

# **G6 English**

## **SE1 – Writing:**

### **An Argumentative Literary Essay**

#### **Short Stories**

- 1. *Friday Black* by Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah**
- 2. *Genesis and Catastrophe* by Roald Dahl**
- 3. *My Son the Fanatic* by Hanif Kureishi**
- 4. *Désirée's Baby* by Kate Chopin**

The main gate creaks and groans.

"I saw the SuperShell in the back. What's she wear, medium or large?"

"Large," I say, opening both eyes.

There's a contest: whoever has the most sales gets to take home any coat in the store. When Richard asked me what I was going to do if I won, I told him that *when I won I was going to give one of the SuperShell parkas to my mother*. Richard frowned but said that was honorable. I said that, yeah, it was. The SuperShells are the most expensive coats we have this season: down-filled lofted exterior with a water-repellent finish, zip vents to keep the thing breathable, elastic hem plus faux fur on the hood for a luxurious touch. I know Richard would have me choose literally anything else. That's half of why I chose it. I set it aside in the back. It's the only large we've got due to a shipment glitch. Nobody will touch it because I'm me.

Most of the Friday heads are here for the PoleFace™ stuff. And whose name is lined up with the PoleFace™ section on the daily breakdown each day this weekend? It's not Lance or Michel, that's for sure. It's not the new kid, Duo, either. I look across to denim where Duo is pacing back and forth making sure his piles are neat and folded. He's a pretty good kid. Sometimes he'll actually ask to help with shipments. He wears a T-shirt and skinny jeans like most of our customers his age. Angela tells him to watch me, to learn from me. She says he's my heir apparent. I like him, but he's not like me. He can sound honest, he knows how to see what people want, but he can't do what I can do. Not on Black Friday. But he'll survive denim.

Michel and Lance cover shoes and graphic tees. Michel and Lance might as well be anybody else. Lance is working the broom.

There's a grind and a metallic rumble. Angela is in the front.

## FRIDAY BLACK

**G**et to your sections!" Angela screams.

Ravenous humans howl. Our gate whines and rattles as they shake and pull, their grubby fingers like worms through the grating. I sit atop a tiny cabin roof made of hard plastic. My legs hang near the windows, and fleeces hang inside of it. I hold my reach, an eight-foot-long metal pole with a small plastic mouth at the end for grabbing hangers off the highest racks. I also use my reach to smack down Friday heads. It's my fourth Black Friday. On my first, a man from Connecticut bit a hole into my tricep. His slobber hot. I left the sales floor for ten minutes so they could patch me up. Now I have a jagged smile on my left arm. A sickle, half circle, my lucky Friday scar. I hear Richard's shoes flopping toward me.

"You ready, big guy?" he asks. I open one eye and look at him. I've never not been ready, so I don't say anything and close my eyes again. "I get it; I get it. Eye of the tiger! I like it," Richard says. I nod slowly. He's nervous. He's a district manager, and this is the Prominent Mall. We're the biggest store in his territory. We're supposed to do a million over the next thirty days. Most of it's on me.

She's pushed the button and turned the key. The main gate eats itself up as it rolls into the ceiling.

"Get out of here!" I yell to Richard. He runs to the register where he'll be backup to the backup safe.

Maybe eighty people rush through the gate, clawing and stampeding. Pushing racks and bodies aside. Have you ever seen people run from a fire or gunshots? It's like that, with less fear and more hunger. From my cabin, I see a child, a girl maybe six years old, disappear as the wave of consumer fervor swallows her up. She is sprawled facedown with dirty shoe prints on her pink coat. Lance walks up to the small pink body. He's pulling a pallet jack and holding a huge push broom. He thrusts the broom head into her side and tries to sweep her onto the pallet jack so he can roll her to the section we've designated for bodies. As he touches her, a woman wearing a gray scarf pushes him away and yanks the girl to her feet. I imagine the mother complaining that her tiny daughter isn't dead yet. She pulls the little girl toward me. The girl limps and tries to keep up, and then I have to forget about them.

"Blue! Son! SleekPack!" a man with wild eyes and a bubble vest screams as he grabs my left ankle. White foam drips from his mouth. I use my right foot to stomp his hand, and I feel his fingers crush beneath my boots. He howls, "SleekPack. Son!" while licking his injured hand. I look him in his eyes, deep red around his lids, redder at the corners. I understand him perfectly. What he's saying is this: My son. Loves me most on Christmas. I have him holidays. Me and him. Wants the one thing. Only thing. His mother won't. On me. Need to feel like Father!

Ever since that first time, since the bite, I can speak Black Friday. Or I can understand it, at least. Not fluently, but well

enough. I have some of them in me. I hear the people, the sizes, the model, the make, and the reason. Even if all they're doing is foaming at the mouth. I use my reach and pull a medium-size blue SleekPack PoleFace™ from a face-out rack way up on the wall. "Thanks," he growls when I throw the jacket in his face.

I jump down from the cabin and swing the reach around so none of them can get too close. The long rod whistles in the air. Most of the customers can't speak in real words; the Friday Black has already taken most of their minds. Still, so many of them are the same. I grab two medium fleeces without anyone asking for them because I know somebody wants one. They howl and scream: daughter, son, girlfriend, husband, friend, ME, daughter, son. I throw one of the fleeces toward the registers and one toward the back wall. The crowd splits. Near the registers, a woman in her thirties takes off her heel and smashes a child in the jaw with it just before he can grab the fleece. She inspects the tag, sees it's a medium, then throws it down on top of the boy with a heel-size hole in his cheek. I toss two large fleeces and two medium fleeces into the crowds. Then I deal with the customers who can still speak, who are nudging and pushing around me.

"C-C-COAL BUBBLE. SMALL, ME! COAL!" a man says while beating his chest. I'm the only one at work who doesn't have a Coalmeister! How can I be a senior advisor without? The only one!

I press the end of my reach against his neck to keep his hungry mouth from me. Then, without taking my eyes off him, I grab one of the Coalmeister bubble coats from the rack behind me. And then it's in his hands. He hugs the coat and runs to the register.

"Us? Us?" the woman with the gray scarf says. She has large

gold earrings hanging off the sides of her head. The pink-coat child is at her shins. The child's face is bruised, but she isn't crying at all.

"Can't. The Stuy!" Gray scarf's husband says. Family time needs forty-two-inch high-def. The BuyStuy deal is only while supplies last! Can't afford any other day.

Black Friday takes everybody differently. It's rough on families. They can't always hear what I hear.

"Asshole!" the wife seethes. Then she stares back at me.

"PoleFace™. Pink," she says, pointing to her child. "Coal SleekPack," she continues, pointing to her own face. A new kiddie PoleFace™, a new coal SleekPack, a Coalmeister. A family set.

The woman has both the coats she needs in a second, then storms off, dragging her child behind her.

It isn't always like this. This is the Black Weekend. Other times, if somebody dies, at least a clean-up crew comes with a tarp. Last year, the Friday Black took 129 people. "Black Friday is a special case; we are still a hub of customer care and interpersonal cohesiveness," mall management said in a mall-wide memo. As if caring about people is something you can turn on and off.

In the first five hours, I do seven thousand plus. No one has ever sold like that before. Soon I'll have a five-hundred-dollar jacket as proof to my mother that I'll love her forever. When I imagine how her face will look as I give it to her, my heart bears faster.

At five in the morning, the lull comes. The first wave of shoppers is home, or sleeping, or dead in various corners of the mall.

Our store has three bodies in the bodies section. The first came an hour in. A woman climbed the denim wall looking

for a second pair her size. She was screaming and rocking the wooden cubby wall so hard that the whole thing almost fell on Duo and everybody in his section. Duo poked her off the wall with his reach. She fell on her neck. Another woman snatched the SkinnyStretches from her dead hands. Lance came with the paller jack, his broom, and some paper towels.

My first break is at 5:30 a.m. On my way to clock out, I walk through denim.

"Looks like you've had it pretty crazy," I say to Duo. There are jeans everywhere. None of them folded. Bloodstains all over the floor.

"Yeah," he says. A young man in a white T-shirt staggers toward us. "Grrrrr," he says. He's gnawing on something. I move to sling him one of the SlimStraights in his size—he thinks it'll make him popular at school—but stop because of how quickly Duo tosses the right kind of jeans to the customer, who takes them and limps to the register.

"You understand them?" I ask.

"Now I do," Duo says. He kicks at a tooth that's lying on the ground. Then he shows me a small bloody mark in the space between his thumb and forefinger.

"That's Black Friday."

"This is my first."

"Well, the worst part is done," I say, kind of smiling, trying to see where he's at.

"I don't know," he says.

"Yeah," I say, and continue on toward the register.

"My break is after yours," Duo says. That's retail for Hurry up, I'm hungry.

I punch my username and password into the computer, and Richard bows down to me like I'm to be worshipped. Angela nods at me like a proud mama. While I'm gone, Angela will

take my spot in the PoleFace™ section. It's the lull, so she can handle it.

Outside the store, the Prominent is bloody and broken, so I can tell it's been a great Black Friday. There are people strung out over benches and feet poking out of trash bins. Christmas music you can't escape plays from speakers you cannot see. Christmas is God here.

I'm hungry. My family didn't really do the Thanksgiving thing this year—which felt like a relief except I missed my chance for stuffing. I'd offered to help with some of the shopping. My mom had lost her job. I make \$8.50 an hour, but I saved. Mom, Dad, sister, me. But then we skipped the whole thing because we don't really like one another anymore. That was one of the side effects of lean living. We used to play games together. Now my parents yell about money, and when they aren't doing that, we are quiet. I walk, wondering if there's stuffing anywhere in the mall.

My second Black Friday, our store was doing pretty well, so there was a commission. You got something like 2.5 percent of all of your sales. It was a big deal for us on the floor. That was when Wendy was sales lead. Which meant she had the highest sales goals. That year she'd brought in a pie for everybody. I made sure not to eat any of it because I don't eat anything anybody tries to shove down my throat, and she couldn't stop talking about the pie. "We can have Thanksgiving in the store! It's homemade." Everybody was saying how nice she was, how thoughtful. Then Wendy and I were the only ones who didn't have the shirts all day.

Who knows what she put in the pie. I made it my mission to beat her. And I did. I squashed her. Maybe it was because, thanks to her biological warfare, I had shoes, graphic tees, hats, plus denim to cover while she was stuck in PoleFace™.

Maybe it was because winter was warm that year. Maybe it was that I'm the greatest goddamn salesman this store has ever seen and ever will see. But I squashed her. I've been lead ever since. Wendy was gone by New Year's. I put the extra commission money toward some controllers for my GameBox.

I make it to the food court where the smell of food wafts over the stench of the freshly deceased like a muzzle on a rabid dog. There are survivors, champions of the first wave, pulling bags stretched to their capacity. Using the last of their energy to haul their newly purchased happiness home. And there are the dead, everywhere. I get two dollar-menu burgers, a small fry, and a drink from BurgerLand. The man at the cash register has seen so much and had so much caffeine that I have to remind him to take money from me. Even as he takes it, he stares forward, past me, looking at nothing. I sit at one of the white tables in the food court that doesn't have a corpse on it.

I bite into my burger and chew slowly. If I hold a bite in my mouth long enough, it softens into something that feels almost like stuffing. While I eat, a woman drags a television in a box to the table in front of me. She pushes a woman who is lying facedown in a small puddle of red blood out of the chair. Then she sits down. I recognize her from the store. One of her ears looks like it's been mangled by teeth; the other still has a large gold earring. Her gray scarf is gone. But she's wearing her new coat. When I look at her, she hisses and shows her pointy white teeth.

"It's okay," I say. "I helped you." She looks at me, confused. "Um, SleekPack, coal," I say in Black Friday, pointing to myself, then back to her. The creases on her face smooth. She relaxes into her seat and rubs her cheek into the faux fur of the hood.

“Good haul?” I ask. She nods hard and pets the face of the television box. “Family still shopping?” I ask. The woman dips her pointer finger into the blood puddle in front of her.

“Forty-two inches, high-def,” she says.

This is the only time they can afford it.

With a red finger she makes a small circle, then points two small eyes onto the cardboard box, and drags a smile beneath the eyes. The blood dries out before she gets all the way across the face.

“What?” I ask.

“Dead,” she says. “BuyStuy. Trample.”

“Oh,” I say. “Right.”

“She was weak. He was weak. I am strong,” the woman says as she pets the face on the box. It hardly smears at all. “Weak,” she repeats.

“Got it,” I say.

I finish one burger, then I toss the second to the woman. She catches it, rears the paper away, and eats gleefully. My phone moves in my pocket and I grab it. I still have fifteen minutes, but it’s the store.

“We need you!” Richard screams.

“I just left,” I say, getting up and starting to walk.

“Duo just quit.”

“Oh.”

“He said he needed to go on break, and I said wait a few minutes, and then he just left. He’s gone.”

“I’m coming,” I say.

I get up, walk toward the escalator. I step to the conveyor and float down. Coming up on the opposite escalator is Duo.

“Hungry?” I say.

“I couldn’t do it, man. That shit is sad,” Duo says.

I grunt something because I don’t have the words to tell him that it is sad but it’s all I have.  
“It’s a nice coat,” he says. “But that’s it.”  
“What?”

“The coat isn’t proof. She knows. You don’t need to, bro,” he says, turning around and rising up the escalator.  
“Don’t do that,” I say. “Not to me.”  
“Sorry.”

“Yeah,” I say, and then Duo flies away.  
My third Black Friday, the company wasn’t doing great. There was no commission and no prize. I still outsold everybody.

Back in the store, there’s a new body in the body pile and in PoleFace™, a young woman is trying to kill Angela. She’s clawing and screaming, and even from the store entrance, I know what she wants. Angela is pinned against the wall where the SuperShells are. It looks like the girl is about to bite Angela’s nose off. Lance is rolling a teen toward the body pile, and Michel is helping a customer in the shoe section. Richard looks at me and points to Angela and the girl. I know what the girl wants.

“Help!” Angela yells, turning to look at me. She has a reach between her and the girl, but she won’t last much longer. I turn and go to the back room. I look up at the only large SuperShell parka hanging there. I pull it off the hanger. I go outside, and the girl can smell it. She looks in my direction and howls like a wolf.

I won’t be alone with this, she’s saying. They’ll like me now. She rushes toward me. I dangle the coat out to the side like a matador. She runs toward it, and I let go and leap out of the way as she comes crashing through the parka. Then with the coat in her hands, she says, “Thank you,” in a raspy voice.

I watch her at the register. "Have a nice day," Richard says, as he rings her up. She growls, then says, "You, too." I punch back in at the computer. Angela puts a hand on my shoulder. "Thanks," she says.

"Yup," I say, and then I go back to my section.

A herd of shoppers stops in front of the store. They see the PoleFace™ we have left. I climb on top of my cabin. The people stampede. Some bodies fall and get up. Some bodies fall and stay down. They scream and hiss and claw and moan. I grab my reach and watch the blood-messed humans with money in their wallets and the Friday Black in their brains run toward me.

I smile out at the crowd. "How can I help you today?"  
They push and point in all directions.

**H**e yelled and jumped at us, making the long fingers of his left hand Lion's claws that viciously tickled our ribs. "One, two, three rabbit children all swallowed up in one bite," my father roared. We jumped and laughed and screamed. He shook the bed we, the children, shared. But watching way up above us was another character who hid in the fist of his right hand, which opened slowly. Anansi the spider appeared before us. "You silly cat," Anansi said before scurrying to the woods, across the mattress and our heads, his tiny legs quick-moving fingers. He disappeared into the bush searching for something special.

Graduation was two weeks away. My father: gone for months. The day he'd left, my father had said, "I have some business I need to see to."

"And you're leaving today?" I'd said as evenly as possible. I had become a devotee to a religion of my own creation. Its most integral ritual was maintaining a precise calm especially when angry, when hurt, when terrified. People like my father,

# Genesis and catastrophe: a true story

Roald Dahl

1962

"Everything is normal," the doctor was saying. "Just lie back and relax." His voice was miles away in the distance and he seemed to be shouting at her. "You have a son."

"What?"

"You have a fine son. You understand that, don't you? A fine son. Did you hear him crying?"

"Is he all right, Doctor?"

"Of course he is all right,"

"Please let me see him."

"You'll see him in a moment."

"You are certain he is all right?"

"I am quite certain."

"Is he still crying?"

"Try to rest. There is nothing to worry about."

"Why has he stopped crying, Doctor? What happened?"

"Don't excite yourself, please. Everything is normal." "I want to see him. Please let me see him."

"Dear lady," the doctor said, patting her hand. "You have a fine strong healthy child. Don't you believe me when I tell you that?"

"What is the woman over there doing to him?"

"Your baby is being made to look pretty for you," the doctor said. "We are giving him a little wash, that is all. You must spare us a moment or two for that."

"You swear he is all right?"

"I swear it. Now lie back and relax. Close your eyes. Go on, close your eyes. That's right. That's better. Good girl..."

"I have prayed and prayed that he will live, Doctor."

"Of course he will live. What are you talking about?"

"The others didn't."

"What?"

"None of my other ones lived, Doctor."

The doctor stood beside the bed looking down at the pale exhausted face of the young woman. He had never seen her before today. She and her husband were new people in the town. The innkeeper's wife, who had come up to assist in the delivery, had told him that the husband worked at the local customs-house on the border and that the two of them had arrived quite suddenly at the inn with one trunk and one suitcase about three months ago. The husband was a drunkard, the innkeeper's wife had said, an arrogant, overbearing, bullying little drunkard, but the young woman was gentle and religious. And she was very sad. She never smiled. In the few weeks that she had been here, the innkeeper's wife had never once seen her smile. Also there was a rumour that this was the husband's third marriage, that one wife had died and that the other had divorced him or unsavoury reasons. But that was only a rumour.

The doctor bent down and pulled the sheet up a little higher over the patient's chest. "You have nothing to worry about," he said gently. "This is a perfectly normal baby."

"That's exactly what they told me about the others. But I lost them all, Doctor. In the last eighteen months I have lost all three of my children, so you mustn't blame me for being anxious."

"Three?"

"This is my fourth...in four years."

The doctor shifted his feet uneasily on the bare floor.

"I don't think you know what it means, Doctor, to lose them all, all three of them, slowly, separately, one by one. I keep seeing them. I can see Gustav's lace now as clearly as if he were lying here beside me in the bed. Gustav was a lovely boy, Doctor. But he was always ill. It is terrible when they are always ill and there is nothing you can do to help them."

"I know."

The woman opened her eyes, stared up at the doctor for a few seconds, then closed them again.

"My little girl was called Ida. She died a few days before Christmas. That is only four months ago. I just wish you could have seen Ida, Doctor."

"You have a new one now."

"But Ida was so beautiful."

"Yes," the doctor said. "I know."

"How can you know?" she cried.

"I am sure that she was a lovely child. But this new one is also like that." The doctor turned away from the bed and walked over to the window and stood there looking out. It was a wet grey April afternoon, and across the street he could see the red roofs of the houses and the huge raindrops splashing on the tiles.

"Ida was two years old, Doctor...and she was so beautiful I was never able to take my eyes off her from the time I dressed her in the morning until she was safe

in bed again at night. I used to live in holy terror of something happening to that child. Gustav had gone and my little Otto had also gone and she was all I had left. Sometimes I used to get up in the night and creep over to the cradle and put my ear close to her mouth just to make sure that she was breathing.

"Try to rest," the doctor said, going back to the bed. "Please try to rest." The woman's face was white and bloodless, and there was a slight bluish-grey tinge around the nostrils and the mouth. A few strands of damp hair hung down over her forehead, sticking to the skin.

"When she died... I was already pregnant again when that happened, Doctor. This new one was a good four months on its way when Ida died. 'I don't want it!' I shouted after the funeral. 'I won't have it! I have buried enough children!' And my husband... he was strolling among the guests with a big glass of beer in his hand... he turned around quickly and said, 'I have news for you, Kiara, I have good news.' Can you imagine that, Doctor? We have just buried our third child and he stands there with a glass of beer in his hand and tells me that he has good news, 'Today I have been posted to Braunau,' he says, 'so you can start packing at once. This will be a new start for you, Kiara,' he says. 'It will be a new place and you can have a new doctor...'"

"Please don't talk any more."

"You are the new doctor, aren't you, Doctor?"

"That's right."

"And here we are in Braunau."

"I am frightened, Doctor."

"Try not to be frightened."

"What chance can the fourth one have now?"

"You must stop thinking like that."

"I can't help it. I am certain there is something inherited that causes my children to die in this way. There must be."

"That is nonsense."

"Do you know what my husband said to me when Otto was born, Doctor? He came into the room and he looked into the cradle where Otto was lying and he said, 'Why do all my children have to be so small and weak?'"

"I am sure he didn't say that."

"He put his head right into Otto's cradle as though he were examining a tiny insect and he said, 'All I am saying is why can't they be better specimens? That's all I am saying.' And three days after that, Otto was dead. We baptized him quickly on the third day and he died the same evening. And then Gustav died. And then Ida died. All of them died, Doctor... and suddenly the whole house was empty."

"Don't think about it now."

"Is this one so very small?"

"He is a normal child."

"But small?"

"He is a little small, perhaps. But the small ones are often a lot tougher than the big ones. Just imagine, Frau Hitler, this time next year he will be almost learning how to walk. Isn't that a lovely thought?"

She didn't answer this.

"And two years from now he will probably be talking his head off and driving you crazy with his chatter. Have you settled on a name for him yet?"

"A name?"

"Yes."

"I don't know. I'm not sure. I think my husband said that if it was a boy we were going to call him Adolfus."

"That means he would be called Adolf."

"Yes. My husband likes Adolf because it has a certain similarity to Alois. My husband is called Alois."

"Excellent."

"Oh no!" she cried, starting up suddenly from the pillow. "That's the same question they asked me when Otto was born! It means he is going to die! You are going to baptize him at once!"

"Now, now," the doctor said, taking her gently by the shoulders. "You are quite wrong. I promise you you are wrong. I was simply being an inquisitive old man, that is all. I love talking about names. I think Adolfus is a particularly fine name. It is one of my favourites. And look-here he comes now."

The innkeeper's wife, carrying the baby high up on her enormous bosom, came sailing across the room towards the bed, "Here is the little beauty!" she cried, beaming. "Would you like to hold him, my dear? Shall I put him beside you?"

"Is he well wrapped?" the doctor asked. "It is extremely cold in here."

"Certainly he is well wrapped."

The baby was tightly swaddled in a white woollen shawl, and only the tiny pink head protruded. The innkeeper's wife placed him gently on the bed beside the mother. "There you are," she said. "Now you can lie there and look at him to your heart's content."

"I think you will like him," the doctor said, smiling. "He is a fine little baby,"

"He has the most lovely hands!" the innkeeper's wife exclaimed. "Such long delicate fingers!"

The mother didn't move. She didn't even turn her head to look.

"Go on!" cried the innkeeper's wife. "He won't bite you!"

"I am frightened to look. I don't dare to believe that I have another baby and that he is all right."

"Don't be so stupid."

Slowly, the mother turned her head and looked at the small, incredibly serene face that lay on the pillow beside her.

"Is this my baby?"

"Of course."

"Oh..., oh... but he is beautiful."

The doctor turned away and went over to the table and began putting his things into his bag. The mother lay on the bed gazing at the child and smiling and touching him and making little noises of pleasure. "Hello, Adolfus," she whispered. "Hello, my little Adolf."

"Sshhh!" said the innkeeper's wife. "Listen! I think your husband is coming."

The doctor walked over to the door and opened it and looked out into the corridor.

"Herr Hitler?"

"Yes."

"Come in, please."

A small man in a dark-green uniform stepped softly into the room and looked around him.

"Congratulations," the doctor said. "You have a son."

The man had a pair of enormous whiskers meticulously groomed after the manner of the Emperor Franz Josef, and he smelled strongly of beer. "A son?"

"Yes."

"How is he?"

"He is fine. So is your wife."

"Good," The father turned and walked with a curious little prancing stride over to the bed where his wife was lying. "Well, Klara," he said, smiling through his whiskers. "How did it go?" He bent down to take a look at the baby. Then he bent lower. In a series of quick jerky movements, he bent lower and lower until his face was only about twelve inches from the baby's head. The wife lay sideways on the pillow, staring up at him with a kind of supplicating look.

"He has the most marvellous pair of lungs," the innkeeper's wife announced. "You should have heard him screaming just after he came into this world."

"But my God, Klara..."

"What is it, dear?"

"This one is even smaller than Otto was!"

The doctor took a couple of quick paces forward. "There is nothing wrong with that child," he said.

Slowly, the husband straightened up and turned away from the bed and looked at the doctor. He seemed bewildered and stricken. "It's no good lying, Doctor," he said. "I know what it means. It's going to be the same all over again."

"Now you listen to me," the doctor said.

"But do you know what happened to the others, Doctor?"

"You must forget about the others, Herr Hitler. Give this one a chance,"

"But so small and weak!"

"My dear sir, he has only just been born."

"Even so..."

"What are you trying to do?" cried the innkeeper's wife. "Talk him into his grave?"

"That's enough!" the doctor said sharply.

The mother was weeping now. Great sobs were shaking her body.

The doctor walked over to the husband and put a hand on his shoulder. "Be good to her," he whispered. "Please. It is very important." Then he squeezed the husband's shoulder hard and began pushing him forward surreptitiously to the edge of the bed. The husband hesitated. The doctor squeezed harder, signaling to him urgently through fingers and thumb. At last, reluctantly, the husband bent down and kissed his wife lightly on the cheek.

"All right, Klara," he said. "Now stop crying."

"I have prayed so hard that he will live, Alois."

"Yes."

"Every day for months I have gone to the church and begged on my knees that this one will be allowed to live."

"Yes, Klara, I know."

"Three dead children is all that I can stand, don't you realize that?"

"Of course."

"He must live, Alois. He must, he must... Oh God, be merciful unto him now..."

## My Son the Fanatic

Surreptitiously the father began going into his son's bedroom. He would sit there for hours, rousing himself only to seek clues. What bewildered him was that Ali was getting tidier. Instead of the usual tangle of clothes, books, cricket bats, video games, the room was becoming neat and ordered; spaces began appearing where before there had been only mess.

Initially Parvez had been pleased: his son was outgrowing his teenage attitudes. But one day, beside the dustbin, Parvez found a torn bag which contained not only old toys, but computer discs, video tapes, new books and fashionable clothes the boy had bought just a few months before. Also without explanation, Ali had parted from the English girlfriend who used to come often to the house. His old friends had stopped ringing.

For reasons he didn't himself understand, Parvez wasn't able to bring up the subject of Ali's unusual behaviour. He was aware that he had become slightly afraid of his son, who, alongside his silences, was developing a sharp tongue. One remark Parvez did make, 'You don't play your guitar any more,' elicited the mysterious but conclusive reply, 'There are more important things to be done.'

Yet Parvez felt his son's eccentricity as an injustice. He had always been aware of the pitfalls which other men's sons had fallen into in England. And so, for Ali, he had worked long hours and spent a lot of money paying for his education as an accountant. He had bought him good suits, all the books he required and a computer. And now the boy was throwing his possessions out!

The TV, video and sound system followed the guitar. Soon

the room was practically bare. Even the unhappy walls bore marks where Ali's pictures had been removed.

Parvez couldn't sleep; he went more to the whisky bottle, even when he was at work. He realised it was imperative to discuss the matter with someone sympathetic.

Parvez had been a taxi driver for twenty years. Half that time he'd worked for the same firm. Like him, most of the other drivers were Punjabis. They preferred to work at night, the roads were clearer and the money better. They slept during the day, avoiding their wives. Together they led almost a boy's life in the cabbies' office, playing cards and practical jokes, exchanging lewd stories, eating together and discussing politics and their problems.

But Parvez had been unable to bring this subject up with his friends. He was too ashamed. And he was afraid, too, that they would blame him for the wrong turning his boy had taken, just as he had blamed other fathers whose sons had taken to running around with bad girls, truanting from school and joining gangs.

For years Parvez had boasted to the other men about how Ali excelled at cricket, swimming and football, and how attentive a scholar he was, getting straight 'A's in most subjects. Was it asking too much for Ali to get a good job now, marry the right girl and start a family? Once this happened, Parvez would be happy. His dreams of doing well in England would have come true. Where had he gone wrong?

But one night, sitting in the taxi office on busted chairs with his two closest friends watching a Sylvester Stallone film, he broke his silence.

'I can't understand it!' he burst out. 'Everything is going from his room. And I can't talk to him any more. We were not father and son – we were brothers! Where has he gone? Why is he torturing me!'

And Parvez put his head in his hands.

Even as he poured out his account the men shook their

heads and gave one another knowing glances. From their grave looks Parvez realised they understood the situation.

'Tell me what is happening!' he demanded.

The reply was almost triumphant. They had guessed something was going wrong. Now it was clear. Ali was taking drugs and selling his possessions to pay for them. That was why his bedroom was emptying.

'What must I do then?'

Parvez's friends instructed him to watch Ali scrupulously and then be severe with him, before the boy went mad, overdosed or murdered someone.

Parvez staggered out into the early morning air, terrified they were right. His boy – the drug addict killer!

To his relief he found Bettina sitting in his car.

Usually the last customers of the night were local 'brasses' or prostitutes. The taxi drivers knew them well, often driving them to liaisons. At the end of the girls' shifts, the men would ferry them home, though sometimes the women would join them for a drinking session in the office. Occasionally the drivers would go with the girls. 'A ride in exchange for a ride,' it was called.

Bettina had known Parvez for three years. She lived outside the town and on the long drive home, where she sat not in the passenger seat but beside him, Parvez had talked to her about his life and hopes, just as she talked about hers. They saw each other most nights.

He could talk to her about things he'd never be able to discuss with his own wife. Bettina, in turn, always reported on her night's activities. He liked to know where she was and with whom. Once he had rescued her from a violent client, and since then they had come to care for one another.

Though Bettina had never met the boy, she heard about Ali continually. That late night, when he told Bettina that he suspected Ali was on drugs, she judged neither the boy nor his father, but became businesslike and told him what to watch for.

'It's all in the eyes,' she said. They might be bloodshot; the pupils might be dilated; he might look tired. He could be liable to sweats, or sudden mood changes. 'Okay?'

Parvez began his vigil gratefully. Now he knew what the problem might be, he felt better. And surely, he figured, things couldn't have gone too far? With Bettina's help he would soon sort it out.

He watched each mouthful the boy took. He sat beside him at every opportunity and looked into his eyes. When he could he took the boy's hand, checking his temperature. If the boy wasn't at home Parvez was active, looking under the carpet, in his drawers, behind the empty wardrobe, sniffing, inspecting, probing. He knew what to look for: Bettina had drawn pictures of capsules, syringes, pills, powders, rocks.

Every night she waited to hear news of what he'd witnessed.

After a few days of constant observation, Parvez was able to report that although the boy had given up sports, he seemed healthy, with clear eyes. He didn't, as his father expected, flinch guiltily from his gaze. In fact the boy's mood was alert and steady in this sense: as well as being sullen, he was very watchful. He returned his father's long looks with more than a hint of criticism, of reproach even, so much so that Parvez began to feel that it was he who was in the wrong, and not the boy!

'And there's nothing else physically different?' Bettina asked.

'No!' Parvez thought for a moment. 'But he is growing a beard.'

One night, after sitting with Bettina in an all-night coffee shop, Parvez came home particularly late. Reluctantly he and Bettina had abandoned their only explanation, the drug theory, for Parvez had found nothing resembling any drug in Ali's room. Besides, Ali wasn't selling his belongings. He threw them out, gave them away or donated them to charity shops.

Standing in the hall, Parvez heard his boy's alarm clock go off. Parvez hurried into his bedroom where his wife was still awake, sewing in bed. He ordered her to sit down and keep quiet, though she had neither stood up nor said a word. From this post, and with her watching him curiously, he observed his son through the crack in the door.

The boy went into the bathroom to wash. When he returned to his room Parvez sprang across the hall and set his ear at Ali's door. A muttering sound came from within. Parvez was puzzled but relieved.

Once this clue had been established, Parvez watched him at other times. The boy was praying. Without fail, when he was at home, he prayed five times a day.

Parvez had grown up in Lahore where all the boys had been taught the Koran. To stop him falling asleep when he studied, the Moulvi had attached a piece of string to the ceiling and tied it to Parvez's hair, so that if his head fell forward, he would instantly awake. After this indignity Parvez had avoided all religions. Not that the other taxi drivers had more respect. In fact they made jokes about the local mullahs walking around with their caps and beards, thinking they could tell people how to live, while their eyes roved over the boys and girls in their care.

Parvez described to Bettina what he had discovered. He informed the men in the taxi office. The friends, who had been so curious before, now became oddly silent. They could hardly condemn the boy for his devotions.

Parvez decided to take a night off and go out with the boy. They could talk things over. He wanted to hear how things were going at college; he wanted to tell him stories about their family in Pakistan. More than anything he yearned to understand how Ali had discovered the 'spiritual dimension', as Bettina described it.

To Parvez's surprise, the boy refused to accompany him. He claimed he had an appointment. Parvez had to insist that

no appointment could be more important than that of a son with his father.

The next day, Parvez went immediately to the street where Bettina stood in the rain wearing high heels, a short skirt and a long mac on top, which she would open hopefully at passing cars.

'Get in, get in!' he said.

They drove out across the moors and parked at the spot where on better days, with a view unimpeded for many miles by nothing but wild deer and horses, they'd lie back, with their eyes half closed, saying 'This is the life.' This time Parvez was trembling. Bettina put her arms around him.

'What's happened?'

'I've just had the worst experience of my life.'

As Bettina rubbed his head Parvez told her that the previous evening he and Ali had gone to a restaurant. As they studied the menu, the waiter, whom Parvez knew, brought him his usual whisky and water. Parvez had been so nervous he had even prepared a question. He was going to ask Ali if he was worried about his imminent exams. But first, wanting to relax, he loosened his tie, crunched a popadom and took a long drink.

Before Parvez could speak, Ali made a face.

'Don't you know it's wrong to drink alcohol?' he said.

'He spoke to me very harshly,' Parvez told Bettina. 'I was about to castigate the boy for being insolent, but managed to control myself.'

He had explained patiently to Ali that for years he had worked more than ten hours a day, that he had few enjoyments or hobbies and never went on holiday. Surely it wasn't a crime to have a drink when he wanted one?

'But it is forbidden,' the boy said.

Parvez shrugged, 'I know.'

'And so is gambling, isn't it?'

'Yes. But surely we are only human?'

Each time Parvez took a drink, the boy winced, or made a

fastidious face as an accompaniment. This made Parvez drink more quickly. The waiter, wanting to please his friend, brought another glass of whisky. Parvez knew he was getting drunk, but he couldn't stop himself. Ali had a horrible look on his face, full of disgust and censure. It was as if he hated his father.

Halfway through the meal Parvez suddenly lost his temper and threw a plate on the floor. He had felt like ripping the cloth from the table, but the waiters and other customers were staring at him. Yet he wouldn't stand for his own son telling him the difference between right and wrong. He knew he wasn't a bad man. He had a conscience. There were a few things of which he was ashamed, but on the whole he had lived a decent life.

'When have I had time to be wicked?' he asked Ali.

In a low monotonous voice the boy explained that Parvez had not, in fact, lived a good life. He had broken countless rules of the Koran.

'For instance?' Parvez demanded.

Ali hadn't needed time to think. As if he had been waiting for this moment, he asked his father if he didn't relish pork pies?

'Well . . .'

Parvez couldn't deny that he loved crispy bacon smothered with mushrooms and mustard and sandwiched between slices of fried bread. In fact he ate this for breakfast every morning.

Ali then reminded Parvez that he had ordered his own wife to cook pork sausages, saying to her, 'You're not in the village now, this is England. We have to fit in!'

Parvez was so annoyed and perplexed by this attack that he called for more drink.

'The problem is this,' the boy said. He leaned across the table. For the first time that night his eyes were alive. 'You are too implicated in Western civilisation.'

Parvez burped; he thought he was going to choke.

'Implicated!' he said. 'But we live here!'

'The Western materialists hate us,' Ali said. 'Papa, how can you love something which hates you?'

'What is the answer then?' Parvez said miserably. 'According to you.'

Ali addressed his father fluently, as if Parvez were a rowdy crowd that had to be quelled and convinced. The Law of Islam would rule the world; the skin of the infidel would burn off again and again; the Jews and Christers would be routed. The West was a sink of hypocrites, adulterers, homosexuals, drug takers and prostitutes.

As Ali talked, Parvez looked out of the window as if to check that they were still in London.

'My people have taken enough. If the persecution doesn't stop there will be *jihad*. I, and millions of others, will gladly give our lives for the cause.'

'But why, why?' Parvez said.

'For us the reward will be in paradise.'

'Paradise!'

Finally, as Parvez's eyes filled with tears, the boy urged him to mend his ways.

'How is that possible?' Parvez asked.

'Pray,' Ali said. 'Pray beside me.'

Parvez called for the bill and ushered his boy out of the restaurant as soon as he was able. He couldn't take any more. Ali sounded as if he'd swallowed someone else's voice.

On the way home the boy sat in the back of the taxi, as if he were a customer.

'What has made you like this?' Parvez asked him, afraid that somehow he was to blame for all this. 'Is there a particular event which has influenced you?'

'Living in this country.'

'But I love England,' Parvez said, watching his boy in the mirror. 'They let you do almost anything here.'

'That is the problem,' he replied.

For the first time in years Parvez couldn't see straight. He knocked the side of the car against a lorry, ripping off the wing mirror. They were lucky not to have been stopped by the police: Parvez would have lost his licence and therefore his job.

Getting out of the car back at the house, Parvez stumbled and fell in the road, scraping his hands and ripping his trousers. He managed to haul himself up. The boy didn't even offer him his hand.

Parvez told Bettina he was now willing to pray, if that was what the boy wanted, if that would dislodge the pitiless look from his eyes.

'But what I object to,' he said, 'is being told by my own son that I am going to hell!'

What finished Parvez off was that the boy had said he was giving up accountancy. When Parvez had asked why, Ali had said sarcastically that it was obvious.

'Western education cultivates an anti-religious attitude.'

And, according to Ali, in the world of accountants it was usual to meet women, drink alcohol and practise usury.

'But it's well-paid work,' Parvez argued. 'For years you've been preparing!'

Ali said he was going to begin to work in prisons, with poor Muslims who were struggling to maintain their purity in the face of corruption. Finally, at the end of the evening, as Ali was going to bed, he had asked his father why he didn't have a beard, or at least a moustache.

'I feel as if I've lost my son,' Parvez told Bettina. 'I can't bear to be looked at as if I'm a criminal. I've decided what to do.'

'What is it?'

'I'm going to tell him to pick up his prayer mat and get out of my house. It will be the hardest thing I've ever done, but tonight I'm going to do it.'

'But you mustn't give up on him,' said Bettina. 'Many young people fall into cults and superstitious groups. It

doesn't mean they'll always feel the same way.'

She said Parvez had to stick by his boy, giving him support, until he came through.

Parvez was persuaded that she was right, even though he didn't feel like giving his son more love when he had hardly been thanked for all he had already given.

Nevertheless, Parvez tried to endure his son's looks and reproaches. He attempted to make conversation about his beliefs. But if Parvez ventured any criticism, Ali always had a brusque reply. On one occasion Ali accused Parvez of 'grovelling' to the whites; in contrast, he explained, he was not 'inferior'; there was more to the world than the West, though the West always thought it was best.

'How is it you know that?' Parvez said, 'seeing as you've never left England?'

Ali replied with a look of contempt.

One night, having ensured there was no alcohol on his breath, Parvez sat down at the kitchen table with Ali. He hoped Ali would compliment him on the beard he was growing but Ali didn't appear to notice.

The previous day Parvez had been telling Bettina that he thought people in the West sometimes felt inwardly empty and that people needed a philosophy to live by.

'Yes,' said Bettina. 'That's the answer. You must tell him what your philosophy of life is. Then he will understand that there are other beliefs.'

After some fatiguing consideration, Parvez was ready to begin. The boy watched him as if he expected nothing.

Haltingly Parvez said that people had to treat one another with respect, particularly children their parents. This did seem, for a moment, to affect the boy. Heartened, Parvez continued. In his view this life was all there was and when you died you rotted in the earth. 'Grass and flowers will grow out of me, but something of me will live on -'

'How?'

'In other people. I will continue - in you.' At this the boy

appeared a little distressed. 'And your grandchildren,' Parvez added for good measure. 'But while I am here on earth I want to make the best of it. And I want you to, as well!'

'What d'you mean by "make the best of it"?' asked the boy.

'Well,' said Parvez. 'For a start . . . you should enjoy yourself. Yes. Enjoy yourself without hurting others.'

Ali said that enjoyment was a 'bottomless pit'.

'But I don't mean enjoyment like that!' said Parvez. 'I mean the beauty of living!'

'All over the world our people are oppressed,' was the boy's reply.

'I know,' Parvez replied, not entirely sure who 'our people' were, 'but still – life is for living!'

Ali said, 'Real morality has existed for hundreds of years. Around the world millions and millions of people share my beliefs. Are you saying you are right and they are all wrong?'

Ali looked at his father with such aggressive confidence that Parvez could say no more.

One evening Bettina was sitting in Parvez's car, after visiting a client, when they passed a boy on the street.

'That's my son,' Parvez said suddenly. They were on the other side of town, in a poor district, where there were two mosques.

Parvez set his face hard.

Bettina turned to watch him. 'Slow down then, slow down!' She said, 'He's good-looking. Reminds me of you. But with a more determined face. Please, can't we stop?'

'What for?'

'I'd like to talk to him.'

Parvez turned the cab round and stopped beside the boy.

'Coming home?' Parvez asked. 'It's quite a way.'

The sullen boy shrugged and got into the back seat. Bettina sat in the front. Parvez became aware of Bettina's

short skirt, gaudy rings and ice-blue eyeshadow. He became conscious that the smell of her perfume, which he loved, filled the cab. He opened the window.

While Parvez drove as fast as he could, Bettina said gently to Ali, 'Where have you been?'

'The mosque,' he said.

'And how are you getting on at college? Are you working hard?'

'Who are you to ask me these questions?' he said, looking out of the window. Then they hit bad traffic and the car came to a standstill.

By now Bettina had inadvertently laid her hand on Parvez's shoulder. She said, 'Your father, who is a good man, is very worried about you. You know he loves you more than his own life.'

'You say he loves me,' the boy said.

'Yes!' said Bettina.

'Then why is he letting a woman like you touch him like that?'

If Bettina looked at the boy in anger, he looked back at her with twice as much cold fury.

She said, 'What kind of woman am I that deserves to be spoken to like that?'

'You know,' he said. 'Now let me out.'

'Never,' Parvez replied.

'Don't worry, I'm getting out,' Bettina said.

'No, don't!' said Parvez. But even as the car moved she opened the door, threw herself out and ran away across the road. Parvez shouted after her several times, but she had gone.

Parvez took Ali back to the house, saying nothing more to him. Ali went straight to his room. Parvez was unable to read the paper, watch television or even sit down. He kept pouring himself drinks.

At last he went upstairs and paced up and down outside Ali's room. When, finally, he opened the door, Ali was

praying. The boy didn't even glance his way.

Parvez kicked him over. Then he dragged the boy up by his shirt and hit him. The boy fell back. Parvez hit him again. The boy's face was bloody. Parvez was panting. He knew that the boy was unreachable, but he struck him nonetheless. The boy neither covered himself nor retaliated; there was no fear in his eyes. He only said, through his split lip: 'So who's the fanatic now?'

## Désirée's Baby

by Kate Chopin

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

It made her laugh to think of Désirée with a baby. Why, it seemed but yesterday that Désirée was little more than a baby herself; when Monsieur in riding through the gateway of Valmondé had found her lying asleep in the shadow of the big stone pillar.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I knew you would be astonished," laughed Désirée, "at the way he has grown. The little *cochon de lait!* Look at his legs, mamma, and his hands and finger-nails,—real finger-nails. Zandrine had to cut them this morning Is n't it true, Zandrine?"

The woman bowed her turbaned head majestically, "Mais si, Madame."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She sat in her room, one hot afternoon, in her *peignoir*, listlessly drawing through her fingers the strands of her long, silky brown hair that hung about her shoulders. The baby, half naked, lay asleep upon her own great mahogany bed, that was like a sumptuous throne, with its satin-lined half-canopy. One of La Blanche's little quadroon boys—half naked too—stood fanning the child slowly with a fan of peacock feathers. Désirée's eyes had been fixed absently and sadly upon the baby, while she was striving to penetrate the threatening mist that she felt closing about her. She looked from her child to the boy who stood beside him, and back again; over and over. "Ah!" It was a

cry that she could not help; which she was not conscious of having uttered. The blood turned like ice in her veins, and a clammy moisture gathered upon her face.

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

She stayed motionless, with gaze riveted upon her child, and her face the picture of fright. Presently her husband entered the room, and without noticing her, went to a table and began to search among some papers which covered it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The answer that came was as brief:

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

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

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

"Yes, go."

"Do you want me to go?"

"Yes, I want you to go."

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

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

"Good-by, Armand," she moaned.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kate Chopin wrote "Désirée's Baby" on November 24, 1892. It was published in *Vogue* (the same magazine that is sold today) on January 14, 1893, the first of nineteen Kate Chopin stories that *Vogue* published. It was reprinted in Chopin's collection of stories, *Bayou Folk*, in 1894.

You can find complete composition dates and publication dates for all Chopin's works on pages 1003 to 1032 of *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*, edited by Per Seyersted (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969, 2006).

<http://www.KateChopin.org>