

Jane

a short story by THERESA WILLIAMS



WENDY STONE

January — bone-brittle cold.

Another year has gone by, one of many in which I did not get a Christmas card or any kind of howdy-do from Jane.

We have been through a lot together, Jane and me. But Jane is not at all good about answering letters. She did not even write back when I told her my father died last year.

I was my father's light, and he was always so proud of me. When I was little, he and I would lie in bed and count until the numbers were so large they could no longer fit in our heads. We recited poems about dark birds and made up songs about our heroic, badass tomcat slipping through the sun and rain. We would sing, "He is great / Like a snake / Waiting for his prey." And my father would sing to me, "Little Nora, / Little Nora, / Oh, what a pretty girls her is," the bad grammar making the song all the more precious.

Now my father is a silver memory that tarnishes with handling. I can hardly believe Jane did not write to me after his death.

She also did not write after I had my hysterectomy in July.

I teach part time at colleges in Ohio, three in all, some-

times eight or nine classes a semester just to make ends meet. I buy my clothes once or twice removed at the Goodwill. Who can afford new clothes when a good pair of wool pants with lining is more than a hundred dollars at the mall? It is just too sad, going to the mall: the fake plants, the crowds all eating chicken sandwiches, the flash and glitz of sparkling glass and recessed lighting and Christmas lights even when it is not Christmas. I am afraid of the clerks, all whispery when they ask, "Can I help you?" a cloud of perfume around them like a fortress.

I think sometimes — almost every day that I get dressed for work, in fact — about a woman who taught English part time at East Carolina University when I was taking classes there. She wore a rubber band around one shoe to keep the sole from flapping. At the time I wondered what the hell was the matter with her, a university teacher, for God's sake, dressed like that. Now I virtually am that woman.

I once thought that excellence and knowledge and expertise were all you needed to succeed and be loved and respected in life. I never guessed that they would not even buy you good clothes. That teacher at ECU was about the same age I

am now: almost forty-seven, which for a man is young, but for a woman, well, you know the story.

Even my mother says it. She said it when she called last night from Jacksonville, North Carolina, where she has lived all her life, talking of this and that, asking me if I thought Senator John Edwards, a fellow North Carolinian, would make it to the presidency. He is so young, she said — only forty-nine! She is half in love with the handsome young senator, I can tell. She said he has “it,” the magic. Like Kennedy. “At the very least,” she said, “he has to be better than Bush.” At least Edwards has a *real* education, she said.

Education is very important to my mother because she didn't get much of one. She is proud of me for having gotten an education, which is what she is striving to get across when she talks about John Edwards.

I love my mother.

Back when I was an undergraduate, I thought education would give me a place to hide. I would teach and write great novels. I was encouraged in this belief by some small successes: two publications in the campus literary magazine and about three hundred dollars in prize money. I also received encouraging letters from a big editor at a small magazine and a small editor at a big magazine. And I had gotten a personal response from *Vanity Fair*.

Nobody tells you how tiny these victories are.

Now I am too tired to write. My head is so full of the black gunk I allow to pour through my eyes at work that I no longer think in metaphors. There is only the five-paragraph structure with proper transitions, arguments, and counterarguments, student prose that twists on the page like venomous snakes. Let's say I teach seven classes, though oftentimes I teach more. That is five five-page papers per student, times twenty-five students per class, times seven classes. Each student also revises all five papers at least twice. That is well over ten thousand pages of psychological death I must expose myself to every sixteen weeks.

Still, I manage to write to Jane once in a while. You would think she could find time to write me back. She does not have an outside job. She has her marriage to Bart, a logger for Weyerhaeuser, and her church: that is all. I know being a housewife is challenging. I know she does not sit around all day twiddling her thumbs. But give me a break.

I will grant that Jane and I have grown apart. But if she would write more often, we could salvage what we once had. If she would write more and lengthier letters, I could tell her more than “I had a hysterectomy. It went well. I am fine.” If our relationship were better, I could tell Jane that I feel maimed and dead, that when I touch myself I do not feel anything anymore.

I would like to tell Jane that I still hear from Sharon, our friend who moved to Georgia in sixth grade. Sharon sends me a letter at Christmas, and we write a couple of times a year. I would like to write to Jane: “Amazing, isn't it, that even though Sharon is a high-school English teacher and also in charge of the school yearbook, and even though she has three sons and no husband, just a worthless ex, she still manages to write?”

But that would be too mean. And too pitiful.

Sharon was the girl Jane and I thought would live a golden life because she had both brains and looks. Instead she divorced her first husband, Nick, because he was too immature. He could not keep a job and crashed the little Volkswagen her parents had bought for her in college. Then she married Andrew and worked to help him get his master's. After Andrew had gotten his degree and was making a great deal of money, and after Sharon had quit work to have his sons, Andrew cheated on Sharon. He told her he was going golfing.

If our relationship were better, Jane's and mine, I might tell her that Sharon had never stopped loving Nick, and that a few years after Sharon divorced Andrew, Nick found her again. He'd never remarried, and he wooed Sharon all over again, although this time she was cynical about love. Nick treated her sons as if they were his own. He even crammed Sharon and the boys into his car one winter day and drove north until they found snow, just so the boys could play in the snow for the first time in their lives. The very thing that had made Sharon divorce Nick in the first place was what brought them back together: the impulsiveness, the fire, the what-the-hell-let's-go-find-some-snow attitude of this man. I could tell Jane how Sharon planned to remarry Nick, but then he got cancer, which spread to his spine, and Sharon had to watch him slowly die. He died this past July, on her birthday, just about the same time I had my hysterectomy.

“I stay busy, which helps,” Sharon wrote to me. “By the way, how was your hysterectomy?”

You would think that when two people do not write for so long, like Jane and me, they would have a lot to say. But really there is less and less to write about. Before you know it, you are writing things like “How are you? I am fine. I hope you are fine.”

In fourth grade Jane and Sharon and I formed a club: the Horse, Cat, and Squirrel Club. We all loved animals, and each of us had her favorite. Sharon loved horses and collected horse figurines. I loved cats and collected cat figurines. Jane's family could not afford pets, or figurines, so she chose squirrels, because they ran rampant over her shaggy, automobile-strewn yard. With seven other kids in her family, there was no room for collections of any sort. Jane did not care one whit that she could not collect figurines. Her family was the center of her life. The oldest child, she was like a second mother to her brothers and sisters.

One day in fourth grade, Jane and I staged a rebellion. I do not remember why. Out of nowhere we decided we did not like it that the horse came first in the name of our club, and we were tired of galloping and neighing all over the playground at recess. Why were we never allowed to meow or chatter? Also, if one of us got “hurt,” we had to stand on a dirt mound called the Dead White Horse's Grave, and thereupon we would be healed. We were tired of this Dead White Horse game especially. But for some reason we could not simply tell Sharon this. I am quite sure she would have been more than happy to give

cats or squirrels top billing. I think Jane and I knew this even then. Still, direct honesty was not for us. For some reason, we had to act out our disgruntlement in full technicolor drama.

So we took sticks and wrote things like “The Dead White Horse is stupid!” and “Down with the Dead White Horse!” on the dirt mound. One of us subsequently pretended some horsey injury or another, and away we galloped to the mound, letting Sharon get there a little bit ahead. When Sharon read what Jane and I had written, she lifted her pretty head and looked at us with curiosity and grief. As Jane and I laughed and galloped away (why were we still galloping?), Sharon said, “You won’t believe what somebody wrote on the Dead White Horse’s Grave!”

She was so trusting. She is so cynical now. Even more so since Nick died. Nick stormed the castle of her cynicism like a thousand villagers with burning torches. But now Nick is dead, and I do not think Sharon will let her defenses be overrun again.

After the Dead White Horse incident, Sharon stepped quietly out of the picture, and then it was mostly Jane and me. I think we were bound together by our geekiness. In seventh grade, the English teacher noticed us squinting at the chalkboard, and we both had to get glasses. In fact, Jane and I did more than just squint. We pushed down on our eyebrows while squinting or looked through a tiny hole formed with thumb and index finger, like a fleshy monocle. This was too much for the teacher, who sent us both home with notes about our diminished eyesight.

My parents had a decent income and got me glasses at once. They were cat’s-eye glasses — not cheap, but ugly enough to get me teased. I complained about my glasses to anybody who would listen, but secretly I loved them because now I could see individual leaves on the trees instead of just a green blur. With my acute powers of observation, I would sit and write in my notebooks, describing things in minute detail.

Jane’s parents could not afford glasses right away. So, during English class, I would loan Jane my glasses. She would gingerly hold them up to her eyes — not putting them on, because she did not want to stretch them out, she said. She always cleaned my glasses before she gave them back. The symbolism of sharing my glasses, my very eyes, with Jane is not lost on me. The act is every bit as grand a metaphor as the enormous, disembodied eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg in *The Great Gatsby*, which Jane and I were reading in our accelerated English class that year. Maybe it was T.J. Eckleburg’s all-seeing eyes, along with my new ability to observe detail, that made me want to write novels in the first place.

I did not like the kind of books that Jane liked: romances in which the women clawed animal-like at the men’s massive chests; books that promised passion and love and a happy ending like a plump red cherry on top. *Give me Fitzgerald any day*, I would think, or Maupassant, whose *Complete Stories* I kept hidden under my bed, reading them after the rest of my family had gone to sleep, because the stories gave me a morbid thrill

that felt forbidden.

Jane eventually got her glasses, through a government program, and they were truly vile: cheap-looking and even uglier than mine. They were generic, which was about the worst thing you could be in junior high. But then, Jane’s glasses would not have made her popular even if they’d been made of diamonds and gold. So the difference in our glasses was hardly any difference at all.

Jane and I were both gawky, with too-long arms and hairy legs, since our mothers would not let us shave. The dress code forbade pants, and if we tried to hide our legs with flesh-colored hose, the effect was absurd: all those flattened hairs trailing off in every direction.

Then in high school, our mothers let us shave our legs, we both managed to get wire-framed glasses, and men and boys started to notice us. By that time Jane had her driver’s license, and she was always driving some junker or another that her mechanic father had fixed up.

One night Jane and I were on our way home from a French Club meeting when two marines drove up alongside and ogled us through Jane’s window. Just for fun, Jane beeped her horn, and we threw back our heads and laughed. Freedom from parental restraints had made us giddy and stupid. The marines’ car hurtled forward and then pulled into our lane and slowed down, forcing Jane and me to a crawl. It was funny at first, but then we got scared. The road was suddenly lonesome and dark. We had the curious and spine-tingling feeling of being completely helpless.

The marines played cat-and-mouse with us for some time. I got a good look at one of them. He had on black-rimmed, government-issue glasses with an elastic band that went around his long, white, bald head. That is what the corps did to young men then, shaved their heads, took every part of their identity, especially their hair. Maybe the corps still does this, but it seems to me the men packing their bags to go fight terrorism have longer hair.

Anyway, the marine who was playing cat-and-mouse with Jane and me looked like a maggot with glasses. Jane steered carefully, as if trying to drive on a high wire. When we finally turned onto my road, the marines did not follow. Jane and I decided to stick to local boys after that.

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