

## **All New Yorker Stories**

Mary Burger

All *New Yorker* fiction pieces stop at the point where the person makes a bad discovery about himself or herself or the world. That he is or she is a failure personally—in love, usually, romantic love or familial love—or that the world is a failure toward his personal or her personal sensitive nature—that the world is violent, that unequal distribution of power causes pain and unhappiness, usually to the less powerful, but sometimes to the powerful as well.

Regardless of its narrator, its characters, its particular conceits or conflicts, what anchors each story is the sick feeling at the end. The same feeling that comes after a radiation treatment for cancer. The queasy realization that all this, the technological sophistication, the aggressive preservation of human life, is merely its own reward, not a means to anything.

This is how the melancholic condition of privileged passivity confronts itself. When a grown man behaves mercilessly towards his humble, bewildered parents; when a wealthy young Latin American woman is threatened with kidnapping and even death, right in front of her own gated home, right inside her private limousine; when the mostly likable gay neighbor, in the midst of his theatrical, flamboyant prime, withers suddenly and agonizingly, and dies. When an urbane, not quite young writer, supplementing her New York lifestyle with a teaching job in the heartland, falls in love with a simple, decent man, neither a New Yorker nor a writer nor even in any way ironic—and simply leaves him, his marriage proposal, his simple, open face, to return to her lair in the crowded city, her archly urban self in the witheringly sophisticated intellectual world.

In “withering”, a possibility that what is socially belittling might also be personally devastating. That the intricate architecture of social standing might collapse occasionally, like a poorly braced studio set, to reveal something more like an experience arrived at through contemplation.

When the modestly privileged, moderately young childless couple who attend the adoption picnic focus on the same large-eyed, attractive kid (that is, the querulous wife focuses. The ironic husband, whose disavowal of the thing expected of him mimics Kevin Spacey’s in *American Beauty*, instead alights for awhile with an aloof, jaded teenager, whose unflinching lack of delusion contributes to the reader’s own worldliness), that is, the moderately young, uncomfortably nervous wife alights on the same doe-eyed little boy attended to by an imposing Texas judge and his Barbara Bush-edition wife. It is an orphan fair. Like all bazaars, the most attractive goods are fought for, the least attractive are left behind to grow even dingier.

In this version, the judge and his wife are the cunning players. They are powerful, and they are malevolent. The judge and his wife invite the more modest couple to their lair, a large house on a large piece of land by a lake.

With “lair”, variously, the idea that the seeming impotence of the self-conscious intellectual (the New York writer snagged in the loneliness of her cleverness, the cleverness of her loneliness),

the rueful split between the life of the heart and the life of the mind, is a familiar condition, the condition that seems to be most easily recognized as a sign of distress, of all not being right with the world. The dissonance between what you know and what you need—this is the price charged for entry to the club. And who complains? Does a young gymnast object that her muscle-strapped torso and thighs set her apart from other girls? The world-weariness might be counted as a privilege; anyway it's displayed often enough to be interpreted that way. Through the battlefield drills of drinks, dinner, after-dinner segregation of husbands and wives, the older couple's battle plan emerges. The Texas wife begins an oblique attack, a narrative of a foster child they'd had, a black toddler taken from an addicted mother. His mounting health problems and learning disabilities, together with the difficulty in keeping a nanny—when enough details had been laid out, the concluding sentence wasn't needed.

The off-register comments from the Texas wife about her foster child, about finding the boy a nanny “of his own kind” and a school with “all different races, the Mexicans and the Chinese and the Indians and all that”, created another clear space in the story, a way to tell what is right.

In the kitchen, away from the women, the judge's assault was direct: he confronted the husband with ammunition gathered from his labyrinthine legal connections: evidence of the husband's expulsion from college 15 years ago for selling pot, evidence that the judge, with a final flourish of legal muscles, had already inserted into the husband's case file at the adoption agency. This in the few days since the couples met.

But since the cunning of great power isn't really the story, or enough of a story, it was necessary for the judge to punch the husband in the nose and knock him down before the couple, and the story, could leave the judge's house.

The women's exchanges, happening at the same time, were far less direct than the men's but resulted in arguably more damage, like a barbed hook that's slipped smoothly into the skin and then twisted.

It's true too that the young wife and husband wanted different things (as different as a doe-eyed youngster from a disaffected teen), a further cause of dissatisfaction.

The obliquity of the wives and the passive irony of the young husband all form a rueful cognizance that weighs down to the point of paralysis. And yet it's that ruefulness that cradles its hands around the narrative's delicate crown jewel.

Like a lead musician the fiction narrator repeats and elaborates a single sensitive melody line, or crescendos on a particular note of knowing regret, a middle-aged loss of innocence, though evacuated of any possibility that the afflicted might be rescued from the cause of their desolation or even, astonishingly, change their own lives.

This somber performance seems to be the provenance, or the penance, of the fictional narrator only. For the non-fiction narrator, the feat is more acrobatic, if not therefore also more precarious.

The non-fiction narrator is permeated by a sense of ambiguity impossible in her counterpart. While the fiction narrator lives with the certainty that moral rectitude is real, that extreme power is obscene, the non-fiction narrator is instead subject to the wild cards, false leads, and missed signals of a lived life.

The non-fiction narrator tends to have an intimate relationship with squalor, or danger, or pleasure, an intimacy marked by unguarded revelations of vulnerability. She exchanges the reassurance of an intricately self-referencing universe, in which each element contributes clearly and inevitably to the whole, for rapport with the volatile, the off-balance, the unpredictable. Her familiarity with squalor becomes its own sophistication, her fluency in the idiom of disorder, with its free-jazz syncopation and arrhythmia, its own seductiveness. The effect holds our attention like a sudden, beckoning whistle coming in through the window of a quiet room.

In this version, the non-fiction narrator is free to both love and despise her volatile, negligent parents, her alcoholic mother who disappears on binges and returns home to demand attention and threaten suicide; she's free to both admire and resent her slightly older, vastly more sexually experienced sister; she's free to fear and adore the coltish, sanguine boy she's had a crush on since age six. The non-fiction narrator elides between bewilderment and passion for her own still strange sexual feelings and for the obvious, pronounced desire that persists between her parents even in the midst of their pitched battles.

While the fictional narrator breathlessly cradles a fragile egg, the non-fiction narrator darts in and out of the room bouncing a rubber ball.

In the photo, a snapshot salvaged from one of those summers that were both vacant and teeming, she is 15. Her long hair blown a little into her face, head tilted a little to the side, lashes lightly mascarad or just naturally thick and dark—she is the early 70's icon of innocent sexiness, the womanly girl, what Ali McGraw, *Love Story*, and John Denver's *Sunshine* all immortalized, but what she seems to be without trying, maybe without even really knowing.

It's that not knowing, or anyway not always needing to know, that the non-fiction narrator settles for, but that the fiction narrator battles like a riptide.

The one bobs in a tight ship just off shore, pulled between the current and the undertow, while the rest shout and lunge in beach volleyball, play with children, play with dogs, play radios, nap. She imagines her voice as faint, or inaudible, from shore. The other shipwrecks in the shoals and scrambles from her splintered raft. Her escape is always in progress.

---

Works cited:

1. J. Robert Lennon, "No Life." *The New Yorker*, Sept. 4, 2000. Pp. 74-81.
2. Mary Karr, "The Hot Dark." *The New Yorker*, Sept. 4, 2000. Pp. 42-49.