

The Short Story

BIRTHDAY PARTY by Katherine Brush.

They were a couple in their late thirties, and they looked unmistakably married. They sat on the banquette opposite us in a little narrow restaurant, having dinner. The man had a round, self-satisfied face, with glasses on it; the woman was fadingly pretty, in a big hat. There was nothing conspicuous about them, nothing particularly noticeable, until the end of their meal, when it suddenly became obvious that this was an Occasion- in fact, the husband's birthday, and the wife had planned a little surprise for him.

It arrived, in the form of a small but glossy birthday cake, with one pink candle in the center. The headwaiter brought it in and placed it before the husband, and meanwhile the violin-and- piano orchestra played "Happy Birthday to You" and the wife beamed with shy pride over her little surprise, and with such few people as there were in the restaurant tried to help out with a pattering of applause. It became clear at once that help was needed, because the husband was not pleased. Instead he was hotly embarrassed, and indignant at his wife for embarrassing him.

You looked at him and you saw this and you thought, "Oh now, don't be like that!" But he was like that, and as soon as the little cake had been deposited on the table, and the orchestra had finished the birthday piece, and the general attention had shifted from the man and woman, I saw him say something to her under his breath-some punishing thing, quick and curt and unkind. I couldn't bear to look at the woman then, so I stared at my plate and waited for quite a long time. Not long enough, though. She was still crying when I finally glanced over there again. Crying quietly and heartbrokenly and hopelessly, all to herself, under the gay big brim of her best hat.

Banquette-bench seat recessed into a wall.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Identify TWO symbols and explain their significance.
- 2 What do you learn about this couple from paragraph one?
- 3 Why has Occasion a capital "O"?
- 4 Name TWO language techniques used in the story and explain their effect.
- 5 Why is the husband embarrassed in paragraph two?
- 6 Explain the meaning behind line one paragraph one.
- 7 Describe the reaction of the narrator who has witnessed this scene.
- 8 Find an example of contrast in the story and explain the writer's purpose.
- 9 Explain why you think this marriage is collapsing.
- 10 What does the recurring comparison of "little" paint a picture of?
- 11 What does this story reveal to you about human relationships? (12-15 lines)

Knife-play

All my scars are yours. We talk of pledges,
and holding out my hand I show
the faint burn on the palm and the hair-thin
razor-marks at wrist and elbow:

self-inflicted, yes; but your tokens—
made as distraction from a more
inaccessible pain than could have been
caused by cigarette or razor—

and these my slightest marks. In all our meetings
you were the man with the long knives,
piercing the living hopes, cutting connections,
carving and dissecting motives,

and with an expert eye for dagger-throwing:
a showman's aim. Oh, I could dance
and dodge, as often as not, the whistling blades,
turning on a brave performance

to empty stands. I leaned upon a hope
that this might prove to have been less
a gladiatorial show, contrived for murder,
than a formal test of fitness

(initiation rites are always painful)
to bring me ultimately to your
regard. Well, in a sense it was; for now
I have found some kind of favour:

you have learnt softness; I, by your example,
am well-schooled in contempt; and while
you speak of truce I laugh, and to your pleading
turn a cool and guarded profile.

I have now, you might say, the upper hand:
these knives that bristle in my flesh
increase my armoury and lessen yours.
I can pull out, whet and polish

your weapons, and return to the attack,
well-armed. It is a pretty trick,
but one that offers little consolation.
such a victory would be Pyrrhic,

occurring when my strength is almost spent.
No: I would make an end of fighting
and, bleeding as I am from old wounds,
die like the bee upon a sting.

by Fleur Adcock

KNIFE PLAY

- 1 In 10-15 lines describe what is happening in this poem.
- 2 What features are used in this poem to help you understand a main theme or issue?
- 3 Does the poem end on a positive or negative note? Provide reasons.
- 4 Describe the tone throughout the poem. Does it change or remain the same? Reasons needed.
- 5 Identify ONE symbol and explain its significance.
- 6 Analyse the writer's purpose.