrote out her name in big straight lines. The noxious smell made her want to sneeze. She quickly replaced the cap and returned to her seat, huffy and staring at the ground. Her neighbor wrote her name afterwards, “BETH,” in curvy letters with a backwards “e.”

Kit shifted in her chair to face away from Beth. She was such a loud bully! Kit hoped that she wouldn’t have to play with her on the playground. She’d find Madison, and maybe they could play with the quiet boy who drew pictures to her right. Kit knew how to draw, especially dragons and monsters. It seemed hours until recess, when they could line up and file down the stairs to the playground. Kit didn’t see Madison, so she rushed to the swings and began pumping her legs to reach the highest point in the air before the others even sat down into the slack rubber seats. After the initial exhilaration of swooshing through the air, Kit started looking around her. A boy and a girl she had not yet met were on one side of her; on the other was Beth. Kit glowered and let her legs slow their movements.

“Look!” cried the boy next to her, “they’re both swinging at the same time!” Kit checked and indeed they were—Beth reached the highest point at the same time Kit did, and they both slid over the ground backwards at the same time. Kit lowered her feet, dragging her new shoes through the dust. She hopped out of

the seat as soon as she could without falling down. Joining the kids going down the slides, Kit scaled up the ladder and slid down the smooth metal, raising her hands above her head and laughing. She saw Beth stop swinging, saw her walking alone back toward the school. Kit went down the slide again, trying to laugh louder, showing how much fun she was having.

When recess came to an end, Kit was the first to reach the classroom door. She saw Beth already at her seat, tracing shapes on the surface of the desk. Then she looked at the blackboard. Her name was gone! Had Mrs. Topsfield realized her mistake? She must have! Everything would be all right now—Mrs. Topsfield would know that Kit was good, not bad like Beth.

Mrs. Topsfield entered the classroom last, ushering in the stragglers. She handed out construction paper for craft time, and then moved toward the front of the room to demonstrate. While drawing an example on the board, Mrs. Topsfield saw that only Beth's name was still on the board. Suddenly frowning, she turned back to the class.

“Kit, did you take your name off the board? Did you erase your name?”

Kit shook her head slowly.

“No, of course not!” she said, feeling her cheeks suddenly turn warm and pink.

Mrs. Topsfield frowned, all the friendliness of yesterday gone. She wrote Kit's name on the board, and placed a check next to it. Kit squirmed. Would she send a note home to her parents? What would her mother say? Her second day of first grade—ruined now, and the teacher imagined her to be a cheater and a liar.

Kit concentrated on the craft project, slowly and methodically cutting out the shapes of bright construction paper. She refused to smile, focusing her eyes only on the paper. If Mrs. Topsfield had not erased her name, who had? The only person in the classroom before her had been Beth. Beth had done it! She wanted to make Kit look even worse to Mrs. Topsfield. Maybe Beth wanted to be the teacher's pet, and had been trying all along to get Kit into trouble. Beth must have noticed how much Mrs. Topsfield smiled at Kit, and how much happier she looked when she saw that Kit was focusing on the lesson. It wasn't fair; Kit couldn't help it if Mrs. Topsfield liked her best.

Kit furtively glanced at Beth. She had stopped babbling to her neighbor and was instead frowning over her construction paper, slowly pasting the pieces together. Kit could tell that it wouldn't look right when it was finished. She sighed. Beth looked up, her large eyes trained on Kit's face. When Kit frowned, Beth looked down again at her paper, biting her lower lip and fumbling with the pieces she had cut out. Suddenly Beth got up and went to Mrs. Topsfield's desk. Probably to tell some mean story about her, Kit thought. Kit sighed again and sat back in her chair, waiting for the bell to ring so she could go home. She was glad to sit alone—she hated the whole day, her teacher, Beth, and all the noisy children in the class. She didn't belong among them. She would go home, and tomorrow Mrs. Topsfield would realize that today had been a mistake. Maybe she could sit in a different desk, away from Beth.

After class, Mrs. Topsfield stopped Kit on the way out of the room. When all the other children had filed out, she squatted, eye-to-eye with Kit. Close-up,

Kit noticed that Mrs. Topsfield's eyes were pink, the skin a little puffy. She looked younger than her mother.

“Did you know that Beth erased your name from the board?” she asked.

“I thought she did it,” Kit nodded.

“Well, apparently she wanted me to know that she didn't hear you talking this morning during the placement quiz, and so she wanted to make sure that you weren't in trouble for it.”

Kit stared—really? How could that be?

“So, don't worry, I know you didn't do it. I just wanted to be sure that everyone was working quietly, without distractions or help. Otherwise I wouldn't know how well you all understand the subject, right?” She smiled.

“I understand!” Now her teacher knew how grown-up she was!

On her way to the buses Kit saw Beth standing further down the sidewalk, alone with her bulky backpack. Kit weaved her way through the throngs of chattering children and stopped next to Beth. She quietly waited until her bus pulled up with its screeching wheels, and then waved good-bye to Beth. All the way home the bus seemed to creep down the streets. The trees were wild and about to lose all their bright leaves. As soon as Kit flung open the front door, Kit's mother looked up from the book she was reading. “How was your day, honey?”

“It was OK,” Kit replied, shrugging out of the straps on her backpack.

“Learning a lot already?”

“Oh, yeah, tons! There's a girl in my class, her name's Beth—”

“Making some new friends?” Her mother asked, putting her book down.

“Well...” Kit drew the word out as she pulled her shoes off her feet.

“Maybe.” She peeled off her socks, and sat by her mother on the couch. “Want to play dolls with me?” she wheedled.

“Of course—but just for a little while, OK? It’s getting close to dinner time.”

“Yay!” Kit bounced to her feet and sprinted down the hallway to her room. She returned with an armful of dolls, extra doll’s clothes, and miniature hairbrushes. “I’ll be the teacher, and you can be like me, just starting first grade...”

A DAY AT THE BEACH

But one couldn't really blame the children for being antsy on the way to the beach. It was so warm, and the sky so blue, that sitting in the stuffy station wagon must have seemed a waste of the day to them. To placate her husband, Margaret kept tuning the radio to music whenever the DJ switched over to commercial breaks. To keep Rudy and Sam in their seats, she kept them supplied with bags of peanuts and little boxes of raisins. After an hour of driving, however, these tricks were losing their effectiveness.

"Could we please turn off the radio? I'm getting a headache from the sun glare and the damn advertisements." Gary said, flipping down the sun visor. Margaret leaned over and switched off the radio.

"You know Gary, I could take over driving for a while if you're getting tired," she said.

"No, of course I can drive," he said. Margaret sighed and leaned back. Her legs were sweating against the seat; she lifted them slightly, trying to keep her skin exposed to the air. She rolled the windows down even lower, and rested her arm on the ledge, her fingers dangling out into the wind.

"How much longer?" Rudy pestered, kicking the back of his father's seat.

"Hey, knock that off back there," Gary ordered.

"Not that much further kiddos—would you please sit tight back there?"

"Sure, Mom." Rudy dramatically sighed, puffing out his cheeks and looking even younger than his six years. From her rearview mirror Margaret

could see Samantha grinning at her older brother. Then Rudy started humming some tune he had picked up, and so Samantha had to join in.

“Stop that humming, you two, right now,” Gary said.

“Hey! We’re going so *sloooow*! Are we there yet?” Rudy asked.

“We’re hitting traffic, honey, see that line of cars up ahead of us? They all want to get to the Maine beaches, too.” Margaret glanced at Gary. Going to the beach always seemed like a good idea in theory; when she had made the suggestion that morning, she had forgotten to take into account the reality of being trapped in a sun-beaten car for two hours. The traffic at the exit for the beach was backed up for nearly half a mile. They drove a car length, waited a minute or two, and drove only another car length. When a car cut in front of them, Gary honked the horn over and over. Samantha yelled in time with the honking.

“Samantha, stop that, please,” Margaret demanded, twisting in her seat.

“Damn it! Did you see that?” Gary huffed. “Why can’t they wait in line like everyone else?” Margaret nodded quietly in agreement. Without the air whipping into the windows, the car felt stifling.

“Let’s just do the best we can to keep the kids calm,” she said under her breath.

“Calm? Of course. Just remember, this was your idea,” he muttered back. Margaret looked out the window as they passed through the quaint beach town.

“Oh I see the beach! There’s kites in the air!” Rudy exclaimed.

“Kites! Kites! Sandcastles!” chanted Samantha.

Gary shook his head. Margaret saw his hands clenched around the steering wheel, and looked away again. She could see that the parking spots along the beach were all taken. Traffic slowed as drivers looked for people walking to their cars, hoping to slide into a newly vacated spot. From here she could see the beach, littered with variegated towels and umbrellas. Children, teens, lovers, parents, and grandparents—everyone was on the sand. The water reflected the sun's glare, blinding and sharp on Margaret's eyes.

“Ohhh...so pwetty!” Samantha said.

“Why aren't we moving, Dad?” Rudy wiggled restlessly.

“Because no one in front of us is moving. There aren't any parking spaces.” Gary replied, shortly.

“Oh.” Rudy said. A few minutes later: “Then can me and Sam get out and start on the sandcastle while you guys park?”

“No, Rudy.” Ten minutes and twenty car lengths later, Margaret spotted a sign for fee parking.

“Honey, let's do it. It's only a few dollars more than the meter would end up being, and the kids are getting so antsy to be on the beach.” Margaret, too, had felt the excitement of being at the beach.

Gary swung into the lot, and soon the whole family was crossing the street to get to the beach. Rudy was bounding and frisking around them in circles, swinging his red plastic pail with its yellow shovel. With one hand Samantha clung to her mother, with the other she held her own pail, pink with square depressions on the bottom to mold the sand into turrets.

As soon as they descended the stairs and stepped onto the sand, Margaret removed her sandals. She helped Samantha out of her tiny sandals, and the family maneuvered through the crowds of towels and beach chairs. Rudy led them, pressing forward toward the sand nearer the water. Finally a patch of bare sand was found, a blanket laid down to claim it as their own, and the various bags, buckets, and chairs deposited around the corners to hold the blanket down against the wind. Margaret wiggled her toes in the sand. She felt the old euphoria of the beach returning. Such a beautiful day, and the whole family together here.

Rudy jumped up and down to get his parents' attention. "I wanna go to the water and get some wet sand! We're gonna build a sandcastle." Samantha nodded, swinging her pink bucket to and fro.

Gary shielded his eyes from the sun with his hand. "OK, kiddos, let's go. Are you coming too, Margy?"

"I suppose I should, I'm melting with the heat." Margaret slipped off her blouse, and adjusted the tank top she had put on over her bathing suit top. She wiggled out of her skirt, conscious again of how her hips and thighs had changed with the children. Not quite like the trips she and Gary had taken when they were going steady in college. Rudy started hopping down the beach toward the water, and Margaret turned toward Gary. He had taken off his shirt, too, and wore just his shorts. Why didn't men change as much, she wondered.

"Ready?" Gary asked her, suddenly grinning.

"Very!" She replied, feeling the frustration from the car ride slip into the background as Gary took her hand. They followed the children at a more sedate

pace, laughing as Rudy ran the last few steps and splashed into the water, stomping his feet in the waves. Samantha waddled along behind, throwing her arms into the air and giggling as she went ankle deep.

As soon as Margaret and Gary began wading, Rudy's face lit up with a mischievous scheme. He whispered in Samantha's ear, and she nodded in glee. Margaret pretended not to notice, resolving to let them have their fun. The two began splashing their parents, scooping up the foamy water and flinging the little water that stayed in their cupped hands. Margaret watched for Gary's reaction, and beamed as he chuckled and quickly responded with his own splashing. Margaret then joined in, feeling almost Rudy's age as she cupped the water in her hands.

"Sammy, are you about to splash me? I'll get you first!" Margaret playfully turned to Samantha, her arms poised.

"I stop, Mummy!" Samantha squealed, backing up.

Margaret laughed, flinging the water at Rudy instead. After she was thoroughly soaked, she left Gary and the children to their play and retreated to the blanket to dry off. She plopped onto the blanket and stretched out on her back, closing her eyes to the beating rays. The sun was still bright through her pink eyelids, and she reached for the sunglasses in her purse. She heard the sounds of people chattering and laughing against the steady beat of the ocean waves and the periodic cries of the gulls. So few days like this—neither she nor Gary had work, the kids didn't have play dates or birthday parties to attend, and the weather was brilliant. As a child, she had thought that trips to the beach were timeless, endless.

But really there were so few days like this. Rudy and Samantha did not know this yet—perhaps they would never need to realize this. Maybe they would always feel that such summer days were a constant—recurring year after year.

“Mom! Mom! Look at this great sand!” Rudy rushed toward her, his pail posed to tip over. Margaret watched as he slammed the bucket down into the ground. He paused, shifting the pail a little, and then slowly lifted it. The newly formed tower stood, perfectly smooth along its edges of pressed, moist sand.

“Good job! Is your sister going to help?”

“Nah—she’s looking for shells with Dad. And I’m better at making castles.” Rudy rushed back to the water, and was soon back with another pail full of sand. He carefully extricated the second tower, positioning it next to the first. “I’m going to make a moat around it when I’m done—maybe even deep enough to hit water!” Before Margaret could reply, he was running back to the water’s edge. Closing her eyes, she felt the grains of sand hitting her cheeks and bare legs as a breeze picked up. From a distance she heard children laughing and calling to one another. Is that Rudy and Samantha? she wondered dozily.

“Come on, boys, keep up!” Margaret heard a new voice, surely belonging to a family just settling in. If only they would move a bit further away so she might enjoy this area of vague noises, without being able to hear the actual words.

“Ah! That’s it—look at those waves, kids! Watch you don’t get pulled into the undertow. Better if you stay up here with your Mom and me.” Margaret opened her eyes behind the sunglasses to get a look at the newcomers. The boys were young—one too young to be in school yet; their pale skin glared in the

sunlight. They dug holes in the sand with their feet, and began exploring near their parents' beach towels. Each carried a brightly colored water gun and bucket. Margaret shut her eyes, concentrating again on the sound of the waves. Maybe later she would jump completely into those waves, paddling first and then letting them carry her back to shore.

“Daddy, look at those big old seagulls!” she heard the voice of one of the little boys.

“Where’s that bread? Want to feed them?”

“Yes, yes, please, please!” both the little voices.

“OK, now feed them, boys! Here they come! See, they know you’ve got bread,” he instructed them. Margaret roused herself to watch the boys flinging bread into the air, trying to get the seagulls to swoop low and catch it while in flight. The birds flew down to the ground, stabbing at the pieces of bread that had fallen onto the sand. Two birds lunged for the same piece of bread, and tore it apart with their beaks thrusting. At least twenty gulls swarmed around the boys, periodically flying up in attempts to catch the bread still in the air. One seagull grasped a larger chunk and flew away, escaping to enjoy his spoils away from the seizing flock.

“No, boys, smaller chunks! Tear it smaller so we don’t run out so fast.”

The father barked. The older boy obeyed, and tore the bread into small cubes. He gave his younger brother a handful to throw. Margaret saw the smaller boy’s little arm rising, the fist closed around the bread. He threw the breadcrumbs at the gulls

gathered on the sand, causing some of them to fly up, cawing at one another in indignation.

The father laughed. “That’s right, get ‘em, boys! The best part is chasing them off.” He rose from the beach towel and picked up one of the water guns that the boys had left in the sand. With two big strides he reached the boys, and raised the water gun and started squirting at the birds. The older boy scampered back to the blanket, retrieving his water gun and pail. The younger boy laughed as the gulls fled, cawing and swooping and shaking their wet feathers. For good measure, the older boy flung his pail after the departing birds. It landed a few feet away, just inches from another beach blanket. An older woman glanced back in surprise at the pail.

“Ah come on, Bobby, that was a dumb thing to do. What were you thinking?” The father sighed. “Go on, go get it!” he said. Margaret watched the little boy skulk toward the woman, staring at the ground and dragging his toes in the sand as if to purposefully slow him down. The woman held the pail out to him, and he quickly grasped the handle and fled back to his own family. Margaret leaned back, supporting herself with her arms. If only their parents would lead them down to the water and leave her in peace—

Looking toward the shore, Margaret saw her kids bounding up to meet her. Behind them her husband loped. His appearance really hadn’t changed that much at all since they first started dating—she could see the familiar outline of his muscles. Seeing him in just his swim trunks reminded her of their getaways

before the kids, when they'd buy a bottle of wine at the supermarket and splurge on a hotel up in one of these beach towns—

“Mom! Look at the cool shells Sam got. She's going to help decorate the sand castle, but I get to build it because I have the plans and everything,” Rudy said, running up beside her.

“Do you really? So you know what it's supposed to look like?”

“Yup,” Rudy said.

Gary dried off and sat next to Margaret. He shrugged, grinning, at Rudy's answer. The kids busily set to work, Samantha pressing the seashells into the molded sand of the new tower. Glancing to the side, Margaret saw that the two little boys were avidly watching. Gary stretched out, his feet not quite fitting onto the blanket. For just a moment he sought Margaret's attention, his eyes squinting against the sun. He clasped her hand. She squeezed his back, looking out to sea and understanding a silent apology for being snappy in the car.

“Mom, see my shells?” Samantha dumped her bucket of shells onto the sand. Margaret loosened herself from Gary's hand, and helped Samantha sort through the fragments of sand dollars, mother-of-pearl mussel shells, sun-bleached clamshells, and tiny, smoothly worn agates. Perhaps they could put Samantha's shells and agates into a bowl in the garden—Samantha did love bringing home souvenirs. But Samantha had also picked up a few rough pieces of rocks, blunt-edged and opaque.

“Samantha, see how these rocks aren't agates yet? They aren't transparent, see?” The child held out her hand to examine the rocks. “It takes such a long time

for the ocean to make agates. If we put them back in the ocean, in years and years they'll become even prettier."

Samantha brightened. "Let's make agates!"

"Well, it'll take a long time. But maybe when we come back to the beach in a few years we'll find these same rocks." Samantha was already on her feet, the rocks clutched in her hands. "We'll be right back, honey, Samantha is going to give these rocks back to the ocean until they become agates."

"Sounds like a good idea, Sam," Gary praised her as she set off toward the shore.

"As long as we don't have to bring home buckets full of ordinary rocks!" Margaret joked. Then she slowly stood, and set off after Samantha, leaving Gary to watch over Rudy's castle building. At the water's edge, Samantha looked up for her mother. "Ready, Samantha?" Down the shore a bit Margaret could see the other boys, no longer interested in the seagulls, scooping wet sand into their buckets. She turned back to Samantha. "Let's toss them back into the ocean, OK?"

"Yeah!" Samantha threw the rocks into the water, gleefully imitating their "plopping" noises. "Next time I'll find you, wocks!" Samantha turned and ran back up to the towels, joining her brother in the construction of the sandcastle. Margaret could tell even from this distance that Gary was giving Rudy tips on making it the best sandcastle on the beach. Margaret waded in the foamy waves, noticing as the boys from the neighboring blanket began building their own sandcastle. She turned, looking out to sea. A few boats, far off in the distance, slid

through the bright water. It really was a perfect day to be at the beach. The children were so happy to be here, playing and gathering shells. Somehow, she felt, once they had reached the sand, everything had changed. If only it were always like this—But, after all, they would be back here, year after year.

ABOVE THE STREETS

Even before she could see the tops of the buildings, she knew they were close. The familiar hazy clouds hung over the city, and Allie recognized Boston from the turnpike by these clouds. She fidgeted, zipping and unzipping the bottom of her sweater. Bridget drove the white sports car nonchalantly, with one hand on the wheel and the other wrapped around her cell phone.

“Yeah, we’re almost there—what exit do we take?” Bridget said into the phone. Allie yawned. If only she could close her eyes and rest before they reached Cambridge. Bridget might need help though, and it would be rude to doze off. “And what street is that? A right? OK.” Allie glanced over. The car was tending dangerously toward the left of the road and the cement barrier. Bridget corrected it with a slight turn of her hand. “OK. If we get lost I’ll call again.”

“Have you gone this way into Boston before?” Allie asked as soon as Bridget dropped the cell phone into the car’s console.

“Oh, no, usually Kevin drives out to see me at college. But it’s OK, we have directions now.” Bridget flipped her strawberry blond hair behind her shoulder and settled her slim body into the leather seat.

“That’s good, because I don’t make much of a navigator.” Allie grinned.

“Ha! Don’t worry about it. At least you’re here. Usually I don’t have company when I’m driving. I go to Boston at least twice a month to see Kevin. Who did you say you were visiting? I thought you told me the other week at dinner.”

“Oh, my boyfriend.”

“And where does he go to college?” Bridget glanced at Allie.

“He goes to MIT—” Allie said, looking into Bridget’s expectant eyes.

Why was that always the first question anyone asked her about Mikey? Not even his name! Allie started to babble. “So when I’m feeling kind of homesick I go for the weekend. I’m so glad you were able to bring me with you—I hate taking the bus into Boston.” Allie stopped talking, realizing that she couldn’t picture Bridget on a bus, crammed between children with runny noses and women with shopping bags.

“Yeah?”

“Is that the exit we’re supposed to take?” Allie changed the subject.

“Oh yeah, yeah, definitely.” Bridget chirped, cursorily glancing over her shoulder before switching lanes and decelerating rapidly. The line off the exit ramp crept along. Allie squinted out her window.

“What are those bugs flying around? There are so many of them right outside here.”

“Eww—I have no idea.” Bridget took a sip of the bottled water sitting in the cup holder. Allie watched as the bugs swarmed, and followed the path of one insect that landed on the windshield. It was small and reddish; Allie decided it was some winged, ant-like insect.

“Yuck, yuck, yuck! Look at that!” Bridget yelled, as she pointed at the bug, her mouth open. Allie saw that the ant had stopped, and seemed to be

shaking itself. The wings fell off, and the ant resumed its course across the windshield. “That is so, so disgusting.”

“Yeah, it must be a seasonal thing—” Allie broke off mid-sentence, as Bridget popped a CD into the player. There was an excessive number of buttons and knobs to control the sound quality. Bridget deftly adjusted the volume and bass, steering with one hand.

Out the window, Allie noticed a man holding a sign and walking along the exit ramp from car to car. Homeless, probably—if she had some change in her wallet it would be less awkward to drop some money into his hand than to sit in this car and pretend not to see—

“Oh no. Don’t you hate that?” Bridget asked, nodding toward the approaching man. What, Allie wondered—poverty? Homeless people? “I mean—begging. Honestly. Roll up your window—all the way.” Allie searched among the buttons on her door till she found the right one. It was Bridget’s car, after all— As she gazed at her shoes, she watched the man approach out of the corner of her eye. He stumbled with the sign, holding out an old red stocking cap to any open windows. He drew closer to the white car, and Allie realized that he was an older man, with deep creases down his cheeks and across his forehead.

“Finally!” Bridget sighed, as the stream of traffic sped up and they left behind the man with his outstretched cap. They sped through crowded intersections, cutting off lines of traffic and crossing beneath the lights as they changed to red. “Does this look familiar yet? I don’t know where we are.”

“Oh, uhm, kind of familiar. But I don’t know which way to go. Are you going to call Kevin back?”

“Yeah, but first I’ll pull over.” Bridget steered the car into a handicapped space. “We’ll just sit here a second, and move if a cop comes.” She dialed the number, and tapped her fingernails on the steering wheel. “Hey—yeah...we’re lost...Where are we? There’s a Dunkin’ Donuts across the street, and a bank...Oh, OK—” Bridget turned to Allie. “Could you run into that store and see what the address is? Kevin’s going to look it up online—find some sort of map.”

“OK.” Allie jumped out of the car, and darted down the street to the convenience store beneath a sign that she thought was Spanish at first glance. A bored man sat behind the counter, rubbing his stubbly cheek and listlessly watching the lottery numbers flash across the TV screen suspended on the wall. “Hi there, I was wondering, what’s the address here? We’re kind of lost—”

“Address?” he questioned. Allie nodded. It’s “457, and the street sign is right out there—see?”

“Oh, thank you!” Allie repeated the numbers under her breath until she reached the car. She repeated the address, and Bridget in turn repeated it into the phone.

“Thank God he’s coming,” Bridget said, hanging up the phone. “I need to use a restroom so bad. Can you sit here? And just—if a cop comes—delay as long as you can—you can move it if you have to.” Allie nodded. “Oh, and lock the doors. This is a really bad neighborhood.” Bridget stepped out of the car, and Allie watched as she strode across the street to a fast food place. If a meter maid

saw Bridget's car, and if there wasn't the chance to move the car to avoid a ticket— And even if she could move the car, where would she move it? There were no empty parking spots; she'd have to drive around and around the block, hoping to meet up with Bridget before she started wondering where her car went. That would be awkward, she decided.

Allie saw flashing lights, and she felt as if her whole body was flushed with nervousness. She peered into the rearview mirror, and realized that it was an ambulance, speeding by without a care for the illegally parked car. She leaned back into the soft leather seat, closing her eyes for a moment. After keeping watch for a while, Allie spotted Bridget walking back to the car. She straightened up and checked to be sure that the door was unlocked. Bridget, in one fluid movement, stepped into the car and locked the door.

“Oh my God—are all the doors locked? This is such a bad neighborhood!”

“What? Why? What happened?”

“You have no idea—oh I hope Kevin hurries up. In that restroom I saw the worst—” She sighed, as if gathering forces to finish her story. “There was a woman groaning in the other stall—I'm sure she was doing drugs or something, but I didn't know what to do, and I really, really had to use the bathroom.” Her flurried gestures reminded Allie of nervous birds.

“What did you do? Did you stay?”

“Yeah—and the noises just got louder and I was so worried she was going to come out at the same time as me, strung out on something—maybe even violent, I don't know—I just washed my hands and ran out of there.”

“Did you tell the people working there? Maybe they should call 911...”

“Oh, no, I didn’t have time to think, I was scared. You never know what might happen—this isn’t a good neighborhood—” They sat in the car, peering into the rearview mirror. “Oh thank God, there he is!” Kevin’s silver car pulled up, and he double-parked next to them. The passenger side window slowly lowered.

“There you are, how did you manage to get this lost when you’d only been in the city for ten minutes?” he said. Allie couldn’t see his face, but heard the jesting tone. He stepped out of the car after putting on his hazard lights.

“I’m so, so, so glad to see you!” Bridget had already slipped out of the seat and stepped into his arms. “You’ll never believe what happened—”

“I’m sure I won’t,” he winked. “So Allie, Bridget told me that you need to get on a bus to Kendall Square, right?” She nodded. “If you go right down this block and take a left, you’ll see the bus stop. I passed it on my way in. Just stand by the sign—you know how to negotiate the bus system, right?”

“Well, I know most lines around here. Thanks for pointing me in the right direction.” Kevin opened the trunk to the small white car so that Allie could extricate her backpack from Bridget’s totes and bags. “Thanks again Bridget for the ride—”

“Oh no problem.” Bridget was watching Kevin as he arranged her bags so that they would remain upright.

“OK Bridge, all set. Just follow me and don’t get separated—”

Allie turned and headed down the street. Her backpack was heavy and strained the straps. The sidewalk was crowded with people coming home from work. A bad neighborhood—did that mean that people wore street clothes or uniforms from grocery stores instead of suits and blazers? A restaurant—Sabor do Brasil—Bridget probably meant that it was a neighborhood with signs she couldn't read—accents she couldn't place. Finally, the bus stop. Allie slipped the backpack off her shoulders and sat on the bench next to an old woman with a newspaper and a bag of groceries. Waiting, she watched people pass by. The bus pulled up in a cloud of exhaust fumes.

Allie waited as the older woman stepped slowly onto the bus. Allie fumbled in her pocket for the correct change, and realized that she was short—she'd forgotten to use an ATM before leaving with Bridget, who had been in a rush to go. And she'd been lucky enough in the first place getting a ride—“Oh, shoot,” she said, pausing on the steps of the bus.

“Short?” Allie looked up. “You are short?” The older woman slipped a warm quarter into her palm.

“Thank you—thank you so much.” Allie dropped her change and the quarter into the machine. Her cheeks flushed, and she found an empty seat toward the back of the bus. Leaning against the backrest, she opened her bag, taking out a book. She looked out the window. It was slightly open, letting the warm fall air whip into the bus as it sped up. They passed a market, apartment complexes, asymmetrical two and four-family houses with chipped paint, litter on the streets, older people with canes, children with backpacks. Closer to Kendall Square she

realized that everyone was about her age—college students after class. They sped about with laptop bags and totes, ducking into coffee shops or biking through the square.

She stepped off the bus and joined the flow of traffic on the sidewalks. Turning down the familiar street past the busiest part of the square, she pushed open the distinctive red door and went up the staircase to the fourth floor apartment. She had the key he'd given her months ago so she could visit anytime.

“Hey—Mikey, are you home?”

“Yeah!” He bounded into the room, his shaggy brown hair swinging into his eyes. As soon as he reached her, he held her face between his palms to kiss her. “I was hoping you'd be here—any minute—so good to see you, I missed you.”

“Missed you too. Such a strange ride in—”

“I'll bet. Ahh sweetie, you know I've got work soon—I hate to leave you here alone—”

“It's OK, I have homework to do, I don't mind.”

“Thanks, you're the best. They needed extra help for the dinner shift tonight so they wanted another cook on hand.”

“That's good—extra shifts are always good. And I'll be here when you get back.”

“See you soon, love you, I should be back in four hours, tops.” He leaned over to kiss her.

“See you, love.” She waited till she heard the door close to sit on the overstuffed couch with her reading. It was difficult to concentrate. Her eyes strayed to pictures of the two of them on the walls, the magazines splayed across the little coffee table, the faded curtains over the windows that looked into the apartment next to them. She frowned. It wasn’t that she was ashamed of him—or what he did for a living—but it was such a trouble to explain over and over again. And all the questions—as long as he never knew about it, it couldn’t be bad. It wasn’t for the wrong reasons, after all. She leaned back into the cushions that were always uncomfortable on her back. But in this position a ray of sunlight that slipped between the curtain panels fell across her forehead. She closed her eyes, the sun a band of heat on her skin. When she opened her eyes the apartment seemed lit with an ethereal glow from the light diffusing through the curtains. It was a small apartment, but so wonderful when the sun shone in just right.

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