

The Jade Peony

WAYSON CHOY



Focus Your Learning

Reading this story will help you:

- develop insight into character motivation
- understand and explain symbolism
- write instructions

When Grandmama died at 83 our whole household held its breath. She had promised us a sign of her leaving, final proof that her present life had ended well. My parents knew that without any clear sign, our own family fortunes could be altered, threatened. My stepmother looked endlessly into the small cluttered room the ancient lady had occupied. Nothing was touched; nothing changed. My father, thinking that a sign should appear in Grandmama's garden, looked at the frost-killed shoots and cringed: *no, that could not be it.*

My two older teenage brothers and my sister, Liang, age 14, were embarrassed by my parents' behaviour. What would all the white people in Vancouver think of us? We were Canadians now, *Chinese-Canadians*, a hyphenated reality that my parents could never accept. So it seemed, for different reasons, we all held our breath waiting for *something*.

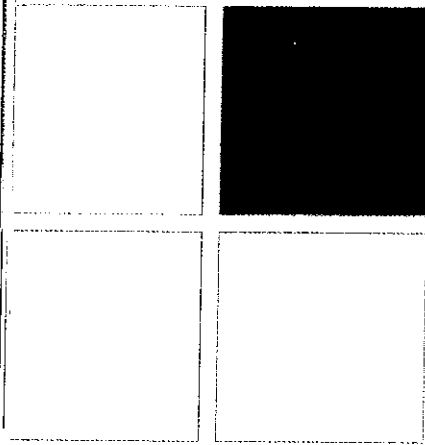
I was eight when she died. For days she had resisted going into the hospital ... *a cold, just a cold* ... and instead gave constant instruction to my stepmother and sister on the boiling of ginseng roots mixed with bitter extract. At night, between wracking coughs and deadly silences, Grandmama had her back and chest rubbed with heated camphor oil and sipped a bluish decoction of a herb called Peacock's Tail. When all these failed to abate her fever, she began to arrange the details of her will. This she did with my father, confessing finally: "I am too stubborn. The only cure for old age is to die."

My father wept to hear this. I stood beside her bed; she turned to me. Her round face looked darker, and the gentleness of her eyes, the thin, arching eyebrows, seemed weary. I brushed the few strands of grey, brittle hair from her face; she managed to smile at me. Being the youngest, I had spent nearly all my time with her and could not imagine that we would ever be parted. Yet when she spoke, and her voice hesitated, cracked, the sombre shadows of her room chilled me. Her wrinkled brow grew wet with fever, and her small body seemed even more diminutive.

"I—I am going to the hospital, Grandson." Her hand reached out for mine. "You know, Little Son, whatever happens I will never leave you." Her palm felt plush and warm, the slender, old fingers bony and firm, so magically strong was her grip that I could not imagine how she could ever part from me. Ever.

Her hands *were* magical. My most vivid memories are of her hands: long, elegant fingers, with impeccable nails, a skein of fine, barely-seen veins, and wrinkled skin like light pine. Those hands were quick when she taught me, at six, simple tricks of juggling, learned when she was a village girl in Southern Canton; a troupe of actors had stayed on her father's farm. One of them, "tall and pale as the whiteness of petals," fell in love with her, promising to return. In her last years his image came back like a third being in our two lives. He had been magician, acrobat, juggler, and some of the things he taught her she had absorbed and passed on to me through her stories and games. But above all, without realizing it then, her hands conveyed to me the quality of their love.

Most marvellous for me was the quick-witted skill her hands revealed in making wind chimes for our birthdays: wind chimes in the likeness of her lost friend's only present to her, made of bits of string and scraps, in the centre of which once hung a precious jade peony. This wondrous gift to her



broke apart years ago, in China, but Grandmama kept the jade pendant in a tiny red silk envelope, and kept it always in her pocket, until her death.

These were not ordinary, carelessly made chimes, such as those you now find in our Chinatown stores, whose rattling noises drive you mad. But making her special ones caused dissension in our family, and some shame. Each one that she made was created from a treasure trove of glass fragments and castaway costume jewellery, in the same way that her first wind chime had been made. The problem for the rest of the family was in the fact that Grandmama looked for these treasures wandering the back alleys of Keefer and Pender Streets, peering into our neighbours' garbage cans, chasing away hungry, nervous cats and shouting curses at them.

"All our friends are laughing at us!" Older Brother Jung said at last to my father, when Grandmama was away having tea at Mrs. Lim's.

"We are not poor," Oldest Brother Kiam declared, "yet she and Sek-Lung poke through those awful things as if—" he shoved me in frustration and I stumbled against my sister, "—they were beggars!"

"She will make Little Brother crazy!" Sister Liang said. Without warning, she punched me sharply in the back; I jumped. "You see, look how *nervous* he is!"

I lifted my foot slightly, enough to swing it back and kick Liang in the shin. She yelled and pulled back her fist to punch me again. Jung made a menacing move toward me.

"Stop this, all of you!" My father shook his head in exasperation. How could he dare tell the Grand Old One, his ageing mother, that what was somehow appropriate in a poor village in China, was an abomination here? How could he prevent me, his youngest, from accompanying her? If she went walking into those alley-ways alone she could well be attacked by hoodlums. "She is not a beggar looking for food. She is searching for— for ..."

My stepmother attempted to speak, then fell silent. She, too, seemed perplexed and somewhat ashamed. They all loved Grandmama, but she was *inconvenient*, unsettling.

As for our neighbours, most understood Grandmama to be harmlessly crazy, others that she did indeed make lovely toys but for what purpose? Why? they asked, and the stories she told me, of the juggler who smiled at her, flashed in my head.

Finally, by their cutting remarks, the family did exert enough pressure so that Grandmama and I no longer openly announced our expeditions. Instead, she took me with her on "shopping trips," ostensibly for clothes or groceries, while in fact we spent most of our time exploring stranger and more distant neighbourhoods, searching for splendid junk: jangling pieces of a vase, cranberry glass fragments embossed with leaves, discarded glass

beads from Woolworth necklaces We would sneak them all home in brown rice sacks, folded into small parcels, and put them under her bed. During the day when the family was away at school or work, we brought them out and washed every item in a large black pot of boiling lye and water, dried them quickly, carefully, and returned them, sparkling, under her bed.

Our greatest excitement occurred when a fire gutted the large Chinese Presbyterian Church, three blocks from our house. Over the still-smoking ruins the next day, Grandmama and I rushed precariously over the blackened beams to pick out the stained glass that glittered in the sunlight. Small figure bent over, wrapped against the autumn cold in a dark blue quilted coat, happily gathering each piece like gold, she became my spiritual playmate: "There's a good one! *There!*"

Hours later, soot-covered and smelling of smoke, we came home with a Safeway carton full of delicate fragments, still early enough to steal them all into the house and put the small box under her bed. "These are special pieces," she said, giving the box a last push, "because they come from a sacred place." She slowly got up and I saw, for the first time, her hand begin to shake. But then, in her joy, she embraced me. Both of our hearts were racing, as if we were two dreamers. I buried my face in her blue quilt, and for a moment, the whole world seemed silent.

"My juggler," she said, "he never came back to me from Honan ... perhaps the famine" Her voice began to quake. "But I shall have my sacred wind chime ... I shall have it again."

One evening, when the family was gathered in their usual places in the parlour, Grandmama gave me her secret nod: a slight wink of her eye and a flaring of her nostrils. There was *trouble* in the air. Supper had gone badly, school examinations were due, father had failed to meet an editorial deadline at the *Vancouver Chinese Times*. A huge sigh came from Sister Liang.

"But it is useless this Chinese they teach you!" she lamented, turning to Stepmother for support. Silence. Liang frowned, dejected, and went back to her Chinese book, bending the covers back.

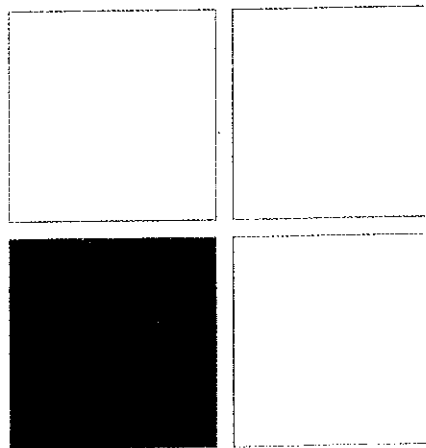
"Father," Oldest Brother Kiam began, waving his bamboo brush in the air, "you must realize that this Mandarin only confuses us. We are Cantonese speakers ..."

"And you do not complain about Latin, French, or German in your English school?" Father rattled his newspaper, signal that his patience was ending.

"But, Father, those languages are *scientific*," Kiam jabbed his brush in the air. "We are now in a scientific, logical world."

Father was silent. We could all hear Grandmama's rocker.

"What about Sek-Lung?" Older Brother Jung pointed angrily at me. "He



was sick last year, but this year he should have at least started Chinese school, instead of picking over garbage cans!"

"He starts next year," Father said, in a hard tone that immediately warned everyone to be silent. Liang slammed her book.

Grandmama went on rocking quietly in her chair. She complimented my mother on her knitting, made a remark about the "strong beauty" of Kiam's brushstrokes which, in spite of himself, immensely pleased him. All this babbling noise was her family torn and confused in a strange land: everything here was so very foreign and scientific.

The truth was, I was sorry not to have started school the year before. In my innocence I had imagined going to school meant certain privileges worthy of all my brothers' and sister's complaints. The fact that my lung infection in my fifth and sixth years, mistakenly diagnosed as TB, earned me some reprieve, only made me long for school the more. Each member of the family took turns on Sunday, teaching me or annoying me. But it was the countless hours I spent with Grandmama that were my real education. Tapping me on my head she would say, "Come, Sek-Lung, we have *our* work," and we would walk up the stairs to her small crowded room. There, in the midst of her antique shawls, the old ancestral calligraphy, and multi-coloured embroidered hangings, beneath the mysterious shelves of sweet herbs and bitter potions, we would continue doing what we had started that morning: the elaborate wind chime for her death.

"I can't last forever," she declared, when she let me in on the secret of this one. "It will sing and dance and glitter," her long fingers stretched into the air, pantomiming the waving motion of her ghost chimes; "My spirit will hear its sounds and see its light and return to this house and say good-bye to you."

Deftly she reached into the Safeway carton she had placed on the chair beside me. She picked out a fish-shape amber piece, and with a long needle-like tool and a steel ruler, she scored it. Pressing the blade of a cleaver against the line, with the fingers of her other hand, she lifted up the glass until it cleanly snapped into the exact shape she required. Her hand began to tremble, the tips of her fingers to shiver, like rippling water.

"You see that, Little One?" She held her hand up. "That is my body fighting with Death. He is in this room now."

My eyes darted in panic, but Grandmama remained calm, undisturbed, and went on with her work. Then I remembered the glue and uncorked the jar for her. Soon the graceful ritual movements of her hand returned to her, and I became lost in the magic of her task: she dabbed a cabalistic mixture of glue on one end and skillfully dropped the braided end of a silk thread into it. This part always amazed me: the braiding would slowly, *very* slowly, *unknot*, fanning out like a prized fishtail. In a few seconds the clear, home-

made glue began to harden as I blew lightly over it, welding to itself each separate silk strand.

Each jam-sized pot of glue was precious; each large cork had been wrapped with a fragment of pink silk. I remember this part vividly, because each cork was treated to a special rite. First we went shopping in the best silk stores in Chinatown for the perfect square of silk she required. It had to be a deep pink, a shade of colour blushing toward red. And the tone had to match—as closely as possible—her precious jade carving, the small peony of white and light-red jade, her most lucky possession. In the centre of this semi-translucent carving, no more than an inch wide, was a pool of pink light, its veins swirling out into the petals of the flower.

"This colour is the colour of my spirit," she said, holding it up to the window so I could see the delicate pastel against the broad strokes of sunlight. She dropped her voice, and I held my breath at the wonder of the colour. "This was given to me by the young actor who taught me how to juggle. He had four of them, and each one had a centre of this rare colour, the colour of Good Fortune." The pendant seemed to pulse as she turned it: "Oh, Sek-Lung! He had white hair and white skin to *his toes!* *It's true, I saw him bathing.*" She laughed and blushed, her eyes softened at the memory. The silk had to match the pink heart of her pendant: the colour was magical for her, to hold the unravelling strands of her memory ...

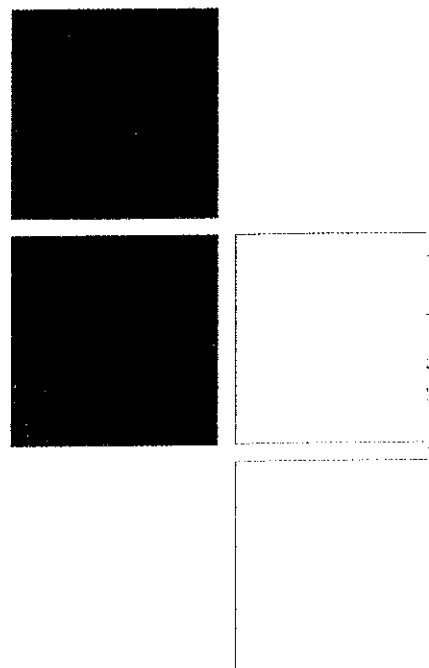
It was just six months before she died that we really began to work on her wind chime. Three thin bamboo sticks were steamed and bent into circles; thirty exact lengths of silk thread, the strongest kind, were cut and braided at both ends and glued to stained glass. Her hands worked on their own command, each hand racing with a life of its own: cutting, snapping, braiding, knotting Sometimes she breathed heavily and her small body, growing thinner, sagged against me. *Death, I thought, He is in this room,* and I would work harder alongside her. For months Grandmama and I did this every other evening, a half-dozen pieces each time. The shaking in her hand grew worse, but we said nothing. Finally, after discarding hundreds, she told me she had the necessary thirty pieces.

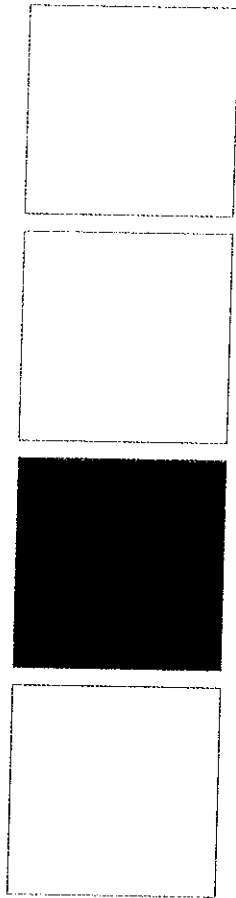
But this time, because it was a sacred chime, I would not be permitted to help her tie it up or have the joy of raising it. "Once tied," she said, holding me against my disappointment, "not even I can raise it. Not a sound must it make until I have died."

"What will happen?"

"Your father will then take the centre braided strand and raise it. He will hang it against my bedroom window so that my ghost may see it, and hear it, and return. I must say goodbye to this world properly or wander in this foreign devil's land forever."

"You can take the streetcar!" I blurted, suddenly shocked that she actually





meant to leave me. I thought I could hear the clear chromatic chimes, see the shimmering colours on the wall: I fell against her and cried, and there in my crying I knew that she would die. I can still remember the touch of her hand on my head, and the smell of her thick woollen sweater pressed against my face. "I will always be with you, Little Sek-Lung, but in a different way ... you'll see."

Months went by, and nothing happened. Then one late September evening, when I had just come home from Chinese School, Grandmama was preparing supper when she looked out our kitchen window and saw a cat—a long, lean, white cat—jump into our garbage pail and knock it over. She ran out to chase it away, shouting curses at it. She did not have her thick sweater on and when she came back into the house, a chill gripped her. She leaned against the door: "That was not a cat," she said, and the odd tone of her voice caused my father to look with alarm at her. "I cannot take back my curses. It is too late." She took hold of my father's arm: "It was all white and had pink eyes like sacred fire."

My father started at this, and they both looked pale. My brothers and sister, clearing the table, froze in their gestures.

"The fog has confused you," Stepmother said. "It was just a cat."

But Grandmama shook her head, for she knew it was a sign. "I will not live forever," she said. "I am prepared."

The next morning she was confined to her bed with a severe cold. Sitting by her, playing with some of my toys, I asked her about the cat.

"Why did father jump at the cat with the pink eyes? He didn't see it, you did."

"But he and your mother know what it means."

"What?"

"My friend, the juggler, the magician, was as pale as white jade, and he had pink eyes." I thought she would begin to tell me one of her stories, a tale of enchantment or of a wondrous adventure, but she only paused to swallow; her eyes glittered, lost in memory. She took my hand, gently opening and closing her fingers over it. "Sek-Lung," she sighed, "he has come back to me."

Then Grandmama sank back into her pillow and the embroidered flowers lifted to frame her wrinkled face. I saw her hand over my own, and my own began to tremble. I fell fitfully asleep by her side. When I woke up it was dark and her bed was empty. She had been taken to the hospital and I was not permitted to visit.

A few days after that she died of the complications of pneumonia. Immediately after her death my father came home and said nothing to us, but walked up the stairs to her room, pulled aside the drawn lace curtains of her window, and lifted the wind chimes to the sky.

I began to cry and quickly put my hand in my pocket for a handkerchief. Instead, caught between my fingers, was the small, round firmness of the jade peony. In my mind's eye I saw Grandmama smile and heard, softly, the pink centre beat like a beautiful, cramped heart. ■

Activities

1. Assign a character in the family to each member in a small group. After each person has reviewed his or her character's role in the story, and is clear on his or her point of view, role-play a conversation the family might have had after the grandmother's death. (Don't forget that only the young child/narrator knows how his grandmother felt about the wind chimes.)
2. Pretend you are the father in the story. Write an obituary for your mother that will be published in the *Vancouver Chinese Times*. Make sure you use details from the story to summarize the main points of her life, her achievements, her dreams, and why she will be missed. You might want to look at some obituaries in your local newspaper for format.
3. What do the wind chimes symbolize for the grandmother, the parents, the young child? In an expository essay, explain how the wind chimes represent different things to different characters in the story. Develop an effective introduction and conclusion for your essay. Work on incorporating transition words and sentences to create unity.
4. Use details from the story to write the instructions for making a wind chime. If possible, try to make your own version of the wind chime.

*When someone you
don't know does a
kind thing that ends
up changing your
life, perhaps it's
enough to just say...*

Thank You Ma'am

Short Story by Langston Hughes

She was a large woman with a large purse that had everything in it but a hammer and nails. It had a long strap, and she carried it slung across her shoulder. It was about eleven o'clock at night, dark, and she was walking alone, when a boy ran up behind her and tried to snatch her purse. The strap broke with the sudden single tug the boy gave it from behind. But the boy's weight and the weight of the purse combined caused him to lose his balance. Instead of taking off full blast as he had hoped, the boy fell on his back on the sidewalk and his legs flew up. The large woman simply turned around and kicked him right square in his blue-jeaned sitter. Then she reached down, picked the boy up by his shirt front, and shook him until his teeth rattled.

After that the woman said, "Pick up my pocketbook, boy, and give it here."

She still held him tightly. But she bent down enough to permit him to stoop and pick up her purse. Then she said, "Now ain't you ashamed of yourself?"

Firmly gripped by his shirt front, the boy said, "Yes'm."

The woman said, "What did you want to do it for?"

The boy said, "I didn't aim to."

She said, "You a lie!"

By that time two or three people passed, stopped, turned to look, and some stood watching.

GOALS AT A GLANCE

- Write a thank-you letter.
- Analyse paragraph structure.

"If I turn you loose, will you run?" asked the woman.

"Yes'm," said the boy.

"Then I won't turn you loose," said the woman. She did not release him.

"Lady, I'm sorry," whispered the boy.

"Um-hmm! Your face is dirty. I got a great mind to wash your face for you. Ain't you got nobody home to tell you to wash your face?"

"No'm," said the boy.

"Then it will get washed this evening," said the large woman, starting up the street, dragging the frightened boy behind her.



He looked as if he were fourteen or fifteen, frail and willow-wild, in tennis shoes and blue jeans.

The woman said, "You ought to be my son. I would teach you right from wrong. Least I can do right now is to wash your face. Are you hungry?"

"No'm," said the being-dragged boy. "I just want you to turn me loose."

"Was I bothering you when I turned that corner?" asked the woman.

"No'm."

"But you put yourself in contact with *me*," said the woman. "If you think that that contact is not going to last awhile, you got another thought coming. When I get through with you, sir, you are going to remember Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones."

Sweat popped out on the boy's face and he began to struggle. Mrs. Jones stopped, jerked him around in front of her, put a half nelson about his neck, and continued to drag him up the street. When she got to her door, she dragged the boy inside, down a hall, and into a large kitchenette-furnished room at the rear of the house. She switched on the light and left the door open. The boy could hear other roomers laughing and talking in the large house. Some of their doors were open, too, so he knew he and the woman were not alone. The woman still had him by the neck in the middle of her room.

She said, "What is your name?"

"Roger," answered the boy.

"Then, Roger, you go to that sink and wash your face," said the woman, whereupon she turned him loose—at last. Roger looked at the door—looked at the woman—looked at the door—and *went to the sink*.

"Let the water run until it gets warm," she said. "Here's a clean towel."

"You gonna take me to jail?" asked the boy, bending over the sink.

"Not with that face, I would not take you nowhere," said the woman. "Here I am trying to get home to cook me a bite to eat, and you snatch my pocketbook! Maybe you ain't been to your supper either, late as it be. Have you?"

"There's nobody home at my house," said the boy.

"Then we'll eat," said the woman. "I believe you're hungry—or been hungry—to try to snatch my pocketbook!"

"I want a pair of blue suede shoes," said the boy.

"Well, you didn't have to snatch *my* pocketbook to get some suede shoes," said Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones. "You could of asked me."

"Ma'am?"

The water dripping from his face, the boy looked at her. There was a long pause. A very long pause. After he had dried his face, and not knowing what else to do, dried it again, the boy turned around, wondering what next. The door was open. He could make a dash for it down the hall. He could run, run, run, *run!*

The woman was sitting on the daybed. After a while she said, "I were young once and I wanted things I could not get."

There was another long pause. The boy's mouth opened. Then he frowned, not knowing he frowned.

The woman said, "Um-hum! You thought I was going to say *but*, didn't you? You thought I was going to say, *but I didn't snatch people's pocket-books*. Well, I wasn't going to say that." Pause. Silence. "I have done things, too, which I would not tell you, son—neither tell God, if He didn't already know. Everybody's got something in common. So you set down while I fix us something to eat. You might run that comb through your hair so you will look presentable."

In another corner of the room behind a screen was a gas plate and an icebox. Mrs. Jones got up and went behind the screen. The woman did not watch the boy to see if he was going to run now, nor did she watch her purse, which she left behind her on the daybed. But the boy took care to sit on the far side of the room, away from the purse, where he thought she could easily see him out of the corner of her eye if she wanted to. He did not trust the woman *not* to trust him. And he did not want to be mistrusted now.

"Do you need somebody to go to the store," asked the boy, "maybe to get some milk or something?"

"Don't believe I do," said the woman, "unless you just want sweet milk yourself. I was going to make cocoa out of this canned milk I got here."

"That will be fine," said the boy.

She heated some lima beans and ham she had in the icebox, made the cocoa, and set the table. The woman did not ask the boy anything about where he lived, or his folks, or anything else that would embarrass him. Instead, as they ate, she told him about her job in a hotel beauty shop that stayed open late, what the work was like, and how all kinds of women came in and out, blondes, redheads, and Spanish. Then she cut him a half of her ten-cent cake.

"Eat some more, son," she said.

When they were finished eating, she got up and said, "Now here, take this ten dollars and buy yourself some blue suede shoes. And next time, do not make the mistake of latching onto *my* pocketbook *nor nobody else's*—because shoes got by devilish ways will burn your feet. I got to get my rest now. But from here on in, son, I hope you will behave yourself."

She led him down the hall to the front door and opened it. "Good night! Behave yourself, boy!" she said, looking out into the street as he went down the steps.

The boy wanted to say something other than "Thank you, ma'am," to Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones, but although his lips moved, he couldn't even say that as he turned at the foot of the barren stoop and looked at the large woman in the door. Then she shut the door. ♦

What do you think?

Sometimes turning points happen when we least expect them.

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1

2

3

4

5

DONING TIME

Short Story by Christine Harris

VOCABULARY

cricket: a team sport played with a ball and bat

paddock: a field or meadow, usually on a farm

sniggers: snickers; disrespectful laughter

Vocabulary Tip

Sports and hobbies may use specialized terms or jargon. It sometimes helps to search online for jargon when a selection contains terms you are unfamiliar with.

One wheel clips the door and Sebastian jerks sideways, his head bouncing a little. This thing's worse than a supermarket trolley.

"Thanks. I can manage now," he says.

Fine. I stand back. I don't want to spend my afternoon pushing him around.

"I have to go to the toilet first." He turns his head to look at me over his shoulder.

I flinch. "I don't do toilets."

Sebastian half-smiles. "Who's asking?"

He pushes himself over to the wide door across the foyer.

Arms folded, I wait, wishing I was anywhere else but here. With two hands, I smooth back my hair. When my fringe flops down onto my face, it makes me look younger.

I sigh. This is not how I want to spend a Saturday afternoon.

I hate sports.

Cricket? It takes days to finish one game. If you can make yourself stick it out to the bitter end, you'd be smart to take a tent and a trailer-load of food.

And playing is even worse, especially when you're batting. It's like waiting for a cannonball to rearrange your face, your fingers, or something more painful.

Totally uncool to roll around on the grass, curled up like a caterpillar, wondering if you'll ever be able to walk again.

Rugby? There's no fun in a bunch of meatheads tackling each other in the mud, unless you're into dirt and pain. Football? The shorts are so tight that if you make the mistake of bending over, you walk off in two halves. Table tennis? What's the point in tapping a puny lump of white plastic across a table for hours? In my one go at table tennis I was wiped out by a snotty-nosed kid half my size. Lucky for him a table tennis bat doesn't do much damage.

Then there's ten-pin bowling. The shoes are so dorky, and you don't know who's been wearing them or what's festering on their feet. And the stupid balls are so heavy that your arms are longer each time you come out of there. I cringe as I remember swinging my arm and dropping the ball with a loud *crack*. It rolled backward at the speed of light. Wide-eyed people jumped left and right, except for the blonde in the stretch jeans with the loud voice. The bowling ball trundled over her left foot. And she wasn't happy, I can tell you.

Sports? No way. I shudder at the thought.

Finally Sebastian returns and I follow him outside, trotting behind like a puppy dog. His sneaker-clad feet are awfully small. The back of his red Mambo T-shirt has a picture of a devil with horns. Yeah. Right. If he's a devil, then I'm the pope.

We move onto the oval, where a group of kids and three adults in tracksuits are gathered on the grass.

There are two metal chairs, like highchairs, with blue nylon straps pegged to the ground.

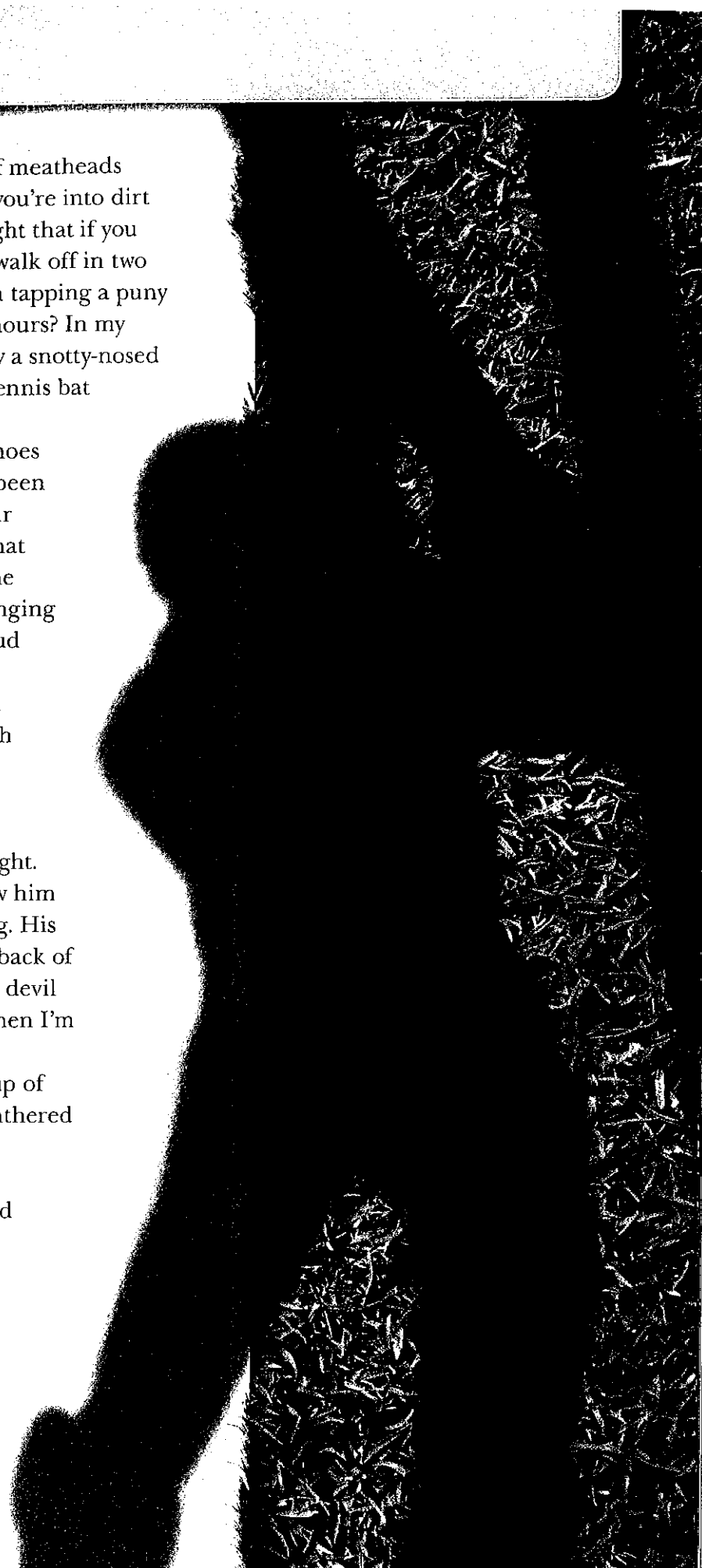
"Sebastian," calls a woman in a tracksuit—must be the coach because she's dishing out equipment and instructions like there's no tomorrow.

"That's us," he says to me.

"That's you, you mean."

He looks sideways. "You're helping, aren't you?"

I shrug.



The coach holds a silver ball in her right hand.
 “Two k, Seb?”

He nods and wheels himself over to the funny-looking chair. Pushing himself up with his hands, he tries to get out of his wheelchair and onto the higher metal one and fails.

Am I supposed to lift him or leave him?

With a grunt, he tries again and heaves his body upward: made it.

The coach eyeballs me. “Here ... er ... ”

“Joel.”

“Joel,” repeats the coach, “hold this for a second, will you?”

Abruptly, she hands me the ball and it almost rips my arms from their sockets. “Ow.” I quickly check if anyone is watching, but they’re not.

“How much does this thing weigh?”

They both grin as she straps his legs into place. “That shotput’s only two kilograms, isn’t it Sebastian?”

Only?

She takes it from me and hands it to Sebastian. He leans back, his left hand gripping a metal bar, and one ... two ... three ... he hurls the silver ball into the air.

It lands with a dull thud.

I make like a tree and stand still; silent. There’s no way I could throw a shotput that far. But I’m not going to tell them that.

The coach goes over to retrieve the shotput.

“What’d you do, anyway?” Sebastian asks me.

“I hit someone.” I make my voice sound hard so he won’t ask any more stupid questions. “With a cricket bat.”

He doesn’t take the hint. “Why?”

“Because I couldn’t find a shotput,” I smirk.

Looking down at him, I feel too tall, almost gigantic. His brown eyes are friendly, curious.

“I don’t do conversation,” I say, shutting the door on further revelations.

“That was a good shot, Sebastian.” A girl with braces pushes herself up close. Her wheelchair is psycho with colour; looks like she whizzed through a paint shop. Then she pushes off to peer at a peacock-blue chair, then a red one. What does she think this is, a chairmart?

If Sebastian can ask nosy questions about my community service hours, I can ask him something. "What's the matter with you anyway?"

He looks at me sideways. "Don't worry, nothing contagious."

I squat beside him so he can see I'm not scared of germs. Besides, I feel guilty towering over him on my legs.

"I've got spina bifida." He sees that I haven't got a clue what he's on about. "My brain doesn't give messages to my legs, so they don't work."

A little way off, the coach is waylaid by a kid complaining about a javelin. "It's a boomerang. The thing's so bent it comes back by itself. It bends if you look at it."

In a soft voice, the coach shows the kid how to hold it properly. "It'll stick in your hand if you grip it like that. Why don't you get out in the paddock at home and practise with a broomstick?"

A fair-haired woman, probably his mother, yells out, "He's got a javelin. It's under his bed."

With a laugh, the coach pats his shoulder. "Is that where you keep your shotput?"

The kid laughs; the mother laughs; the coach laughs. I yawn. I look at Sebastian, perched precariously on the metal chair, then at some of the other kids. "You ever fall out of your wheelchair?"

He nods. "Sometimes."

"Backward or forward?"

"Backward, forward, and sideways."

His eyes are alight with amusement, whether at himself or me, I'm not sure.

"How can you fall sideways?"

"Some kids at school pressed the buttons on my wheels."

I look at the wheels on his vacant chair—can't see anything special. "Is that the brake?"

He shakes his head. "No. If you press the button in the middle, the wheel comes off. So you can put the chair in the car. These kids pressed the button and I didn't know. When I tried to move my chair, the wheel fell off, and so did I."

Indignant on his behalf, I think how humiliating it would be to crash in a heap like that, especially if you couldn't get back up again without help.

"Did you get those kids back?"

“Nah. They’re my friends. And once I was doing an obstacle race at the junior games and I hit a piece of wood and went for a six. Got a beaut egg on the back of my head.”

This I can’t work out. “Why do you keep doing this then?”

Without looking at me, his voice steady, he says, “I want to win.”

There is a small silence between us.

“But you can’t always win,” I say. “What if you mess up?”

“I have another go,” he answers with a shrug.

At last the coach returns with the heavy shotput and Sebastian chucks it a second time. It goes a little farther.

“Don’t you want it?” the coach jokes. “Every time I give it to you, you throw it away.”

Her sense of humour is really bad. I don’t know if Sebastian laughs because he thinks it’s funny or because he feels sorry for her.

I pluck at a blade of grass. “Are you any good at this stuff?”

“I’ve got six medals. I eat vegetables, so I’m fairly strong.”

Medals? What use are they? You wouldn’t get much for them. Also, I hate vegetables, and tell him so.

“Me too, but I meant that I can eat vegetables.” He nods toward the other kids. “Some of them can’t swallow properly.”

For a second, I feel really stupid.

“You’re lucky, you know,” he says.

For a moment, I assume he means about my legs.

Then he adds, “I read about someone who had to do community service in a chicken factory. He plucked feathers from an eagle at a zoo. The judge said if he liked feathers so much, he could have all he wanted.”

I suppose a month helping out at wheelchair sports is better than doing time in a chicken factory. Actually, I didn’t really hurt the guy I thumped—only his pride. He’d had bruises before, much worse than the one I gave him. And he’d started it. Giving me heaps like that, especially in front of Jane-Marie Yates. The sound of her sniggers lit a fire inside me that only went out with the sound of wood connecting with his skull.

Sebastian’s cough brings me back to the present.

"You want a rug or anything?" I ask, wondering if he feels the cold. "A drink or ... ?"

He turns his eyes on me, and says in a good-natured way, "Chill out."

My mouth falls open.

"Don't pamper me. I'm not a poodle. It reminds me that I'm in a wheelchair ... "

How could he forget he's in a wheelchair?

"Anyway ... being polite doesn't suit you. Just be normal."

Ha. If I was being "normal" I wouldn't be here. I'd be down at the mall, checking out babes.

"Good on ya, Tony!" The whole bunch clap and shout as the tape measure comes out and a boy with thick glasses grins like his face will split in half.

"He's a new kid," says Sebastian and without pausing, adds, "want a ride?"

Astonished, I blink. "In the chair?"

Sebastian nods. "It'll cost you though."

"What?"

"Five dollars."

As if I'd pay some guy to slip into his warm chair for a burn around the oval.

Sebastian says, "When I was in primary school, I got heaps of money from the others. Then the teacher made me stop because kids were losing their bus money."

I shake my head. "I don't do chairs."

What if someone saw me? I have a reputation to worry about.

But I guess there would be some benefits to a wheelchair. You could get away with a lot. People would feel sorry for you—and you wouldn't get a judge giving you dumb community service.

"You ever walked?" I ask.

"Sometimes I dream about it." He shrugs just once, his face a mixture of puzzlement and yearning. "I can't feel it, though. It's like a movie, only I can see myself. I just wish I could feel it. You tell me, what's it like to be an upright?"

I'd been calling him a wheelie in my head, but it gives me a start when he calls me an upright. It makes me sound like a hairy shuffling animal that's escaped from a science lab. What's it like to walk? I find I can't describe it. It's just something you do. You never think about it.

"It feels ... tall." I'm not satisfied with my answer but it's all I can think of.

He nods as though I've said something really profound.

I shift uncomfortably, then sit on the grass, hoping I won't get green stains on my new jeans.

A breeze rushes across the oval. I brush back my hair. "How about javelin now?" asks the coach.

So that the kid with the thick glasses can use the special chair, Sebastian struggles back into his wheelchair. It's easier going down than up.

He points to the javelin and I pick it up for him. He tests the weight in his right hand and grips it near the centre. "You can't look at the ground, or it falls short. You have to look up at the sky and imagine the javelin flying over the top of the trees."

Sebastian's face is full of concentration. Is he imagining the javelin, or himself, flying over the trees?

One ... two ... three.

With a sudden swing of his arm, he hurls the javelin. Up, up it flies toward the sky, then arcs down and the tip stabs the earth, wobbling a few times before it's still.

Way longer than all the other throws, it's a ripper.

"Yay." I start to clap, then falter, embarrassed at my show of enthusiasm.

I feel my face go red and I try to look bored. But still, a little knot of excitement stays in my stomach. That javelin flew like a bird.

"Well, you going to get it for me, or what?" We exchange glances and I know he's trying to distract me from my awkwardness.

I fetch the javelin, feeling its sleekness in my hand.

"Have a go," he says.

"No ... " I want to say more but can't.

"Go on."

All these people here—what if I look stupid?

I shake my head. "I'll mess up. I always do."

Sebastian, chin resting on one hand, looks up at me from his wheelchair. "So?"

He's got a bung back; he's on wheels; he has to chat up girls from a sitting position—but I'm the one that feels clumsy.

Sebastian's brown eyes dare me to try. I remember how I felt watching his throw.

"Did it hurt when you fell out of your chair in the obstacle race?" I ask.

"Like hell." Sebastian faces the oval. "But I don't care too much if I fall over. The crowd's going to be cheering when I win. Now, you aim for that tree over there." He points to a huge gum tree on the far side.

"Oh sure." I roll my eyes but I don't put down the javelin.

I aim for the sky just above the tree and hurl the javelin with all my strength. It barely gets any air under it and, instead of soaring majestically upward, skims over the ground and flops.

"You looked at the ground," says Sebastian.

Hands on hips, I glare at him. "Did not. I looked at the top of the tree, like you said."

He laughs at me, and I don't mind, which surprises me. His chuckles are kind of friendly.

"First time I threw a javelin I forgot to look behind and when I drew my arm back, I hit a kid on the head. Lucky it only grazed him. Gave him a fright, though. Don't worry. You'll get better with practice."

An image of a bowling ball rolling backward flashes through my mind.

I avoid his eyes so I don't start laughing, too. "I don't do practice," I say.

But this time I don't really mean it.

eBook

Responding

What do you think about? Sometimes a reader points things out when we did not expect them. How do you respond to this reader? How do you think you would do in the story?

Understand the Story. Which story do you think is the most effective in "Doing Time"? Support your answer with examples from the story.

Making Inferences. Based on how Joel behaves, what can you infer about his past experiences?

Write like a Reader. What does "back to the future" mean to you? Write an author's chair and address it to the young author.

Reading like a Writer. Read the first two paragraphs of "Doing Time" aloud. How do the characters' voices sound? Which voice do you like best?

Metacognition. The story is an Australian word written by an Australian writer. How do you think the vocabulary is difficult to understand? How do you overcome this challenge?

What do you think?

How can talking to someone new change your life?

ISABELLE

Short Story by Beverley Terrell-Deutsch

He watched her from across the hall, as he had done every day in school for the past three months. To him, she was perfect.

He could hear her voice, even when she wasn't talking. He knew every gesture, every tiny habit,
 like the way she rolled up the corners of her notebook when she was thinking,
 like the way she sat with left foot over right.

Yet, they had never spoken. Of course, he had tried, but
 how do you talk to an angel?

And so, after yet another sleepless night planning to the last syllable what he would say, and how he would stand, and what he would do with his stupid, awkward hands, he had determined that today would be THE DAY. Today, he *must* speak to Isabelle. It was now or never.

His heart was pounding and his feet felt glued to the floor as he started toward Isabelle's locker.

He had come early
to make sure he didn't miss her,
and fifteen times already,
once for each year of his life,
he had barely stifled the urge to turn and
run
away.

The sun shone out of a deep blue sky through
the tall windows.
It shimmered on the floor like liquid gold.
His shadow stretched weirdly across the hall
and bent vertically up the wall—
a dark head rolling along,
a head without a body.

He shivered. Maybe this was an omen,
like in that book they were studying,
a bad omen that he should pay attention to.
Run. Run. Run, while you still have time.
But he didn't. His face was set, determined.
He was a warrior, bravely facing battle.
He was a knight, ready to slay a dragon....
There she was. Isabelle. Fiddling with her lock.

In the stillness, he heard it snap open.
His heart was a giant lump in his throat.
He could not breathe.
But his feet defied the fear, and, step by step,
brought him ever closer.

Just the two of them in the whole empty hallway.
Just the two of them in the whole empty world.

She glanced up at him and then away.
No sign of welcome,
or even recognition.

Her thoughts were someplace else ...
inside her locker,
inside her tidy homework,
inside the day ahead that did
NOT include him.

He was almost level with her now.
Should he speak?
Yes, say something!
Or, should he play it safe and walk on by?
Keep walking; she doesn't even know your name.

Ultimately, his feet made up his mind for him.
They ... kept ... walking....
The moment was gone. His opportunity lost.
His plans laid waste.

He felt the universe crumbling
mercilessly around him,
burying him in an agony of regret.

And then, the unbelievable happened.
That voice!
He heard that voice, the one he knew so well,
calling to *him* ... "Simon, ... wait up ..."

Extra

What Do You Think Now? How can talking to someone new change your life? How would Simon answer this question?

Analyzing Short Stories: Compare and contrast this story with other stories in this unit.

Making Inferences: Why doesn't Simon speak to Isabelle? Support your answer.

Critical Thinking: What is the turning point in this story?

Reading Like a Writer: The author has used word choice effectively in this story to develop character. Explain why you agree or disagree with this statement.

Metacognition: How does the arrangement of words affect your understanding and response to this story?