

JUDGES' COMMENTS: SHORT STORY

Choosing the winners of any contest is a difficult task, especially so when the entries are such a thing as fiction. Did you know that Tennessee Williams failed every playwrighting course he ever took? His professor no doubt has nightmares in his grave. That kind of thing horrifies judges of literature, but should comfort all the writers who were not chosen by this, assuredly illiterate, judge.

But I am not so illiterate that I am incapable of recognizing some of the elements of good fiction. While none of the stories submitted were really finished (but we know stories are never finished, simply abandoned), the three chosen for publication demonstrate some of the elements that make fiction come alive in the readers' imagination.

The first story, *Stranger Aren't Too Common*, employs an interesting literary device that makes a basic and simple story of deep interest for the reader. Writing in the first person demands that the narrator be, at least, an interesting person to listen to. In this case, the person is a child — through hearing the narrator tell the story, the reader is not only informed of the events of the story, but is also privy to the intimate thoughts of the narrator. It worked fairly well in *Strangers*,

which is why the story won first prize.

The second-prize winner, *A Yellow Rose*, won on the merits of content. While the ending is a disappointment, this story is an earnest and thoughtful examination of the psyche of a tortured man. There were many such examinations submitted — this story was chosen because of the dexterity the writer demonstrated in developing the character and situation.

The Real Calgary Stampede, etc., the third prize winner, won because of its originality of style. While many writers worked hard to develop new ways of working with fiction, this story was the most successful attempt. It is readable, funny, and the complexities of style serve the content of the story rather than stopping the reader in his or her tracks.

I had a lot of fun with this contest. Sometimes I sifted, sometimes I tore my hair out, often I laughed out loud. Mostly, I was impressed by the efforts of so many new writers. To the winners, congratulations. To those who did not win, remember Tennessee Williams — and keep writing.

Nora Abercrombie

First Place

Strangers Aren't Too Common

Spit Finlay said it was the dumbest thing he ever heard of. "It's plain she got no sense, or she'd see things," he said. "But don't you pay mind to him, Miss Jacobs. He's just repeating his ma, like he always does. You've probably noticed by now that Spit isn't too good at thinking up his own ideas. It's not your fault you don't know how things are and, coming late in the year like you did, I guess you couldn't give us How I Spent My Summer. Besides being almost Christmas, we did that one for Mrs. Lowe before she went off her bat. Just the same, strangers aren't too common here in the valley.

That's why Spit is writing on you. "In all my born days," he said, just like his ma, only his real old with lots of days behind her. "In all my born days, Miss Jacobs is the only stranger I've seen." I asked him how you ever touched him, but he just looked at me like he did when he saw me in a dress once. Finally he said, "Well, she put her hand on my shoulder yesterday." My pa says I can only help Spit so much, and I can see he's right.

It's a funny topic you gave us, though. Pa said we were likely trying to get to know us, but, if that's your aim, my ask about strangers? I was worried at first that I might have to write on the two Old Crows that came out from Simpson, but I never really met them. And I never heard their names. Everyone just called them the two Old Crows. They came out from Simpson, like I said, in a little blue car with Government of Alberta written up on the side. Pa said later they were from Social Services and had come to check on us on account of my ma being dead. You might not have heard yet that I don't have a ma, but don't go worrying about it, patting me on the head and stuff. She's been gone since I was little and mostly I don't mind much anymore, except that Pa misses her a lot.

It doesn't seem like much of a Service to take children away from their pa's, but Spit's ma told me later that was what the two Old Crows had in mind. So you see, they came real close to touching me bad. They had a few points in their favour, too, according to Spit's ma.

The first was that I was chopping wood when they came. We must be about the only family in the valley without the power, even though our house is full of it. Pa built it before my ma died in winter for it and everything. So you can see that he misses her. I don't have to split wood either. I'm too skinny for it to be a regular chore, and too young, too. So I was just mucking around, chopping up the dry stuff with cracks, when the Old Crows drove in the yard. Pa met them at their car, but I couldn't hear what anyone said. And I didn't want to be caught gawking at them, either, so when they started towards me I turned around real quick to the wood pile. So you can see how it's really their fault I dropped the axe on my foot.

It didn't cut or nothing, but it hurt like old

beejebbers and I guess I did cuss a little. "Jody, you should have had more sense," Spit's ma told me. And I would have, too, if I had known. But the Old Crows were more upset that Pa didn't say anything about my cussing. At least, that's his version. I don't know why Pa should have said anything; he knows how it feels to drop an axe on your foot. Once he chopped clear through his boot, and likely you could have heard him a mile away.

Well, the year I was eight, Spit Finlay told me that Santa was a fake, that he was just some man they got all dressed up. "Then how come don't I know him?" I asked, but Spit said he couldn't understand that part, either. I thought about what Spit said all the time we were playing Flying Dutchman and Blind Man's Buff. Then Ellie Stein called us to the piano and I was still trying to make things out when Pa burst through the door cheering and calling, "Look who's dropped by!" Ellie Stein started to pound out Here Comes Santa Claus on the piano and then he was there, stepping through the fog that swirled in the door, ringing his bells and grunting "Ho, ho, ho."

I watched him like my eyes were glued to him all the time they were setting him in a chair and then Ellie Stein was handing him bags one at a time and whispering the names

bejebbers and I guess I did cuss a little. "Jody, you should have had more sense," Spit's ma told me. And I would have, too, if I had known. But the Old Crows were more upset that Pa didn't say anything about my cussing. At least, that's his version. I don't know why Pa should have said anything; he knows how it feels to drop an axe on your foot. Once he chopped clear through his boot, and likely you could have heard him a mile away.

Well, the year I was eight, Spit Finlay told me that Santa was a fake, that he was just some man they got all dressed up. "Then how come don't I know him?" I asked, but Spit said he couldn't understand that part, either. I thought about what Spit said all the time we were playing Flying Dutchman and Blind Man's Buff. Then Ellie Stein called us to the piano and I was still trying to make things out when Pa burst through the door cheering and calling, "Look who's dropped by!" Ellie Stein started to pound out Here Comes Santa Claus on the piano and then he was there, stepping through the fog that swirled in the door, ringing his bells and grunting "Ho, ho, ho."

I watched him like my eyes were glued to him all the time they were setting him in a chair and then Ellie Stein was handing him bags one at a time and whispering the names

almost tore the skirt off it climbing a tree. So you can see that the Old Crows were strangers and they almost touched me, but I never met them.

It wasn't until yesterday that I knew what to write for you. I was eating some of Mrs. Jim's home-made bread stuck together with Rogers Golden Syrup and peanut butter. The syrup had kind of soaked into the bread real nice like, so I don't need to tell you how much I was enjoying that sandwich, when all of a sudden my nose just sat straight up and turned around. And sure enough, there was Terry Fisher sitting on her big butt as solid as Mount Ida, eating a Christmas orange. She always gets the first Christmas oranges, on account of her pa owning the store. And she was just feeding the pieces past her lips, like she didn't even know what she was eating. Can you believe gives "What's so special about Christmas oranges," she said. Well, I only ever ate one Christmas orange I didn't care about and that's how I knew what to write for you.

You may find this hard to believe, Miss Jacobs, but once I insulted Santa Claus. Of course, that was three years ago and I was only a little kid.

It happened at the hall that's over the valley a ways. I don't know if you've ever been there, but every year the ladies put on a big Christmas Eve party and everyone sings carols and plays games and stuff. About halfway through the party, there's always a Santa that comes and gives all the little kids a brown paper bag full of candy and a Christmas orange.

Well, the year I was eight, Spit Finlay told me that Santa was a fake, that he was just some man they got all dressed up. "Then how come don't I know him?" I asked, but Spit said he couldn't understand that part, either. I thought about what Spit said all the time we were playing Flying Dutchman and Blind Man's Buff. Then Ellie Stein called us to the piano and I was still trying to make things out when Pa burst through the door cheering and calling, "Look who's dropped by!" Ellie Stein started to pound out Here Comes Santa Claus on the piano and then he was there, stepping through the fog that swirled in the door, ringing his bells and grunting "Ho, ho, ho."

I watched him like my eyes were glued to him all the time they were setting him in a chair and then Ellie Stein was handing him bags one at a time and whispering the names

Second Place

A Yellow Rose

Outside my window is a man with burning black eyes, a man wrapped in the little like black eyes plaid. I don't know what those sliced coils of words unspoken — searing by bowels with memories like cancer and I know only his pain which is my pain.

David moves away from the window. In the day he likes sitting in the window-seat, filling his lungs with the blue-green hills and the white-gray-blue sky and the houses clustered around the harbour, but at night there is only darkness and his own black reflection.

The door-bell is ringing. David has not heard the bell for days. It is a good sound, almost like a woodland sparrow in the early morning. Sarah had found it in a shop in Toronto, decided she had to have it for the log home she and David would build in Miles Cove.

Toronto is far away, as is the seminary, and Bob walking along the Don River arguing about Amos and poverty and greedy Christians, and Dr. Mathews with his enthusiasm for Bonhoeffer and Bultmann and Canafrican theology. Toronto is far away, but the woodland sparrow peeps and pips, and David knows he's been there.

"Hello, David. We were thinking about you and we brought you a little present to let you know that we care for you." Rose, Dorothy-Jeanette, mothers of David's students, members of his choir, Sarah's friends, stand in the cool September air smiling from hot faces.

David stares, can't focus, holds the door, rubs his hand through his hair. "Come in. Would you like to come in?"

"No, no, David. Not right now." Rose-Dorothy-Jeanette smile. "We want you to

to him. He set the owner of each name on his knee for a few minutes, except for the really small ones who were scared stiff of him, and by the time my name was called, I had figured it out. I just marched right up to him and, before he could say a word, I said, "I know who you are. You are Clancy Olsen."

I knew right away I had made a grave mistake. Even before I heard Ellie Stein make a funny noise like she had just been pinched in church. His eyes were terrible, Miss Jacobs. They turned me to ice through and through and when he hissed his breath in my face, the whiskey on it didn't even warm me up. He didn't say a word though, just jammed that bag of candy into my chest as if he wanted to plant it there. I gave most of the candy away, but I ate the orange. It didn't taste anything like a Christmas orange, either.

But Pa says that year there was a drought on gullible relatives. I think he means no company had come.

Well, all that happened a long time ago. What I couldn't figure out myself, Pa told me. It seems the ladies always find someone that's a stranger, so no little kid is disappointed to see their pa under that white beard. Isn't that thoughtful of them, Miss Jacobs? Usually it's an uncle or a cousin or something, that's visiting for Christmas. But Pa says that year there was a drought on gullible relatives. I think he means no company had come. Anyway, they had to use old Morty Henry.

He's a bachelor that lives up the tower road. Maybe you have seen him. He drives a rattled-out International straight down the middle of the road and Pa says he wouldn't move over if God Himself drove by. You see, old Mort paid to use the road and he aims to get his money's worth. That's what kind of skilful he is.

Pa says it's understandable that I got him mixed up with Clancy Olsen, too. They're

continued next page

know we're thinking of you and praying for you. We made this for you.

"Thank you." They're gone. Into the black trees and down the path on their way to Tuesday night prayer meeting.

When David and Sarah first moved to Miles Cove, they spent hours climbing hills and crawling through spruce trees searching for the perfect location for their log home. The first winter in Rod Budgell's house (Rod gone to Fort McMurray for his stamps) squeezed in between Sam Budgell's on one side and Zeke Budgell's on the other side and Lou Budgell's big two-story in front blocking out the harbour like a sky-scraper and not enough back-yard for a row of peas and after spending September and October staring at the pink-purple-yellow houses David hired all the Budgells to cut logs and in the spring hired the entire grade twelve class too and they cleared a site on a hill overlooking the town and harbour and the log home dreamed about for years was no longer a dream in books only and the Budgells all laughed and called David the bald eagle lording it over the town from his nest atop the hill.

David opens his gift, slowly unites the ribbon and removes the Scotch tape, stretching out the pleasure. A gray sweater, thick and heavy, knit with local wool, the kind of sweater the men wear in the spring hauling their lobster traps; not even the bling air of the Labrador current can penetrate this sweater. Even holding the sweater David feels a warmth trickle through his stomach.

Catlin, are you wearing my sweater tonight, my gray Nonia sweater, a gift from Sarah and I gave it to you one wintry day because you were cold and I didn't want to ask for it back

continued next page