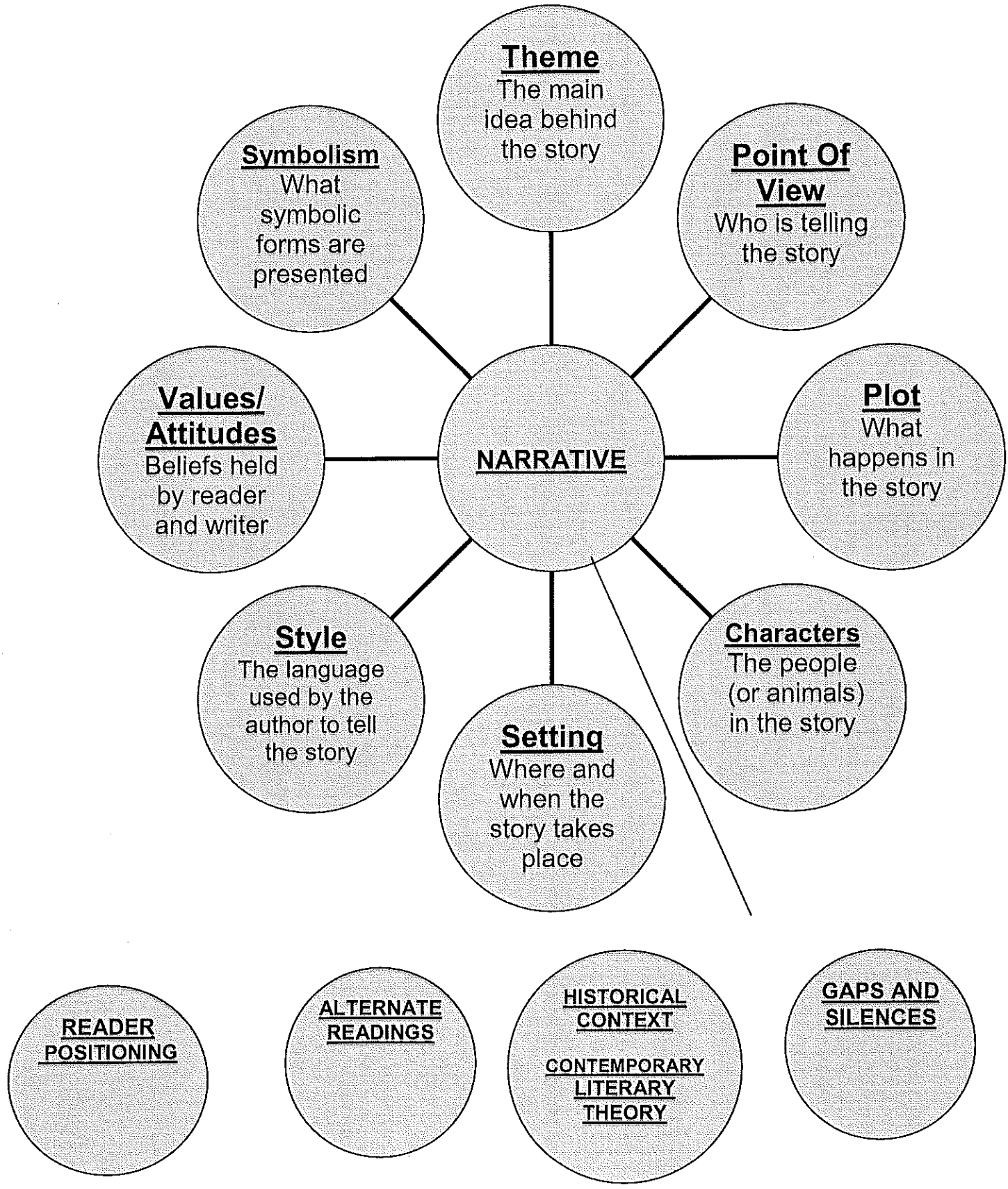
ELEMENTS OF A NARRATIVE



Theme : is the "point of the story" which can be developed using structure, exposition, complication, crisis, climax and resolution, as well as other elements of literacy style, such as: symbolism. Theme is the message you want your reader to understand by having read your narrative, eg: love conquers all, or don't ever give up, or when life gives you much, make mud pies.

Point of View : In every narrative, someone or something tells the story and this person, animal or thing, marks the story which his personal imprint. Authors have several choices about who the narrator of the story will be.

	FIRST PERSON	SECOND PERSON	THIRD PERSON
The narrator is:	A major or minor character	An observer or participant	Omniscient – that is someone who sees everything
Who uses pronouns like:	I, me, my we, our	You, your	He, she, they, his, her, their
The advantage of this point of view is:	The narrator is an eyewitness t the events. This makes readers feel as if they are there.	It is an unusual form of storytelling. The reader becomes a character in the story.	It helps the reader understand all the aspects of the characters and the world of the story.
A disadvantage of this point of view might be:	The narrator cannot know everything about the other characters and can really only know his or her own mind	It is very difficult to keep writing in this way throughout an entire story, and the reader may not accept being a character in a story.	The narrator may sound too detached or too objective so the reader may be less likely to become involved in the story.

Plot : A narrative must have a predetermined purpose. Consider the following statement: the king died then the queen died. This isn't a plot because it lacks causation and motivation. However, the king died then the queen died of grief, is a plot because it shows one thing (grief) controls another. In a well-structured narrative, one thing precedes another not simply because of time but because effects follow causes. Conflict is at the centre of plot – it causes characters to make decisions, take action or respond in ways that make up stories. Various types of conflict are: internal, personal, social and environmental.

Plot is also about structure. Structure is about balance, recurring themes, and suspense. There are also five stages in structure:

1. Exposition: Opening, introductions, setting the groundwork.
2. Complication: Onset of major conflict
3. Crisis: separation between what has gone before and what will happen
4. Climax: consequence of crisis, high point or logical conclusion of all that has gone on before; no new plot is introduced after the climax.
5. Resolution: brings the narrative to a satisfying and rapid end.

Characters : Most characters are important for the unfolding of the plot of a story. Each usually adds some piece of information that builds up the picture (a bit like a jigsaw puzzle being put together, piece b piece). Characters get into conflict with someone or something and we watch the events unfold, hopefully we learn from the experience. Characters add richness, life, meaning and depth. Characters are developed by discussion throughout direct statement, dialogue, dramatic scene, comparison/contrast and associations with other elements. Characters conflicts can reveal many attitudes, messages, morals and values to us through their interactions in a text, these are usually: man vs man, man vs environment, or man vs self.

Character and setting usually work together in supplying information about characters. For example, people usually belong to set places; same types normally stick to the same type and place and speaking the same way. When characters are not typical of their surroundings there is usually a reason behind it and this reason may be a major part of the plot (storyline). A character's appearance, language and actions help to reveal the type of personality he/she is. What characters say about each other also reveals clues to their personalities.

Characters as stereotype may be used to put across a particular message or code. There is little point in introducing a large number of characters in a short story because there is not enough time to deal with them.

Types of Characters: Protagonist: The central character on whom the story focuses and with whom we identify. A story could have more than one protagonist.

Antagonists: The characters aligned against the central character. They can be internal or external.

Flat characters: Extra characters whose purpose is to highlight what the protagonist is experiencing.

Round characters: These characters are complex and three-dimensional; they are included to help the reader understand the scene in a way that advances the action.

Stock characters: Characters who are so obvious and predictable that their roles and personalities are clichés. Stories should not be too full of these characters or else they will be boring.

Contagonists: the Contagonist is the character that balances the Guardian. The differences between the Contagonist and the Antagonist are best understood by looking at their component character elements. At the motivation level, the Contagonist represents Temptation and Hinder, whereas the Antagonist represents Reconsider and Avoid/Prevent. Where a contagonist might lead one astray and impede one's progress, an antagonist would make the argument that one should completely reconsider one's plans while actively acting to avoid or prevent them from taking place.

Setting: The purpose of setting is to set realism for the story. It can reveal character, organise the story and set the atmosphere. Setting can be in the following environments:

- Natural – includes the outdoors, geography, seasons, creature, time and conditions
- Manufactured – includes buildings, possessions, objects and other concrete man-made things.
- Political – includes historical and political beliefs held by an individual or group of individuals in a given place in time.
- Cultural/temporal – includes historical and cultural assumptions.

Location, surroundings, scenery, situation, background. This is where the action takes place. It is usually a particular place with a particular connection to the events or characters (though not always).

Setting may play a special part in revealing different aspects of characters, of moods, of actions and of events. For example, if a character from a wealthy and privileged family is seen to be living in a poor neighbourhood they are out of their normal r ole and setting. Setting can also give us clues to social class, education, religion and political beliefs of individuals and groups. Many conflicts are set in places that are symbolic with the type of character in the text.

Most short stories use a single setting. This allows the author to focus on the development of the plot, without have to continually describe new settings.

Style: This is the language chosen by the author to tell a story. It makes the writing distinctive. Style is the way something is written to give qualities to particular people in a narrated work. Style includes the following elements:

1. Use of dialogue
2. Use of description
3. Length of paragraphs
4. Length of sentences
5. Word choices.

Language can be relaxed and modern, in keeping with teenage characters, words and phrases can be used to reflect the characters. Shortened paragraphs, particular in sentences that contain dialogue, can make the action move quickly and decisively. Shortened sentences can help to set the pace and create tension.

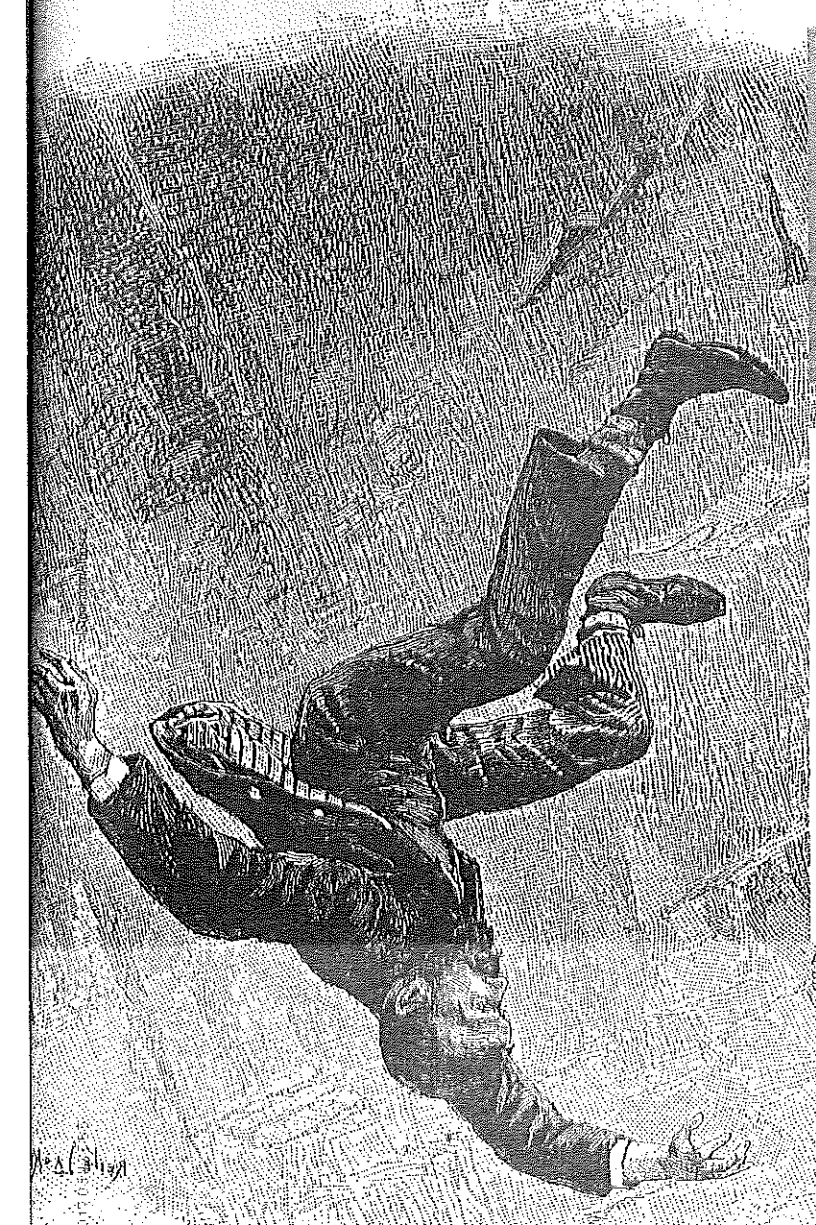
Values and Attitudes: Values - these make up our belief system. Values are beliefs that guide our behaviour. They define what is good or bad, right or wrong, correct or incorrect. They have often been bolstered by religious sanctions: God said this is the way to live. However, they are socially constructed and devised to allow society to operate with the least amount of conflict.

Attitudes - are how these values are manifested in our actions and thoughts to others.

Symbolism: colours, theme, stereotypes, groups, music. Symbolism is a literary technique that adds meaning to a short story by using an event or object as a symbol to represent something else. For example, a gravestone may be a symbol of death since gravestones are associated with death. A character who has a dream about a gravestone may actually be having a dream about death. Symbolism is used by authors for a variety of reasons. Many authors use symbolism to subtly allude to the meaning of something without being obvious.

'The Young Man who Flew Past'

'The Young Man Who Flew Past' appears on the surface to be a rather puzzling text. We will use this story to model some ways to go about arriving at an interpretation of a text by paying close attention to its construction. In particular, we emphasise the importance of teasing out the tone of a text.



Specific aims

To help you:

- describe how 'The Young Man Who Flew Past' adheres to or departs from conventional variations of the short story genre
- analyse the tone of 'The Young Man Who Flew Past'
- produce an interpretation of 'The Young Man Who Flew Past'

General aims

To help you:

- analyse and appraise the ways language patterns can create shades of meaning
- analyse content, purpose and choice of language
- transform and adapt texts for different purposes, contexts and audiences
- analyse the use of voice and point of view
- undertake close analysis of texts
- analyse and evaluate how different attitudes and perspectives underpin texts
- discuss and evaluate different readings of texts.

Generic conventions of the short story

The commonly expected conventions of the short story include the following:

- a clear theme
- a problem–resolution structure
- a brief time frame
- a small number of characters
- a sympathetic protagonist
- limited characterisation
- limited attention to setting
- minimal descriptive detail
- use of direct dialogue.

In Chapter 2, we discussed these conventions in relation to 'The Pedestrian' by Ray Bradbury.

Keep these conventions in mind while you are reading 'The Young Man Who Flew Past' by Arcadii Averchenko, paying attention to which of the conventions the story adheres to and which it departs from.

Alamy Stock Photo/SPUTNIK

Arcadii Averchenko was born in Russia in 1881 and became a very successful playwright and satirist. He worked for many years, finally as editor, for the satirical magazine *Satyricon*. However, after the Russian Revolution of 1917, the magazine was suppressed as being anti-communist. Soon after this, Averchenko left Russia because of his opposition to communism. He lived in a number of countries before dying in 1925 in Prague just shy of his 44th birthday.

'The Young Man Who Flew Past'

This sad and tragic occurrence began thus:

Three persons, in three different poses, were carrying on an animated conversation on the sixth floor of a large apartment building.

The woman, with plump beautiful arms, was clutching a bed sheet to her breast, forgetting that a bed sheet could not do double duty and cover her shapely bare knees at the same time. The woman was crying, and in the intervals between sobs she was saying:

'Oh John! I swear to you I'm not guilty! He set my head in a whirl, he seduced me – and, I assure you, all against my will, I resisted –'

One of the men, still in his hat and overcoat, was gesticulating wildly and upbraiding the third person in the room:

'Scoundrel! I'm going to show you right now that you will perish like a cur and the law will be on my side! You shall pay for this meek victim! You reptile! You base seducer!'

The third in this room was a young man who, although not dressed with the greatest meticulousness at the present moment, bore himself, nevertheless, with great dignity.

9780170382755

'I? Why, I haven't done anything! I –' he protested, gazing sadly into an empty corner of the room.

'You haven't? Take this, then, you scoundrel!'

The powerful man in the overcoat flung open the window giving out upon the street, gathered the young man who was none too meticulously dressed in his arms, and heaved him out.

Finding himself flying through the air the young man bashfully buttoned his vest, and whispered to himself in consolation:

'Never mind! Our failures merely serve to harden us!'

And he kept on flying downward.

He had not yet had time to reach the next floor (the fifth) in his flight, when a deep sigh issued from his breast.

A recollection of the woman whom he had just left poisoned with its bitterness all the delight in the sensation of flying.

'My God!' thought the young man. 'Why, I loved her! And she could not find the courage even to confess everything to her husband! God be with her! Now I can feel that she is distant, and indifferent to me.'

With this last thought he had already reached the fifth floor and, as he flew past a window he peeked in, prompted by curiosity.

A young student was sitting reading a book at a lopsided table, his head propped up in his hands.

Seeing him, the young man who was flying past recalled his life; recalled that heretofore he had passed all his days in worldly distractions, forgetful of learning and books; and he felt drawn to the light of knowledge, to the discovery of nature's mysteries with a searching mind, drawn to admiration before the genius of the great masters of words.

'Dear, beloved student!' he wanted to cry out to the man reading, 'you have awakened within me all my dormant aspirations and cured me of the empty infatuation with the vanities of life, which have led me to such grievous disenchantment on the sixth floor –'

But, not wishing to distract the student from his studies, the young man refrained from calling out, flying down to the fourth floor instead, and here his thoughts took a different turn.

His heart contracted with a strange sweet pain, while his head grew dizzy – from delight and admiration.

A young woman was sitting at the window of the fourth floor and, with a sewing machine before her, was at work upon something.

But her beautiful white hands had forgotten about work at that moment, and her eyes – blue as cornflowers – were looking into the distance, pensive and dreamy.

The young man could not take his eyes off this vision, and some new feeling, great and mighty, spread and grew within his heart.

And he understood that all his former encounters with women had been no more than empty infatuations, and that only now he understood that strange mysterious word – Love.

And he was attracted to the quiet domestic life; to the endearments of a being beloved beyond words; to a smiling existence, joyous and peaceful.

The next story, past which he was flying just then, confirmed him still more in his inclination.

In the window of the third floor he saw a mother who, singing a soft lullaby and laughing, was bouncing a plump smiling baby; love, and a kind maternal pride were sparkling in her eyes.

'I, too, want to marry the girl on the fourth floor, and have just such rosy plump children as the one on the third floor,' mused the young man, 'and I would devote myself entirely to my family and find my happiness in this self-sacrifice.'

But the second floor was now approaching. And the picture which the young man saw in a window of this floor forced his heart to contract again.

9780170382755


Shutterstock.com/tommaso lizzul

A man with disheveled hair and wandering gaze was seated at a luxurious writing table. He was gazing at a framed photograph before him; at the same time he was writing with his right hand and, holding a revolver in his left, was pressing its muzzle to his temple.

'Stop, madman!' the young man wanted to call out. 'Life is so beautiful!' But some instinctive feeling restrained him.

The luxurious appointments of the room, its richness and comfort, led the young man to reflect that there was something else in life which could disrupt even all this comfort and contentment, as well as a whole family; something of the utmost force – mighty, terrific ...

'What can it be?' he wondered with a heavy heart. And, as if on purpose, Life gave him a harsh unceremonious answer in a window of the first floor, which he had reached by now.

Nearly concealed by the draperies, a young man was sitting at the window, sans coat and vest; a half-dressed woman was sitting on his knees, lovingly entwining the head of her beloved with her round rosy arms and passionately hugging him to her magnificent bosom ...

The young man who was flying past recalled that he had seen this woman (well-dressed) out walking with her husband – but this man was decidedly not her husband. Her husband was older, with curly black hair, half-gray, while this man had beautiful fair hair.

And the young man recalled his former plans: of studying, after the student's example; of marrying the girl on the fourth floor; of a peaceful, domestic life, à la the third – and once more his heart was heavily oppressed.

He perceived all the ephemerality, all the uncertainty of the happiness of which he had dreamed; beheld, in the near future, a whole procession of young men with beautiful fair hair about his wife and himself; remembered the torments of the man on the second floor and the measures which that man was taking to free himself from these torments – and he understood.

'After all I have witnessed living is not worthwhile! It is both foolish and tormenting,' thought the young man, with a sickly, sardonic smile; and, contracting his eyebrows, he determinedly finished his flight to the very sidewalk.

Nor did his heart tremble when he touched the flagstones of the pavement with his hands and, breaking those now useless members, he dashed out his brains against the hard indifferent stone.

And, when the curious gathered around his motionless body, it never occurred to any of them what a complex drama the young man had lived through just a few moments before.

Arcadii Averchenko, 'The Young Man Who Flew Past'
Note: We do not know exactly when this story was published, but we do know that it was in the early years of the twentieth century.

Exploring generic conventions in 'The Young Man Who Flew Past'

Form a group with some other students and discuss your views on which of the generic conventions of the short story 'The Young Man Who Flew Past' adheres to and which it departs from.

9780170382755

So what is it all about?

One possible interpretation of this story is that it is an illustration of the meaninglessness of life – of the way life offers the hope of happiness and fulfilment only to crush those hopes. To adopt this interpretation would be to see the story as endorsing the nihilistic view of life of the young man himself shortly before his death.

But does the story encourage us to accept his view? To answer that question, we need to determine whether the young man is constructed as a sympathetic protagonist. And to determine that we need to examine how the tone of the passage encourages us to view the events and characters.

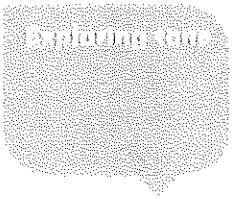
Nihilistic
The adjective from the noun nihilism - the view that life is meaningless.

Tone

Tone, as you should recall, refers to the writer's or narrator's attitude to a subject and/or the reader, as conveyed by the language used. There is a strong sense that the narrator of this story finds many aspects of the situation somewhat entertaining and amusing. This is conveyed partly through the descriptive details included. A number of these descriptive details seem to detract from the apparent seriousness of the situation. For example, while describing the confrontation, the narrator mentions the woman's 'plump beautiful arms' and her 'shapely bare knees'. It is as though the narrator is taking a somewhat voyeuristic delight in the scene. A similar effect is created when the narrator refers to the 'rosy arms' and 'magnificent bosom' of the woman on the first floor.

Another descriptive detail that detracts from the seriousness of the scene is the fact that the narrator twice refers to the fact that the young man was 'none too meticulously dressed'. Similarly, the mention of the young man 'bashfully button[ing] his vest' is somewhat comical – he is worrying about his appearance when he is about to lose his life! This portrays the young man as rather ridiculously pompous and absurd.

Voyeuristic
The adjective from the noun voyeur - someone who gains pleasure from watching the private activities of others.



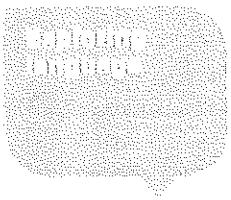
Identify other aspects of the story that detract from the seriousness of the events or suggest that the narrator finds the events somewhat amusing.

Language

Language plays an important role in suggesting the tone of a story. The language of this story is clearly very overblown and melodramatic. One example of this is the exclamatory way in which the woman on the sixth floor speaks, as indicated by the punctuation. Another is the descriptive language applied to the husband – 'gesticulating wildly and upbraiding'. His speech also is also peppered with exclamations and exaggerated terms of abuse, such as 'scoundrel', 'cur', 'reptile' and 'base seducer'.

Melodramatic
Exaggerated or sensationalised.

9780170382755



Find further examples of exaggerated language and consider how they affect the tone of the story and our attitude towards characters.

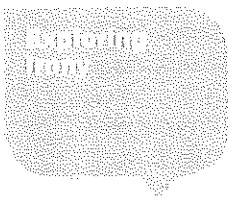
Irony

There are two forms of irony: verbal and dramatic.

- **Verbal irony** means saying one thing and meaning another; for example, a person saying 'Great weather we're having', when it is cold and raining heavily.
- **Dramatic irony** refers to a situation where a reader is made to understand something that a character does not.

Dramatic irony can be achieved through the use of **ironic juxtaposition**: the placement of two things next to or near each other in a story to suggest meanings to readers that characters are unaware of. Thus ironic juxtaposition can be used to suggest an attitude without directly stating it.

The first use of ironic juxtaposition in this story is when the young man thinks resentfully of the woman's betrayal of him through her failure to confess her love for him to her husband. Yet, seconds earlier the young man had not confessed his love for the woman and had done nothing to defend her. Rather, he simply stood 'gazing sadly into an empty corner of the room', disclaiming any responsibility for his actions. The other example of ironic juxtaposition arises from the young man's shock and disappointment at the behaviour of the adulterous couple on the first floor. The irony is that they were doing exactly what the young man had been doing seconds before.



Discuss what other aspects of this story can be seen as ironic.

Characterisation and theme

By now it should be clear that we, the authors of this book, believe that the story encourages readers to view the young man as fickle, shallow, reprehensible, hypocritical, self-centred and not to be taken at all seriously. So where does this leave us in interpreting the theme?

To work out the theme of the story, we need to examine other aspects of the story's construction and use some knowledge of context.

First, note that neither the young man nor any of the other characters is given a name. This is usually a sign that we are meant to interpret them as representative types, rather than individuals. Second, it is clear that the story does not have a realistic time frame. The events of the story theoretically take only a few seconds, but that is far too short a time for the man to witness the scenes and think the thoughts he does. This suggests that the story is not meant to be a realistic portrayal of life. Third, we know that Averchenko was a satirist.

Satirist
A writer who pokes fun at or criticises aspects of a society.

9780170382755

All this information allows us to read the story as a satiric fable. But what is being satirised?

By the descriptions given of the characters and setting, this is clearly a middle-class world. As a result, we can read the characters as representatives of the middle-class society of the time, and the young man as representative of young men of that society.

Thus the story can be seen to be a satire of the middle-class society of the time, and especially of certain types of young men in that society. The society is portrayed as morally corrupt and some of its young men as fickle, shallow, reprehensible, hypocritical and self-centred.

Exploring the theme

1 To what extent do you agree with our interpretation of the theme?
2 Is the society portrayed as totally morally corrupt? Explain your answer.
3 To what extent does this story, written over a century ago, have any relevance today?

9780170382755

Re-read the first 16 paragraphs of the story, stopping at '... and indifferent to me' (just before the young man reaches the fifth floor), and answer the following questions.

1 Explain how language and stylistic features have influenced your response to the central character in the story.

2 Discuss the relationship between the events narrated and the choice of language used to narrate them.

---

1 Texts offer us insights into societies and lives. Discuss this statement with reference to one or more texts you have studied.

2 To what extent is it necessary to like or sympathise with the central character of a text to find that text engaging? Answer with reference to one or more texts you have studied.

3 How have tone and language been used to influence your response to events and/or characters in one or more texts you have studied?

4 Discuss how a text you have studied encourages its readers to respond to particular characters or events.

---

1 Produce a narrative of your own that portrays the thoughts of a character facing imminent death.

2 Respond in a form of your choice to the following statement by the Roman emperor and philosopher Marcus Aurelius: 'Very little is needed to make a happy life. It is all within yourself, in your way of thinking.'

THE ARRANGERS OF MARRIAGE

My new husband carried the suitcase out of the taxi and led the way into the brownstone, up a flight of brooding stairs, down an airless hallway with frayed carpeting, and stopped at a door. The number 2B, unevenly fashioned from yellowish metal, was plastered on it.

"We're here," he said. He had used the word "house" when he told me about our home. I had imagined a smooth driveway snaking between cucumber-colored lawns, a door leading into a hallway, walls with sedate paintings. A house like those of the white newlyweds in the American films that NTA showed on Saturday nights.

He turned on the light in the living room, where a beige couch sat alone in the middle, slanted, as though dropped there by accident. The room was hot; old, musty smells hung heavy in the air.

"I'll show you around," he said.

The smaller bedroom had a bare mattress lodged in one corner. The bigger bedroom had a bed and dresser, and a phone on the carpeted floor. Still, both rooms lacked a sense of space, as

though the walls had become uncomfortable with each other, with so little between them.

"Now that you're here, we'll get more furniture. I didn't need that much when I was alone," he said.

"Okay," I said. I felt light-headed. The ten-hour flight from Lagos to New York and the interminable wait while the American customs officer raked through my suitcase had left me woozy, stuffed my head full of cotton wool. The officer had examined my foodstuffs as if they were spiders, her gloved fingers poking at the waterproof bags of ground *egusi* and dried *onugbu* leaves and *uziza* seeds, until she seized my *uziza* seeds. She feared I would grow them on American soil. It didn't matter that the seeds had been sun-dried for weeks and were as hard as a bicycle helmet.

"Ike aguum," I said, placing my handbag down on the bedroom floor.

"Yes, I'm exhausted, too," he said. "We should get to bed."

In the bed with sheets that felt soft, I curled up tight like Uncle Ike's fist when he is angry and hoped that no wifely duties would be required of me. I relaxed moments later when I heard my new husband's measured snoring. It started like a deep rumble in his throat, then ended on a high pitch, a sound like a lewd whistle. They did not warn you about things like this when they arranged your marriage. No mention of offensive snoring, no mention of houses that turned out to be furniture-challenged flats.

My husband woke me up by settling his heavy body on top of mine. His chest flattened my breasts.

"Good morning," I said, opening sleep-crusted eyes. He grunted, a sound that might have been a response to my greeting or part of the ritual he was performing. He raised himself to pull my nightdress up above my waist.

"Wait—" I said, so that I could take the nightdress off, so it would not seem so hasty. But he had crushed his mouth down on mine. Another thing the arrangers of marriage failed to mention—mouths that told the story of sleep, that felt clammy like old chewing gum, that smelled like the rubbish dumps at Ogbete Market. His breathing rasped as he moved, as if his nostrils were too narrow for the air that had to be let out. When he finally stopped thrusting, he rested his entire weight on me, even the weight of his legs. I did not move until he climbed off me to go into the bathroom. I pulled my nightdress down, straightened it over my hips.

"Good morning, baby," he said, coming back into the room. He handed me the phone. "We have to call your uncle and aunt to tell them we arrived safely. Just for a few minutes; it costs almost a dollar a minute to Nigeria. Dial 011 and then 234 before the number."

"*Ezi okwu?* All that?"

"Yes. International dialing code first and then Nigeria's country code."

"Oh," I said. I punched in the fourteen numbers. The stickiness between my legs itched.

The phone line crackled with static, reaching out across the Atlantic. I knew Uncle Ike and Aunty Ada would sound warm, they would ask what I had eaten, what the weather in America was like. But none of my responses would register; they would ask just to ask. Uncle Ike would probably smile into the phone, the same kind of smile that had loosened his face when he told me that the perfect husband had been found for me. The same smile I had last seen on him months before when the Super Eagles won the soccer gold medal at the Atlanta Olympics.

"A doctor in America," he had said, beaming. "What could be better? Ofodile's mother was looking for a wife for him, she

was very concerned that he would marry an American. He hadn't been home in eleven years. I gave her a photo of you. I did not hear from her for a while and I thought they had found someone. But . . ." Uncle Ike let his voice trail away, let his beaming get wider.

"Yes, Uncle."

"He will be home in early June," Aunty Ada had said. "You will have plenty of time to get to know each other before the wedding."

"Yes, Aunty." "Plenty of time" was two weeks.

"What have we not done for you? We raise you as our own and then we find you an *ezigbo di*! A doctor in America! It is like we won a lottery for you!" Aunty Ada said. She had a few strands of hair growing on her chin and she tugged at one of them as she spoke.

I had thanked them both for everything—finding me a husband, taking me into their home, buying me a new pair of shoes every two years. It was the only way to avoid being called ungrateful. I did not remind them that I wanted to take the JAMB exam again and try for the university, that while going to secondary school I had sold more bread in Aunty Ada's bakery than all the other bakeries in Enugu sold, that the furniture and floors in the house shone because of me.

"Did you get through?" my new husband asked.

"It's engaged," I said. I looked away so that he would not see the relief on my face.

"Busy. Americans say busy, not engaged," he said. "We'll try later. Let's have breakfast."

For breakfast, he defrosted pancakes from a bright-yellow bag. I watched what buttons he pressed on the white microwave, carefully memorizing them.

"Boil some water for tea," he said

"Is there some dried milk?" I asked, taking the kettle to the sink. Rust clung to the sides of the sink like peeling brown paint.

"Americans don't drink their tea with milk and sugar."

"*Ezi okwu?* Don't you drink yours with milk and sugar?"

"No, I got used to the way things are done here a long time ago. You will too, baby."

I sat before my limp pancakes—they were so much thinner than the chewy slabs I made at home—and bland tea that I feared would not get past my throat. The doorbell rang and he got up. He walked with his hands swinging to his back; I had not really noticed that before, I had not had time to notice.

"I heard you come in last night." The voice at the door was American, the words flowed fast, ran into each other. *Supri-supri,* Aunty Ify called it, fast-fast. "When you come back to visit, you will be speaking *supri-supri* like Americans," she had said.

"Hi, Shirley. Thanks so much for keeping my mail," he said.

"Not a problem at all. How did your wedding go? Is your wife here?"

"Yes, come and say hello."

A woman with hair the color of metal came into the living room. Her body was wrapped in a pink robe knotted at the waist. Judging from the lines that ran across her face, she could have been anything from six decades to eight decades old; I had not seen enough white people to correctly gauge their ages.

"I'm Shirley from 3A. Nice to meet you," she said, shaking my hand. She had the nasal voice of someone battling a cold.

"You are welcome," I said.

Shirley paused, as though surprised. "Well, I'll let you get

back to breakfast," she said. "I'll come down and visit with you when you've settled in."

Shirley shuffled out. My new husband shut the door. One of the dining table legs was shorter than the rest, and so the table rocked, like a seesaw, when he leaned on it and said, "You should say 'Hi' to people here, not 'You're welcome.' "

"She's not my age mate."

"It doesn't work that way here. Everybody says hi."

"*O di mma.* Okay."

"I'm not called Ofodile here, by the way. I go by Dave," he said, looking down at the pile of envelopes Shirley had given him. Many of them had lines of writing on the envelope itself, above the address, as though the sender had remembered to add something only after the envelope was sealed.

"Dave?" I knew he didn't have an English name. The invitation cards to our wedding had read *Ofodile Emeka Udenwa and Chinaza Agatha Okafor.*

"The last name I use here is different, too. Americans have a hard time with Udenwa, so I changed it."

"What is it?" I was still trying to get used to Udenwa, a name I had known only a few weeks.

"It's Bell."

"Bell!" I had heard about a Waturuocha that changed to Waturu in America, a Chikelugo that took the more American-friendly Chikel, but from Udenwa to Bell? "That's not even close to Udenwa," I said.

He got up. "You don't understand how it works in this country. If you want to get anywhere you have to be as mainstream as possible. If not, you will be left by the roadside. You have to use your English name here."

"I never have, my English name is just something on my birth certificate. I've been Chinaza Okafor my whole life."

"You'll get used to it, baby," he said, reaching out to caress my cheek. "You'll see."

When he filled out a Social Security number application for me the next day, the name he entered in bold letters was AGATHA BELL.

Our neighborhood was called Flatbush, my new husband told me, as we walked, hot and sweaty, down a noisy street that smelled of fish left out too long before refrigeration. He wanted to show me how to do the grocery shopping and how to use the bus.

"Look around, don't lower your eyes like that. Look around. You get used to things faster that way," he said.

I turned my head from side to side so he would see that I was following his advice. Dark restaurant windows promised the BEST CARIBBEAN AND AMERICAN FOOD in lopsided print, a car wash across the street advertised $3.50 washes on a chalkboard nestled among Coke cans and bits of paper. The sidewalk was chipped away at the edges, like something nibbled at by mice.

Inside the air-conditioned bus, he showed me where to pour in the coins, how to press the tape on the wall to signal my stop.

"This is not like Nigeria, where you shout out to the conductor," he said, sneering, as though he was the one who had invented the superior American system.

Inside Key Food, we walked from aisle to aisle slowly. I was wary when he put a beef pack in the cart. I wished I could touch the meat, to examine its redness, as I often did at Ogbete Market, where the butcher held up fresh-cut slabs buzzing with flies.

"Can we buy those biscuits?" I asked. The blue packets of Burton's Rich Tea were familiar; I did not want to eat biscuits but I wanted something familiar in the cart.

"Cookies. Americans call them cookies," he said.

I reached out for the biscuits (cookies).

"Get the store brand. They're cheaper, but still the same thing," he said, pointing at a white packet.

"Okay," I said. I no longer wanted the biscuits, but I put the store brand in the cart and stared at the blue packet on the shelf, at the familiar grain-embossed Burton's logo, until we left the aisle.

"When I become an Attending, we will stop buying store brands, but for now we have to; these things may seem cheap but they add up," he said.

"When you become a Consultant?"

"Yes, but it's called an Attending here, an Attending Physician."

The arrangers of marriage only told you that doctors made a lot of money in America. They did not add that before doctors started to make a lot of money, they had to do an internship and a residency program, which my new husband had not completed. My new husband had told me this during our short in-flight conversation, right after we took off from Lagos, before he fell asleep.

"Interns are paid twenty-eight thousand a year but work about eighty hours a week. It's like three dollars an hour," he had said. "Can you believe it? Three dollars an hour!"

I did not know if three dollars an hour was very good or very bad—I was leaning toward very good—until he added that even high school students working part-time made much more.

"Also when I become an Attending, we will not live in a neighborhood like this," my new husband said. He stopped to let a woman with her child tucked into her shopping cart pass by. "See how they have bars so you can't take the shopping carts out? In the good neighborhoods, they don't have them. You can take your shopping cart all the way to your car."

"Oh," I said. What did it matter that you could or could not take the carts out? The point was, there *were* carts.

"Look at the people who shop here; they are the ones who immigrate and continue to act as if they are back in their countries." He gestured, dismissively, toward a woman and her two children, who were speaking Spanish. "They will never move forward unless they adapt to America. They will always be doomed to supermarkets like this."

I murmured something to show I was listening. I thought about the open market in Enugu, the traders who sweet-talked you into stopping at their zinc-covered sheds, who were prepared to bargain all day to add one single kobo to the price. They wrapped what you bought in plastic bags when they had them, and when they did not have them, they laughed and offered you worn newspapers.

My new husband took me to the mall; he wanted to show me as much as he could before he started work on Monday. His car rattled as he drove, as though there were many parts that had come loose—a sound similar to shaking a tin full of nails. It stalled at a traffic light and he turned the key a few times before it started.

"I'll buy a new car after my residency," he said.

Inside the mall, the floors gleamed, smooth as ice cubes, and

the high-as-the-sky ceiling blinked with tiny ethereal lights. I felt as though I were in a different physical world, on another planet. The people who pushed against us, even the black ones, wore the mark of foreignness, otherness, on their faces.

"We'll get pizza first," he said. "It's one thing you have to like in America."

We walked up to the pizza stand, to the man wearing a nose ring and a tall white hat.

"Two pepperoni and sausage. Is your combo deal better?" my new husband asked. He sounded different when he spoke to Americans: his *r* was overpronounced and his *t* was underpronounced. And he smiled, the eager smile of a person who wanted to be liked.

We ate the pizza sitting at a small round table in what he called a "food court." A sea of people sitting around circular tables, hunched over paper plates of greasy food. Uncle Ike would be horrified at the thought of eating here; he was a titled man and did not even eat at weddings unless he was served in a private room. There was something humiliatingly public, something lacking in dignity, about this place, this open space of too many tables and too much food.

"Do you like the pizza?" my new husband asked. His paper plate was empty.

"The tomatoes are not cooked well."

"We overcook food back home and that is why we lose all the nutrients. Americans cook things right. See how healthy they all look?"

I nodded, looking around. At the next table, a black woman with a body as wide as a pillow held sideways smiled at me. I smiled back and took another pizza bite, tightening my stomach so it would not eject anything.

We went into Macy's afterwards. My new husband led the way toward a sliding staircase; its movement was rubbery-smooth and I knew I would fall down the moment I stepped on it.

"*Biko,* don't they have a lift instead?" I asked. At least I had once ridden in the creaky one in the local government office, the one that quivered for a full minute before the doors rolled open.

"Speak English. There are people behind you," he whispered, pulling me away, toward a glass counter full of twinkling jewelry. "It's an elevator, not a lift. Americans say elevator."

"Okay."

He led me to the lift (elevator) and we went up to a section lined with rows of weighty-looking coats. He bought me a coat the color of a gloomy day's sky, puffy with what felt like foam inside its lining. The coat looked big enough for two of me to snugly fit into it.

"Winter is coming," he said. "It is like being inside a freezer, so you need a warm coat."

"Thank you."

"Always best to shop when there is a sale. Sometimes you get the same thing for less than half the price. It's one of the wonders of America."

"Ezi okwu?" I said, then hastily added, "Really?"

"Let's take a walk around the mall. There are some other wonders of America here."

We walked, looking at stores that sold clothes and tools and plates and books and phones, until the bottoms of my feet ached.

Before we left, he led the way to McDonald's. The restaurant was nestled near the rear of the mall; a yellow and red M the

size of a car stood at its entrance. My husband did not look at the menu board that hovered overhead as he ordered two large Number 2 meals.

"We could go home so I can cook," I said. "Don't let your husband eat out too much," Aunty Ada had said, "or it will push him into the arms of a woman who cooks. Always guard your husband like a guinea fowl's egg."

"I like to eat this once in a while," he said. He held the hamburger with both hands and chewed with a concentration that furrowed his eyebrows, tightened his jaw, and made him look even more unfamiliar.

I made coconut rice on Monday, to make up for the eating out. I wanted to make pepper soup, too, the kind Aunty Ada said softened a man's heart. But I needed the *uziza* that the customs officer had seized; pepper soup was just not pepper soup without it. I bought a coconut in the Jamaican store down the street and spent an hour cutting it into tiny bits because there was no grater, and then soaked it in hot water to extract the juice. I had just finished cooking when he came home. He wore what looked like a uniform, a girlish-looking blue top tucked into a pair of blue trousers that was tied at the waist.

"Nno," I said. "Did you work well?"

"You have to speak English at home, too, baby. So you can get used to it." He brushed his lips against my cheek just as the doorbell rang. It was Shirley, her body wrapped in the same pink robe. She twirled the belt at her waist.

"That smell," she said, in her phlegm-filled voice. "It's everywhere, all over the building. What are you cooking?"

"Coconut rice," I said.

"A recipe from your country?"

"Yes."

"It smells really good. The problem with us here is we have no culture, no culture at all." She turned to my new husband, as if she wanted him to agree with her, but he simply smiled. "Would you come take a look at my air conditioner, Dave?" She asked. "It's acting up again and it's so hot today."

"Sure," my new husband said.

Before they left, Shirley waved at me and said, "Smells *really* good," and I wanted to invite her to have some rice. My new husband came back half an hour later and ate the fragrant meal I placed before him, even smacking his lips like Uncle Ike sometimes did to show Aunty Ada how pleased he was with her cooking. But the next day, he came back with a *Good Housekeeping All-American Cookbook,* thick as a Bible.

"I don't want us to be known as the people who fill the building with smells of foreign food," he said.

I took the cookbook, ran my hand over the cover, over the picture of something that looked like a flower but was probably food.

"I know you'll soon master how to cook American food," he said, gently pulling me close. That night, I thought of the cookbook as he lay heavily on top of me, grunting and rasping. Another thing the arrangers of marriage did not tell you—the struggle to brown beef in oil and dredge skinless chicken in flour. I had always cooked beef in its own juices. Chicken I had always poached with its skin intact. In the following days, I was pleased that my husband left for work at six in the morning and did not come back until eight in the evening so that I had time to throw away pieces of half-cooked, clammy chicken and start again.

The first time I saw Nia, who lived in 2D, I thought she was the kind of woman Aunty Ada would disapprove of. Aunty Ada would call her an *ashawo,* because of the see-through top she wore so that her bra, a mismatched shade, glared through. Or Aunty Ada would base her prostitute judgment on Nia's lipstick, a shimmery orange, and the eye shadow—similar to the shade of the lipstick—that clung to her heavy lids.

"Hi," she said when I went down to get the mail. "You're Dave's new wife. I've been meaning to come over and meet you. I'm Nia."

"Thanks. I'm Chinaza . . . Agatha."

Nia was watching me carefully. "What was the first thing you said?"

"My Nigerian name."

"It's an Igbo name, isn't it?" She pronounced it "E-boo."

"Yes."

"What does it mean?"

"God answers prayers."

"It's really pretty. You know, Nia is a Swahili name. I changed my name when I was eighteen. I spent three years in Tanzania. It was fucking amazing."

"Oh," I said and shook my head; she, a black American, had chosen an African name, while my husband made me change mine to an English one.

"You must be bored to death in that apartment; I know Dave gets back pretty late," she said. "Come have a Coke with me."

I hesitated, but Nia was already walking to the stairs. I followed her. Her living room had a spare elegance: a red sofa, a slender potted plant, a huge wooden mask hanging on the wall. She gave me a Diet Coke served in a tall glass with ice, asked how I was adjusting to life in America, offered to show me around Brooklyn.

"It would have to be a Monday, though," she said. "I don't work Mondays."

"What do you do?"

"I own a hair salon."

"Your hair is beautiful," I said, and she touched it and said, "Oh, this," as if she did not think anything of it. It was not just her hair, held up on top of her head in a natural Afro puff, that I found beautiful, though, it was her skin the color of roasted groundnuts, her mysterious and heavy-lidded eyes, her curved hips. She played her music a little too loud, so we had to raise our voices as we spoke.

"You know, my sister's a manager at Macy's," she said. "They're hiring entry-level salespeople in the women's department, so if you're interested I can put in a word for you and you're pretty much hired. She owes me one."

Something leaped inside me at the thought, the sudden and new thought, of earning what would be mine. Mine.

"I don't have my work permit yet," I said.

"But Dave has filed for you?"

"Yes."

"It shouldn't take long; at least you should have it before winter. I have a friend from Haiti who just got hers. So let me know as soon as you do."

"Thank you." I wanted to hug Nia. "Thank you."

That evening I told my new husband about Nia. His eyes were sunken in with fatigue, after so many hours at work, and he said, "Nia?" as though he did not know who I meant, before he added, "She's okay, but be careful because she can be a bad influence."

Nia began stopping by to see me after work, drinking from a can of diet soda she brought with her and watching me cook. I turned the air conditioner off and opened the window to let in

the hot air, so that she could smoke. She talked about the women at her hair salon and the men she went out with. She sprinkled her everyday conversation with words like the noun "clitoris" and the verb "fuck." I liked to listen to her. I liked the way she smiled to show a tooth that was chipped neatly, a perfect triangle missing at the edge. She always left before my new husband came home.

Winter sneaked up on me. One morning I stepped out of the apartment building and gasped. It was as though God was shredding tufts of white tissue and flinging them down. I stood staring at my first snow, at the swirling flakes, for a long, long time before turning to go back into the apartment. I scrubbed the kitchen floor again, cut out more coupons from the Key Food catalog that came in the mail, and then sat by the window, watching God's shredding become frenzied. Winter had come and I was still unemployed. When my husband came home in the evening, I placed his french fries and fried chicken before him and said, "I thought I would have my work permit by now."

He ate a few pieces of oily-fried potatoes before responding. We spoke only English now; he did not know that I spoke Igbo to myself while I cooked, that I had taught Nia how to say "I'm hungry" and "See you tomorrow" in Igbo.

"The American woman I married to get a green card is making trouble," he said, and slowly tore a piece of chicken in two. The area under his eyes was puffy. "Our divorce was almost final, but not completely, before I married you in Nigeria. Just a minor thing, but she found out about it and now she's threatening to report me to Immigration. She wants more money."

"You were married before?" I laced my fingers together because they had started to shake.

"Would you pass that, please?" he asked, pointing to the lemonade I had made earlier.

"The jug?"

"Pitcher. Americans say pitcher, not jug."

I pushed the jug (pitcher) across. The pounding in my head was loud, filling my ears with a fierce liquid. "You were married before?"

"It was just on paper. A lot of our people do that here. It's business, you pay the woman and both of you do paperwork together but sometimes it goes wrong and either she refuses to divorce you or she decides to blackmail you."

I pulled the pile of coupons toward me and started to rip them in two, one after the other. "Ofodile, you should have let me know this before now."

He shrugged. "I was going to tell you."

"I deserved to know before we got married." I sank down on the chair opposite him, slowly, as if the chair would crack if I didn't.

"It wouldn't have made a difference. Your uncle and aunt had decided. Were you going to say no to people who have taken care of you since your parents died?"

I stared at him in silence, shredding the coupons into smaller and smaller bits; broken-up pictures of detergents and meat packs and paper towels fell to the floor.

"Besides, with the way things are messed up back home, what would you have done?" he asked. "Aren't people with master's degrees roaming the streets, jobless?" His voice was flat.

"Why did you marry me?" I asked.

"I wanted a Nigerian wife and my mother said you were a good girl, quiet. She said you might even be a virgin." He smiled. He looked even more tired when he smiled. "I probably should tell her how wrong she was."

I threw more coupons on the floor, clasped my hands together, and dug my nails into my skin.

"I was happy when I saw your picture," he said, smacking his lips. "You were light-skinned. I had to think about my children's looks. Light-skinned blacks fare better in America."

I watched him eat the rest of the batter-covered chicken, and I noticed that he did not finish chewing before he took a sip of water.

That evening, while he showered, I put only the clothes he hadn't bought me, two embroidered boubous and one caftan, all Aunty Ada's cast-offs, in the plastic suitcase I had brought from Nigeria and went to Nia's apartment.

Nia made me tea, with milk and sugar, and sat with me at her round dining table that had three tall stools around it.

"If you want to call your family back home, you can call them from here. Stay as long as you want; I'll get on a payment plan with Bell Atlantic."

"There's nobody to talk to at home," I said, staring at the pear-shaped face of the sculpture on the wooden shelf. It's hollow eyes stared back at me.

"How about your aunt?" Nia asked.

I shook my head. You left your husband? Aunty Ada would shriek. Are you mad? Does one throw away a guinea fowl's egg? Do you know how many women would offer both eyes for a doctor in America? For any husband at all? And Uncle Ike

would bellow about my ingratitude, my stupidity, his fist and face tightening, before dropping the phone.

"He should have told you about the marriage, but it wasn't a real marriage, Chinaza," Nia said. "I read a book that says we don't fall in love, we climb up to love. Maybe if you gave it time—"

"It's not about that."

"I know," Nia said with a sigh. "Just trying to be fucking positive here. Was there someone back home?"

"There was once, but he was too young and he had no money."

"Sounds really fucked-up."

I stirred my tea although it did not need stirring. "I wonder why my husband had to find a wife in Nigeria."

"You never say his name, you never say Dave. Is that a cultural thing?"

"No." I looked down at the table mat made with waterproof fabric. I wanted to say that it was because I didn't know his name, because I didn't know him.

"Did you ever meet the woman he married? Or did you know any of his girlfriends?" I asked.

Nia looked away. The kind of dramatic turning of head that speaks, that intends to speak, volumes. The silence stretched out between us.

"Nia?" I asked finally.

"I fucked him, almost two years ago, when he first moved in. I fucked him and after a week it was over. We never dated. I never saw him date anybody."

"Oh," I said, and sipped my tea with milk and sugar.

"I had to be honest with you, get everything out."

"Yes," I said. I stood up to look out of the window. The

world outside seemed mummified into a sheet of dead whiteness. The sidewalks had piles of snow the height of a six-year-old child.

"You can wait until you get your papers and then leave," Nia said. "You can apply for benefits while you get your shit together, and then you'll get a job and find a place and support yourself and start afresh. This is the U.S. of fucking A., for God's sake."

Nia came and stood beside me, by the window. She was right, I could not leave yet. I went back across the hall the next evening. I rang the doorbell and he opened the door, stood aside, and let me pass.

The Altar of the Family

Michael Wilding

BIRRENDULEE, to which Bredon belonged despite its impressive ground and its stone walls that had outlasted the shacks rushed up in the town at the same time that it was built, was a small country town. The family had settled there and built Bredon at the time of Queen Victoria, though what time was never specific. Bredon, though cool in summer, was inconvenient and people would occasionally suggest that the Murrays should sell it, or build a modern house on the site. Mr Murray would always be incensed at such a suggestion of reviling the honour of the family. People who had a family had no business destroying its traditions.

"Doesn't everyone have a family?" David asked.

"Lord no," said his father.

"Where do they come from then?" asked Lindy, his sister.

His father seemed not to have a ready answer, so David explained: "Under cabbages."

"That's quite enough, David," said Mrs Murray, for whom even the euphemisms of sexuality were disgusting. She was as dry as an inland desert, her skin furrowed and lined and cracked, like a lizard's, her neck gaunt and hollowed. Yet still a striking looking woman in her slim, tall, tight-lipped imperious way.

David could never understand the idea of the Family; he never knew which Family they referred to. It seemed, sometimes, that when his mother and father used the word they had forgotten that they both came from different Families; and that their parents had each been the product of two different Families, making four. In bed his thoughts would construct charts of this expansion, this ever widening cone, this inverted pyramid whose apex pressed on him. It would puzzle him, especially when tracing towards his father's father's father's father's father he lost track of chronology and numbers and names. It provoked him to ask, for clarity, one morning at breakfast. "Were the Family convicts?"

"Oh really, David, don't be ridiculous," said his mother, disgusted.

But his father was oddly ambivalent, and David could not discover whether they were or weren't; or whether his father was pleased that they were, or weren't, or would have wanted them to be, or not. The problem of Family perplexed David; he knew it was involved somehow with the problem of Honour, but he could get no clear statement on the whole complex concept. But listened carefully for what he could pick up. Once somebody stole something from them, or damaged their car and couldn't pay, and he remembered his father announcing, "The damn man's got no honour." He dimly perceived a connection between not stealing or not driving into cars, and Honour. Though many of those who certainly did not steal or damage cars were not allowed Honour. He tried to define the limits.

"Father Flynn?" he asked. "Does he have honour?"

His father snorted. "Damn Irishman. No damn family nor honour," he said, "pack of thieves, all of them."

Mrs Murray demurred. The clergy, even the catholic sort, had a certain sanctity that had to be observed. They could not be talked of roughly, as other men.

He was glad to be home from school from the city for the holidays, even though he was at times lonely. His mother would not let him play with the local children. His father voiced no discouragement, and if forced, indeed, might have found his wife's attitude rather un-Australian, undemocratic, a womanish whim. But he never encouraged David to go out and play with those children. Not that at school in the city the company of boys was always friendly. They had ragged him at first for his country accent, which playing with the local children had given him. The masters still tried to make him lose it, but it was hard to get rid of. He hated the elocution classes. But being away at school meant he had lost touch, anyway, with those local children he had

even played with, who, if they at all remembered him, now thought him snobbish.

So he played with his young sister, Lindy, dressing and undressing dolls, till his father came across them one day and snorted in disgust.

"Damn grown boy playing with dolls."

And David could hear the reverberations of his father's shock at night as his parents talked with raised voices.

They would play down at the lagoon, sitting there watching the birds, ibises, storks, duck, heron, swimming, diving, floating, squabbling, flying up in huge surges reflecting the sun like blown blossom at the foot of the original Bredon. They would collect the fallen white plumes, and attire themselves as Indians.

His father was furious: "Damned if I bred a son to go and cover himself with white feathers, take them off you fool."

They hoped for animals, but rarely saw any. It was not kangaroo country, and any kangaroo or wallaby venturing near would have been shot. Like they shot the rabbits, organising mass shoots. It made his sister cry, hearing of the slaughter.

His father snorted over lunch at her distress: "Lily-livered chicken-hearted girlish - "

She rushed from the table in tears: "You're a brute, a pig," she screamed with terrible rashness. He didn't rise from his place. But said, over his huge steak. "At least I'm not a lily-livered poofter."

"Really," said Mrs Murray in fury, at his saying such things before his children and at table.

David sat silent; was he a lily-livered poofter? was that the aim of the remark? He looked at the lilies, that, grown in his mother's garden, adorned the room. Velvety, soft, rich-textured, so white, so creamy: he loved them; though he could not imagine what having a liver like one would be. He looked at the steak on his plate, but could imagine it no other colour than its deep red, its blood red. He closed his mind to the blood-redness, the slaughter, turned back to the lilies, to whiteness. He knew from his father that whiteness was wrong; though to be a white man was good. He could not resolve that puzzle. He wondered what colour his father's liver was.

One night a possum broke into the kitchen, through a window left just slightly ajar. It had splintered the edge of the window frame, stolen some bread, and smashed a china teapot in its clumsiness. Lindy was delighted: "It must have been having a tea party," she said.

"Damned if I can see anything to get excited about," said her father. "The blasted thing's been stealing all the fruit and now it comes in smashing up the house, damn cheek of it. Ought to be shot. If you bloody youngsters spent less time cooing over damn pests of animals and more time - " His sentence trailed away, a specific solution not to hand.

David sat at the lagoon abstracted from his sister's babble. He closed himself from it. The possum's trespass was an insult to the family's honour. To watch animals all day was condoning the outrage; he knew he must wreak vengeance.

His sister one afternoon went to visit a girlfriend. He didn't go; he had suggested it and his father had been appalled; "What, want to fiddle around with dolls with them?" He wilted, shamed, a shame he had to wipe away. His parents went over to dinner and would bring Lindy back with them. He assured them he would be all right alone in the house. Proving himself manly.

He sat in his pyjamas at the kitchen table, the window wide open, bread and fruit alluring on the sill. He held his father's rifle in the darkness.

About nine o'clock it appeared, soft, beautiful, white in the moonlight. Ghost white, proleptic of its own death, imaging his fear and unaware of the need for its own. He was stiff with terror, the horror of shooting it convulsed his stomach, his bowels; he could hear already his sister's hysteria. He shut his eyes, but realised he could not aim, so opened them. It bent down, then held a pear in its forepaws, sat up nibbling it, on the window sill.

He aimed, point blank, fired, and at the explosion shut his eyes. It fell from the sill, knocked backwards by the impact. There was no other movement. The lilies stood still in the moonlight like altar flowers. Sick, but his duty done he put the gun away, went to bed, stumbling. He lay in bed shivering. He did not weep. He could express no emotion.

Nauseated, numbed; he was paralysed by the awfulness of his deed, the guilt of taking life.

He came down early to find his trophy before breakfast. He went out by the kitchen window, and stood there and surveyed the wide flat lawn, the flat gravel path. He reached out more widely, pacing out to the lawn's extremities, and back again to the window. He knelt down outside the window, and looked at the trimmed grass. And where he should have found the corpse, the trophy, honour, the family, there was nothing. Just the clear morning, the warm sun, the still air. Spreading over nothing, not even the slightest stain of blood, nor scrap of fur. And it could not have survived, for he had seen it drop down at once, struck point blank; there had been no chance of its escape.

"What've you lost old man?" his father shouted.

But he could say only nothing. For to confess would be a confession of incompetence, not a proud statement of honour avenged. His wavering voice could not announce avenged honour; its message could only be a bungling failure.

"Why don't you go and practise your cricket instead of moping around like a poet?"

So he practised his cricket in the increasing heat of the sun, torn by this further proof of his unmanly incompetence; confirmed by the night's event of his own sick cowardice with a gun, that firing it could not conceal; and carrying for ever the guilt of having taken that life, the tearing conscience of murder premeditated, with a corpse that vanished could never be laid.

The ball struck his bat with a hollow resonance in the still morning, and the sun shone down hotly on the hollow dome of the atmosphere. In the wide quietness he swung his bat like an automaton figure on a mechanical clock, chiming futile time in the flat emptiness of eternity.

The Blooding

Peter Goldsworthy

A dedicated sportsman, my father. The complete athlete - especially where football was concerned. He never missed a Saturday in the stands - hurling abuse and empty bottles, picking fights, generally raising hell. He never missed a Saturday in the club rooms, either - the weekly drunken wallow after the game. The weekly purge of joy or grief.

He trained hard in the pub every night for that weekly booze-up. And kept his barracking voice in good shape too, with a nightly work-out as he stumbled home after closing time. Some nights you could hear him coming from a kilometre away; could hear him coming from the moment he left the pub - picking his way through the shattered milk bottles, sprawling over the garbage cans, keeping himself warm with the sheer energy of his noise. Noise which followed a fixed nightly training schedule: a hundred metres or so of four-letter words to loosen up, then straight into the long-distance abuse event itself: his unexpurgated version, house by house, of the ancestry and sexual habits of the entire neighbourhood *en route*. As I said, a dedicated athlete, my father ...

Which is part of the reason I still find it hard to think of him as a father - as my father. He certainly never met any of the normal obligations entailed in that work - apart, presumably, from the original one. The seminal one.

But what else to call him? The old man? Far too affectionate, in a patronising sort of way - and I was never pater to that man. As for Dad - Dad is even worse! Immediate male forbear yes, next of kin perhaps - but never Dad. Even as a kid I never called him Dad.

But then, as a kid, I never called him anything. On the rare occasions when we might have talked, he did enough for both of us. He did it all. I couldn't have got a Dad, a Father, or even a Hey, you! in edgeways if I'd tried.

I remember once - I must have been all of five at the time - he sat me down at the kitchen table and informed me he was henceforth to be addressed as sir. He liked the sound of it, he said. A word befitting his station in life: his newly appointed station as Leading Hand in the foundry.

"A Leading Hand," he told me, "should set an example. Should show a bit of class ... "

I noticed that overnight his fork had rotated awkwardly in his hand. I noticed also that he was trying to rake peas, for some mysterious reason, onto the convexity of the prongs.

"Manners," I like to think he said, "manners is very important."

Manners! What a laugh that was! Excuse me, you're pissed again, sir! You're late for the afternoon shift, sir! A thousand pardons, but the bailiff is here to repossess the fridge, sir! His drinking mates must have laughed themselves sick at Jack Abbott's airs and graces. At Leading Hand Abbott's manners. ...Which makes me pause. If I must mention him at all, if I really have to get all this down, to write him out of my system somehow, why not just call him Abbott? It was his name, after all. Besides, Abbott is what he liked to call himself. He had a tendency to talk about himself in the third person, as if he were not actually present - a tendency that increased in direct proportion to his intake of beers.

"No-one pushes Jack Abbott around," he would growl, slumped at the kitchen table, sounding off about his latest grievance at the foundry. "What Jack Abbott says, Jack Abbott does. And does well ... "

So, Abbott it is. The man my Mum was married to. My immediate male forebear (which is all I'll admit to): Jack Abbott.

His dogs were Abbott's other favourite sport. His barkers. His previous greyhounds.

He kept them in the old chook-shed at the bottom of the yard. Kept them? Kept it, I should say - he never owned more than one dog at any one time. Even on a Leading Hand's wage, the costs were prohibitive - the meat and eggs, the track fees, the registration and vet fees. Not to mention the exorbitant cost of dope - several quid per

ampoule of benzedrine at the time.

And the odd fiver here and there for friendly stewards, of course.

All the same, any number of greyhounds must have lived in that chook-shed over the years - and just as many must have died there as well. They had a quick turnover. As soon as each dog flopped at the track, Abbott would shoot it and buy another. It was purely business, he would answer any objections - and like any business you have to have turnover. Had to have *flow*. Oh, it was all very painless, very merciful, granted - just like an abattoir. A quick "bulletting" and it was all over.

"You can't lose them all," he told me the night we bulletted Austral Queen, and buried her in the West Beach sandhills. Although sandhills was hardly the word for them - I was beginning to believe there were more dogs heaped in those dunes than sand.

I watched in silence as he hacked off the bitch's ears with his fishing knife, and pushed them deep into his pocket. The ears were tattooed, the serial number could be traced easily. He always burnt the ears separately later.

"Got my eye on a new pup," he cheerfully confided to me, sliding sand into the shallow grave with the side of his boot. "Only twelve months, but comes out of the traps like a rocket ... "

He'd used those exact words eighteen months before about Austral Queen, I remembered. He'd had great hopes for the Queen; hopes she had almost repaid. Such a beautiful running machine, he had said - so full of promise. Small and tautly sprung, tight around the corners.

"Best dog Jack Abbott ever had!" he crowed the night she squeezed into a minor placing at some minor bush track, and she survived longer than most on the strength of that. But not quite long enough - even a place-getter wasn't good enough, eventually. Her winnings - a few meagre quid from a few meagre bush meetings - barely kept her in kangaroo meat.

The *worst* dog he ever had was actually my dog - his gift for my tenth birthday. I remember the year exactly - how could I ever forget? It was the only year there was any gift to remember! No doubt dear Mum had been on his back about the waste of it all - all that money gone to the dogs - and this was the only way he could sneak another barker into the house. Certainly I can think of no other reason for such generosity.

And what perfect timing! The birthday sponge rising in the oven, the party frankfurters boiling on the stove, the house filling with laughing kids - and in the middle of it all, a boy and his dog. How could she argue with that?

Main Chance, he christened her for me, and I loved her from the start. She might have developed the usual greyhound warp later - the elastic lean and hungry look - but as a pup she looked more like a dog than a running machine. And even more important, my dog.

Or mostly mine. She was still kept in his chook-shed, still had to eat his food, still had to exercise the exact number of kilometres he specified each day.

"Whatever you do, don't spoil her," he warned. "You spoil her, she'll never learn to chase."

Learning to chase was the last thing I had in mind, myself. As soon as Abbott escaped from the house each day, I ensured the dog also escaped from hers. I could never stomach the sight of animals in cages - even a muzzle and leash still stirs me up inside. As a kid, there was nothing I hated more than those mandatory holiday trips to the zoo. Was there nothing else for families to do on long weekends? Every Easter, every Anzac Day, every Queen of England's birthday, off we all trekked to the zoo. I hated the place. The real animals, I decided, were outside the bars - poking sticks, tossing peanuts, or just promenading past, staring, I even invented a special word for that kind of staring - zooing, I called it. The same kind of stare Abbott liked to fix on me when he wobbled home at closing time most nights. A What-Kind-Of-Thing-Are-You? stare. A What-Rock-Did-You-Crawl-From-Under? stare. More than anyone, I knew how those zoo creatures felt: the wild cats especially pacing their tiny cells. Given half a chance, I'd have set them all free, every last one of them. Then we'd see who was doing the zooing, and poking the sticks and tossing the peanuts ...

Although I have to admit, the only time I *did* set something free it promptly got itself eaten by something bigger. I'm talking about the canary - the late canary - that was the property of the lady next door. (The

Chandelier Lady, Abbott liked to call her for her expensive tastes). She kept the bird in a cage no bigger than a shoebox, suspended from her back porch in full view every time I glanced across the fence.

The Chandelier Lady was out shopping the day I finally found enough courage to vault that fence, and free the bird - but I soon knew she was back. The whole neighbourhood soon knew she was back - screaming abuse at her various Siamese cats.

Sometimes, I understood then, cages also keep things out.

The Chandelier Lady kept chooks too - if chooks was the right word for these aristocrats. Chinese Bantams, prize Yokohamas, extravagantly plumed Silkies of every shape and size and pedigree. Chooks that had never had to lay an egg in their lives, but had filled whole cabinets with blue and red ribbons from chook shows.

These were the same chooks that Chance dug beneath the fence to "play" with one Saturday afternoon - hounding them round their yard till they dropped dead of exhaustion. Or was it sheer fright? She carried one home in her mouth afterwards, moving her puzzled head from side to side as if trying to shake it gently back to life. I'm sure she didn't mean to harm, let alone eat, the thing. I prefer to believe she was just lonely. Or else, having spent so much time in our chook-shed, had come to believe she was a chook herself.

Not surprisingly, the Chandelier Lady didn't see it that way. No, she didn't see it that way at all. She was lying in wait as Abbott staggered home from the club that night, letting fly at the front gate with a volley of dead birds, flying feathers and abuse. A volley he promptly passed on to me the moment he retreated inside. I still vividly remember that night - every bizarre detail etched permanently on my mind. I had sought refuge in the bath - thinking paradoxically, perhaps, that nakedness might afford some protection - when those dead, stiff-feathered birds began to splash into the water around me.

"You let that dog out again," Abbott shouted, "and I'll keep you in the bloody chook-shed!"

An idle threat? Not at all - he'd done worse before. Much worse. But I think this was the reason I wasn't particularly worried - the very fact that he had done worse before. Also the fact that being locked inside a chook-shed didn't seem such a bad idea at times - especially if he were on the other side, locked out.

So after the feathers had settled, the disobedience continued. On winter nights I would sneak Chance in by the fire, and in the midday heat of summer have her stretched out on the cold stone of the bathroom floor.

As for food, she ate what she pleased. Cakes, biscuits, chocolate - her bowl was piled high with forbidden goodies every day. Even, at times, that most forbidden of goodies: cooked meat.

"She'll never get a taste for blood," Abbott told me one night, actually getting down on all fours and sniffing suspiciously at her bowl. "She'll never chase live meat, if you give it to her cooked!"

It meant another beating, of course - but a beating well worth it for that image of him, down on his belly with his nose in the dog's dinner like the mongrel he was. I replayed that scene to myself, in slow motion, in secret, for months and months.

Of all his Commandments, I recall only one that I religiously obeyed: Thou Shalt Walk the Dog Each Morning. And the fine print in that Commandment: Thou Shalt Walk Her Two Kilometres Up the Port Road, and Two Kilometres Back Down. And Thou Shalt Never Leave the Bitumen, For Thy Dog's Nails Must Be Properly Worn Down.

I never deceived him over this - he scrutinised all four paws with a magnifying glass each Sunday, and from the way he pored over those nails I could have sworn he was reading the exact distance off. Come rain or shine, there was no escape from tramping four kilometres of bitumen every morning before school.

It seems hard to believe now that Chance was with us for little more than a year. The year of a dog, of a particular dog, as was every other year in our lives. We could have rewritten the calendar in our house; renamed the years after their respective dogs. The year of Austral Queen, the year of Abbott's Prize ... the year of Main Chance.

That year passed quickly - all too quickly - and soon it was birthday time again. My

eleventh, my dog's first. And the day of which I'd managed to avoid all thought had finally arrived.

"We're going possum hunting," Abbott announced over breakfast that morning, but I already knew. The instant I'd spotted the bottle on the table - Oil of Aniseed - I knew. I watched helplessly as he began infiltrating the pungent oil into a pile of apples, through an ancient hypodermic he'd filched from somewhere.

We drove up into the hills that same afternoon - the possum trap banging around in the boot, the apples bouncing up and down on the seat between us, and all four windows fully wound down.

"Every possum for miles will get a whiff of these," he grinned.

He set his traps in a stand of gums in the throat of a small valley, then pitched a camp for us a couple of kilometres upwind. I fetched wood while he prepared a small - a very small - fire.

"More efficient," he pretended as he nursed those tiny flames beneath the billy. Neither of us mentioned the roadside hoardings that had lined the route up:

TOTAL FIRE BAN.
PENALTY 60 POUNDS OR
6 MONTHS IMPRISONMENT.

For it was a perfect night, one of the few times the two of us were ever close, and six months' jail seemed a small price to pay. Abbott had brought the inevitable icebox with him, of course, and I watched a little apprehensively as the bottles came out. But for once he didn't seem to need the stuff. For once he seemed almost at peace - as if the tranquillity of the bush had somehow rubbed off. The creek talking softly to itself, the night noises of the frogs and crickets somewhere in the dark ...

More likely, perhaps, the beer was too hot. Which would also explain why he wasted half a cup on me - my first-ever taste - thinking it a great joke as I shuddered and spat the bitterness out.

"We should go bush more often," he told me a little later, standing with his back to the fire, pissing out into the night. "It's so bloody peaceful ..."

Of course, we never did. But I sometimes think that was for the best. I sometimes even think that's why I remember the occasion at all - there were no later memories, not superimposed disappointments, to obscure it.

I slept till late the following morning, snug in a makeshift bag of blankets and safety pins. I was still asleep when Dad (yes, Dad - just this once -) returned with the sprung trap. And trembling inside, a creature that certainly wasn't a possum.

"Looks like we've caught ourselves a cat," he said, prodding me awake with his boot. "Or a kitten. A half-starved kitten ... "
And perhaps it was. I examined the thing closely: a shrivelled bag of fur and bones, starving and covered in sores, but still recognisably feline.

"Just the right size," he pronounced. "Any bigger, it might get its claws into the dog's eyes ... "

He didn't bother with breakfast - I guess he was starting to get thirsty again. With one deft movement he somehow bundled our entire camp-site inside a groundsheet and tossed the package into the back of the car.

"No sense in hanging around. Let's get out of here ... "

The sun had barely lifted itself from the hills when we arrived home - and Mum had barely lifted herself from bed.

"We're late for church," she told me, squeezing into her best Sunday frock. "If you're coming you'd better hurry ... "

She didn't bother asking Abbott; the struggle for his soul had been lost long ago. Which was precisely the reason I made sure I never missed a service - anything, even an hour of boredom on a hard wood pew, had always seemed better than staying with him.

Until today. Today for the first time, I decided not to escape. I was worried sick. Morbid fascination had got the better of me, and I had to stay and watch - or at least be there so I could choose not to watch.

"It's no sight for an eleven-year-old," Mum tried to argue.

"Rubbish! It'll do him good. Law of the jungle," Abbott said, already reaching into the fridge for his second bottle.

"But that poor creature. You should call the RSPCA; have it put down ... "

He turned his attention from the fridge to the stove, bending down to flip open the oven door, where the Sunday roast was spitting and crackling in full view.

"You eat meat," he snapped. "So do dogs."

What could she say? She jammed her best hat on, pulled open the front door, and hurried off up the street. I waited silently while Abbott poured himself another beer - chivalrously giving his wife enough time to get out of earshot, perhaps - before he picked up the kitten and headed out the back door.

Chance was asleep in the straw, and didn't move as the chook-house latch was lifted and the kitten tossed in. I was terrified - terrified that she might rip the kitten apart, yes, but even more terrified that she might not.

And she didn't. She didn't raise her head, didn't even bother opening her eyes. Her bowl was nowhere in sight, but it didn't take a university degree to guess that she'd just been fed - fed, in all likelihood, until she almost burst.

"I don't believe it," Abbott whispered. "I don't bloody well believe it ... "

He disappeared into the house, returning almost immediately with his fishing knife clenched in his fist. He squeezed inside the wire enclosure, gripped the kitten between his knees, and in one deft movement flipped the head back and slit the exposed throat. Blood sputtered everywhere - more blood than I thought such a tiny creature could hold - as he dropped the remains between Chance's paws.

"Eat it!" he muttered as he slammed the wire door behind him. "You won't be getting anything else to eat around here!"

The kitten was still lying there, untouched by anything larger than meat ants, the next morning. But by then Abbott had relented, and I was permitted to take out the usual bowl of biscuits and raw eggs. To give him his due, he always regretted his outburst afterwards - although never quite long enough afterwards to prevent the next.

"I'll give the bitch one more chance," he allowed. "One *last* chance. We'll run her in the qualifying trials next month as soon as she comes on heat."

"But you said bitches couldn't race on heat ... "

"This one can," he smirked. He went on to tell me about the packet of powder - "hormones", he whispered confidentially - that some drinking mate had sold him at the pub. The idea was to stop her hind parts swelling up when she came on heat. Bitches were banned from racing during heat - the track vet examined them before each event for that exact reason.

"Because a bitch on heat always wins," Abbott had told me a hundred times. "All the other dogs run behind her!" (It was his favourite joke. At times I thought it was his only joke.)

Needless to say, the magic dust did nothing. And I can't say I was surprised - I'd dabbed a few grains on my tongue when his back was turned, and knew there weren't any hormones in self-raising flour.

Even worse, the vet picked it immediately. How could he miss it? A bitch on heat, dusted lightly around the hind quarters with self-raising flour. Abbott was interviewed by the stewards, and not even the odd fiver slipped into friendly pockets could save him this time. He was warned off the track for a year.

"Crooks!" he roared at home. "Jump on the little blokes just to make it look good - while the big bastards laugh all the way to the bank ... "

He paused for a moment to push more beer upstream against the flow of words.

"There's a lesson here," he said. "There's a lesson here: the only mistake Jack Abbott made was getting caught!"

When I carried out her leash and muzzle next morning, Chance had gone. My pet had vanished overnight. Or else had shrunk back to puppy size - and a male pup at that. No more than six weeks old, I guessed.

"He sold her," Mum tried to persuade me over breakfast. "To a friend. A good home. We couldn't really afford to keep her - she wasn't paying her way. And it's no life for a greyhound if she can't race ... "

I tried to believe her. I tried desperately. Who knows? I might even have succeeded if Abbott hadn't slipped outside after tea that night, and started burning rubbish.

After that I didn't step into the backyard for weeks. In the far corner, behind the chook shed, stood a crumbling oil drum - flaking with rust on the outside, lined with thick soot inside. And if I had searched among the ashes in that drum, I knew only too well what I would have found - charred, but still distinctly tattooed.

As for Abbott, his anger quickly vanished. He might have been warned off the

greyhound track for a year, but there was still the football club. No more dogs chasing rabbit pelts, perhaps, but any number of men chasing pigskins ...

He brought one of those pigskins home a couple of nights later - a sort of peace offering for me, I guess. After tea we took the ball and threaded our way through the lanes of peak hour traffic to the Port Road median strip - the only public strip of turf in the whole of Brompton. As always that narrow strip was crowded: fathers and sons and footballs as far as the eye could see. This was the same strip, after all, that had produced some of the greatest players in the game - whole generations of footballers learning to kick straight and long, or losing their balls among the onrushing traffic on either side of them.

We spent an hour out there that first night, and at least two the next. And as the nights passed with no sign of respite, Abbott's twelve months of enforced absence from the dogs began to loom very large in front of me. Visions of endless training sessions in the middle of the highway filled my mind - visions of rigid diets and compulsory morning runs. Of fivers slipped into the pockets of friendly team-selectors, of fivers exchanged for ampoules of speed. Not to mention solitary confinement in the chook-house if I fumbled a pass, and the West Beach sandhills if ...

But I exaggerate. On that first night, as the ball flipped back and forth between us, I still felt reasonably safe. Provided I didn't break a leg, I felt reasonably safe.

Greyhounds might be immediately replaceable - but sons, surely, took a little longer.