

# **Flash Fiction: Very Short Stories Study Guide**

**Flash Fiction: Very Short Stories by James Thomas (professor)**

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# Brilliant Silence through Crossing Spider Creek

## Brilliant Silence through Crossing Spider Creek Summary

### Brilliant Silence

Two dancing bears are touring in Chile when a jaguar attacks the animal trainer. The bears escape and 70 years later, ancestors of the bears are found in Chile and the surrounding islands. The bears all perform circus tricks and dance at night when the moon is full. It is theorized that the bright moonlight is reminiscent of the spotlights their predecessors performed in. However, what music do the bears dance to? They dance in unison in brilliant silence.

### Pumpkins

A young woman is driving down the road and is hit by a pumpkin truck. She is killed in the accident. Another young woman getting ready to drive to work reads the morning paper and is frightened about the story of the young woman killed in the accident with the pumpkin truck. She tells her husband who answers strangely. She realizes that the pumpkin truck accident took place right in front of the house where the woman with whom her husband was having an affair lives. She thinks his guilty response could mean that he has resumed his affair. They fight and he leaves home again that night. She sees her therapist the next day but her therapist thinks she is petty for centering on her marriage problems when a young woman has been killed. The therapist goes home and begins to recall his childhood. When he was five he had mumps and was so swollen in his face that he looked like a pumpkin. He realized that was why he was so sad about the story of the woman being killed by a pumpkin truck.

### The Stones

This relates a tale of young stones who want to go on adventures and old stones who are happy to stay in their warm places in the desert.

### The One Sitting There

A woman throws all her food out of the refrigerator. The power has been out for hours and the food is spoiled. It reminds her of her parents who never throw food away and of her older sister who loves to clutch bread as a young child. Her older sister dies as a young child. It is difficult for the woman to throw the bread away. She throws it away last.

### Crossing Spider Creek



A man on horseback is attempting to cross Spider Creek. The horse is spooked by the icy water and throws the man. The man sustains a serious injury—a broken femur and bloody wound. He keeps thinking of his wife, Carol. She loves the horse he is riding but has been upset with the man spending so much time away from her. She does not understand his need for solitude. If the horse refuses to cross the creek and throws him again, he will die. He wishes he could have spent more time with his wife. If the horse throws him, he will be able to reach his rifle as he falls and shoot the horse. He could crawl by the horse's warm, dead body and the two of them could die together. Carol would like that.

## **Brilliant Silence through Crossing Spider Creek Analysis**

### Brilliant Silence

Brilliant Silence is a whimsical story that is a tribute to living free. The dancing is in the bears DNA and the music, though seemingly silent, is being heard inside their minds. The story shows the power of nature. The bears escape from the constraints put on them by man. They are able to live freely but hear the voices, the music, of the bears who have gone before them and have not been able to live freely.

### Pumpkins

The story shows how the tragedy of a perfect stranger can cause a chain reaction of emotions in people who learn about it. The characters in the story twist the story to fit their lives. It illustrates the self-centeredness of people who show little or no sympathy for the person who suffers the greatest tragedy by losing her life.

### The Stones

This story is a metaphor for young people who rebel and leave the home and of their parents who fear their children will fail or suffer from their adventures as they did as youngsters.

### The One Sitting There

When the woman has to throw away her bread, it brings back memories of her sister dying as a child. Her parents never wanted to throw any food away, especially bread. The bread has become symbolic of her dead sister. When the woman finally is forced to throw her spoiled bread, which represents her memories, away, she finally is freed from the past and can enjoy her sister's memory.

### Crossing Spider Creek

The horseman might die from his wound if he cannot get the horse to cross the creek. The horse represents his wife who is upset with him for not spending time with her. If he



is injured too badly to make it back to camp, he will kill the horse and die with it. By dying with his wife's favorite horse, he is assuaging his guilt and metaphorically spending his last moments with her.



# The Lampshade Vendor through Gold Coast

## The Lampshade Vendor through Gold Coast Summary

### The Lampshade Vendor

A lampshade vendor knocks on a woman's door. He has no hands and has two hooks in their place. The woman does not want to buy a lampshade. She asks him about his background. She is curious how he lost his hands but will not ask him directly about them. The man used to have a flea circus and boasted about how strong the fleas were. He kept one flea as a pet. He let the flea suck the palm of his hand and attached the insect to a gold chain. The woman is intrigued and the man puts a pen in one of his hooks and draws illustrations of the fleas and the flea circus all over the lampshade. He draws a picture of his pet flea resting on the palm of a hand. The woman purchases the lampshade and keeps it by her bedside.

### Roseville

A couple meets at an antique show. Karen is looking at a piece of blue Roseville pottery but is uncertain whether its value will be decreased by the slight chip on the bottom. Konrad stumbles into her and pushes her against a cabinet containing vases and glasses and bowls. They all go crashing and break. The only thing that does not break is the Roseville piece in Karen's hands. Konrad buys the item. They begin dating and relate the story to friends about how they met. They grow tired of the story and vow to never repeat it again. At their golden anniversary party years later, Karen is speaking at the microphone to family and friends who are joining in the celebration. Konrad rises and walks to the microphone, a blue item flashes in his mind.

### Pendergast's Daughter

A man and his girlfriend, Leann, are driving to her parents' house. He is going to ask her father for Leann's hand in marriage. After they arrive, they witness her parents in physical combat. Her mother slaps her father, accusing him of adultery with a young girl. Her father punches her mother in the chest. As the man and Leann near them, her mother is hanging over the balcony. Leann pleads with the man to help her mother, but he is frozen and cannot respond. The mother falls but survives the fall. Later, the man keeps calling Leann but she refuses to take his call.

### Ponderosa

Jimmy's father is a minister. He sees Jimmy's friends at a Ponderosa. They all seemed happy, unlike Jimmy, who seems troubled. He asks Jimmy if the rumor is true that he is cheating on his wife. Jimmy is involved with another woman but denies it to his father. Linda, Jimmy's wife, complains to his father again about Jimmy's behavior. His father



visits Jimmy to convince Jimmy to change his ways. He brings a shotgun with him which accidentally goes off and takes off half of Jimmy's jaw. His father claims it was God's will. Father and son begin traveling as evangelists. His father tells the people that God punished Jimmy for lying by taking away his ability to speak. Jimmy contributes to the ministry by humming a melodious sound that brings sinners forward.

Gold Coast

A couple wakes up just before dawn on the 37th floor of a hotel. The drapes are opened wide and they see the silvery images of skyscrapers in still dark skies. It reminds the man of his trips as a teenager with friends to the gold coast. He is uncertain which image is more appealing but thinks he will figure it out. The man and woman both make comments that reveal they are unsure about their relationship, whether it will endure.

## **The Lampshade Vendor through Gold Coast Analysis**

The Lampshade Vendor

The man's pet flea turns on him. He boasts so much about the strength of the flea, never thinking it could pull his hands off. Chaining the flea does not keep him with the man. He wants his freedom so much that he pulls the man's hands off. The man is selling lampshades because they hide the light, the truth. The woman has her own secrets as she hides the truth by purchasing the lampshade and keeping it near her.

Roseville

Konrad buys the piece of blue Roseville pottery. It is the only unbroken item in the shop and represents Karen's purity. Although they tire of telling the story of how they met, it is the thread that holds them together. Nearing the end of their lives after having 50 years together, Konrad still remembers Karen as the pure girl he met so many years before.

Pendergast's Daughter

The man's inability to help Leann's mother tells Leann that he is a weak man and would not make a good husband. Leann grows up in a dysfunctional family and does not want to marry the man and repeat her parents' mistakes.

Ponderosa

Jimmy's father claims that God punishes Jimmy for lying by taking his ability to talk away. In reality, it is his father who shot and injured his son because he was shaming him. Father and son become missionaries in an effort to make amends for the sins of both.

Gold Coast



The man and woman are in a relationship that has an uncertain future. Although he enjoys the stark beauty of the skyline, he thinks back to his youth when he was single and free, especially the times he visited the gold coast with a friend. He is not certain which vision is the best—in reality, whether it is better to be single or in this relationship. His uncertainty about which landscape is preferable is symbolic for the uncertainty he feels about his current relationship.





# Mr. Mumsford through The Father

## Mr. Mumsford through The Father Summary

Mr. Mumsford

Bibs, the janitor at a school, is planning to kill the principal. He has worked at the school for 27 years. Everyone has always called him Bibs—after his bib overalls—never bothering to learn his real name. Late one night, he confronts the principal with a baseball bat. He tells him he is going to kill him because he never calls him by his real name. The principal promises to instruct all the teachers and students to call him Mr. Mumsford from that point on. Mr. Mumsford is satisfied and agrees not to kill the principal. He tells the principal that he works too many hours and that he should go home to his family. The principal leaves the building.

From the Floodlands

In the deep south, the summers are so humid that a person can almost drown when they breathe. The complaining about the hot, humid summer ceases when a farmer from the north, where there is a drought, asks for water.

A Public Denial

The writer wants to clear up an ugly rumor about his grandfather's death. The writer's grandfather wanted to own a Toyota distributorship in his town but due to his advanced years, Toyota would not allow him to become a distributor. The grandfather boasted about how solidly Toyotas were built. To prove that point, he drove his Toyota across a fish pond located on his property. The old man safely reached the other side but a short time later, he drove his Toyota off a bridge and drowned in a pond miles away from his farm. The only reason the car sunk in the second pond was because his grandfather had the windows open. The writer pleads that everyone understand that his grandfather did not die in a foolhardy stunt.

232-9979

A woman is contemplating making a call to the woman who is the wife of her lover. She relates how their initial meeting—in a car accident—is innocent, then reasons that running into him a few more times is also innocent. However, eventually they do start having an affair. They want to wait until his children are grown but something has happened that will not allow a delay.

The Father

The mother, grandmother and sisters of a newborn baby boy are doting over him as he lays in his crib. They all discuss who the baby looks like. The sisters think he looks like the father. The grandmother thinks his lips look like his grandfather. The sisters discuss



who their father looks like and they decide that he does not look like anyone. Everyone, except the grandmother, looks at the father who turns his back to them.

## Mr. Mumsford through The Father Analysis

Mr. Mumford

Mr. Mumsford does not get any respect. He wants to be recognized for who he is. When he finally is given the respect he deserves, he shows his caring side by telling the principal that he works too hard. The story ends with a question: does the principal go home or go to the police to report Mumsford? Perhaps Mumsford is too quick to trust the principal again.

From the Floodlands

This is a story of appreciating what one has. While the writer complains about the oppressively hot and humid summer, he begins to enjoy it when he realizes it could be far worse.

A Public Denial

The writer is embarrassed that his grandfather dies in a foolish stunt. He tries to save face for himself, his family and his grandfather's memory by fabricating a story of how he dies. The old man ends his life needlessly and the grandson cannot admit it. Perhaps the old man's insurance is invalid if he has committed suicide.

232-9979

The woman is not as innocent as she would like to portray. She wants to break up her lover's marriage. If the man wants to leave his wife and children, he would tell his wife. The woman purposely becomes pregnant. She is using her pregnancy as an excuse to confront the woman with her husband's affair in hopes that the woman will throw her husband out.

The Father

The father knows that he is the son of his mother and her lover. Since he does not "look like anybody"—anybody in the family that is—he must look like his biological father. The grandmother refuses to look at her son when the little girls are trying to figure out who he looks like. The man turns away from them, knowing that his secret will probably be revealed through his daughters' curiosity.



# Love Poems through The Appalachian Trail

## Love Poems through The Appalachian Trail Summary

### Love Poems

A man writes a beautiful poem for his lover. He will send it to her so she gets it for Valentine's Day. He is very proud of his work. It is the best he has ever written. His lover will keep it with his other letters. She will not show it to anyone since she is a private person. As an afterthought, he decides to submit it to a poetry magazine for possible publication. He also decides to give a copy to his wife and also to a friend in England, who is a poet and will love it.

### Night

A man is sleeping in his bed and hears the sound of his child breathing in the next room. He wakes his wife who simply says, "yesterday" and falls immediately back to sleep. He hears his wife breathing but also hears his child breathing. He walks down the hall to the child's room. He flips on the light and the room is empty. The room remains the same as the last time the child was there. The man has this experience every night.

### Mandy Shupe

When she is a little girl, a woman is told about Mandy Shupe by her mother. Mandy is a Mennonite who leaves her church and goes straight to Crystal Beach where she takes off her clothes and dances naked with a man. The woman does not know why her mother tells her about Mandy Shupe but later her mother changes the story by telling her that Mandy is a drunk, too.

### Wedding Night

A man works at a bus station for years. He works there during the Korean War and sees lots of soldiers come through. He is robbed at gunpoint one night. He gives the robber all the money and does not know for sure if they ever catch him. He always thinks he will find the right girl coming through the station some day. He meets a young girl who looks exhausted. He buys her lunch and invites her home. She is so tired that she sleeps for hours in his bed while he sleeps on the floor beside her. He caresses her while she sleeps. He wakes the next day and she is gone. He concludes his story by proclaiming that good marriages sometimes do not last very long.

### The Appalachian Trail

A woman has decided to take a 2,000 mile walk on the Appalachian Trail. Her husband tries to convince her that it is an outlandish idea. It will take her three or four months to



walk that far. Despite her husband's protests, she is determined to make the trip. She looks for her backpack in the basement and he yells down to her to bring his up too. She cannot go alone. He looks at his feet and apologizes to them in advance.

## Love Poems through The Appalachian Trail Analysis

### Love Poems

The man is a self-centered adulterer. He is so proud of his work that he keeps thinking of other people to send the poem to, including his wife. His focus is on his ego, not his lover.

### Night

The couple's child is dead. The man has a nightmarish experience every night that the child is still alive. The wife has recognized the child's death but is depressed and can only think of "yesterday" when the child was alive. The man is in deep denial about the death.

### Mandy Shupe

The mother tells her daughter a fictional story about a woman who abandons her religion and becomes promiscuous and a drunk. The mother tells her daughter the tale in hopes that she will not leave her religion and become an immoral person.

### Wedding Night

The man is someone who does not seem to expect to get much out of life. He finds the right girl for himself but is not upset when she leaves after twelve hours and sleeps the whole time they are together. At least he has found a woman he can love even though he does not get to keep her very long.

### The Appalachian Trail

Even though this man's wife has an idea that he considers ridiculous, the man loves her enough to first try to talk her out of it, then agrees to go with her so that she is not alone. He is more concerned about her welfare than his own feet or his ego.



# Dinner Time through the Colonel

## Dinner Time through the Colonel Summary

### Dinner Time

A man is waiting for his wife to serve dinner. He hears a commotion in the kitchen. She is beating pans, which compels him to start hitting himself. He knocks himself out and wakes to hear her throwing the dinner and china on the floor. He is so hungry he eats one of his hands. She tells him he should have cooked it first. He wants to know when they are going to eat. She tells him that he knows how she must subdue the kitchen every night before she can cook. He eats a spoon then he swallows himself whole.

### Vision Out of the Corner of One Eye

A man is fondling a woman on a bus. She tries to move away from him but he moves closer. His fondling becomes more intense. She decides to get even and fondles him. They are separated by other passengers and she finally gets off at her stop. She regrets not getting to know him better. His wallet contained only 7,400 pesos. He was generous and affectionate and had she been able to be alone with him she could have gotten more out of him.

### I Get Smart

A woman tells her live-in that she is going to get three new cats. Roy, the boyfriend, absolutely forbids her to get more cats—they already have three. The next week, she tells him that they have three new cats. He is furious until she tells him that she has simply renamed her cats. He thinks her actions are silly. He is angry that the cats learn their new names so quickly and that one of the cats ruins the crossword puzzle he is about to work on. The woman gets smart—a few months later she gets a new man named Ralph who is better with crossword puzzles and with cats.

### True Love

Two entomologists meet at a conference. They are immediately attracted to each other partly because they have physical features that resemble insects. After dinner, they go to his room and disrobe. He is afraid of her. He tells her that she reminds him of the female praying mantis who bites off the heads of her mating partners. She responds by discussing the female empid fly that also mutilates the male during mating. The two stare at each other but they are unable to resist each other and make love.

### The Colonel

Two men are visiting the Colonel in his home. A maid serves dinner after which wine is served. The Colonel becomes angry and pulls out a sack of dried human ears. He puts one of the ears in a glass of water and it comes alive. The Colonel orders the men to tell



their people that they have no rights. He throws the rest of the ears on the floor. Some of the ears are pressed against the floor.

## Dinner Time through the Colonel Analysis

### Dinner Time

The man is so hungry for his wife's attention that it ruins his life. He does not appreciate the hard work she goes through to please him. He is too self-centered to help her and too impatient to appreciate her.

### Vision Out of the Corner of One Eye

The author begins the story portraying the woman as a victim. The twist at the end of the story puts the woman in control. There is a sense of satisfaction that the man gets what he deserves. He picks the wrong woman to fondle on the bus. She is a thief and a prostitute. She steals his wallet and regrets not getting alone with him so she could get more money out of him.

### I Get Smart

The woman tests her live-in to see if he really cares for her. She gives him a hint that she might be dumping him when she renames her cats—it would be just as easy to rename, or replace, her lover. After he fails the test, she finds someone she is more compatible with to take Roy's place.

### True Love

Two scientists are attracted to each other at an entomology conference. They are physically attracted to each other partly because they both resemble insects. However, what really turns them on is "talking insect." Even though the man fears he may be getting in too deep, the man likes to live dangerously and cannot resist the woman. She is the perfect woman for him. It is true love.

### The Colonel

The Colonel is a brutal dictator who does not allow his people to have any rights. The ears represent the people he has mistreated. When one ear is placed in water, it comes alive which means that the Colonel has not destroyed them and that there is still hope. At the end, the ears are pressed to the floor which represents their hope that they will hear someone coming to help them.



# Snow through Subtotals

## Snow through Subtotals Summary

### Snow

In Yolanda's first year in New York, she attends a Catholic school. The nun, Sister Zoe, keeps Yolanda near her desk so she can help her with English. Since Russian missiles are pointed at New York, the class does drills to be ready in case of attack. Sister Zoe draws a mushroom cloud on the board with dots and dashes of toxic radiation coming from. One day Yolanda sees white dots coming down from the sky. She is frightened thinking that they are being attacked. Sister Zoe laughs and tells her it is snow. She tells Yolanda that every flake is beautiful and different just like every person.

### Everything Is Green

Mitch is 48 years old. His lover is much younger. He is sad as he looks around his dismal trailer. His girlfriend looks out the window and remarks about how green everything is. Mitch looks outside on the rainy day and spots beer cans on an old table and cigarette butts floating in ashtrays. He sees a kid's discarded toy under a clotheslines where there are no clothes hanging. She whispers to herself that everything is green. She is his morning.

### Draft Horse

When he is a young man in Fargo, the man can hear the cows huddling together for warmth. It is so bitterly cold that he can press his fingers on the window in the morning and find his finger print still frozen on the pane at night. He often looks at a photo of when his grandfather and his men had to put a horse down. It had fallen and failed and the others insisted that he put it out of its misery. His grandfather slipped the barrel of his rifle over the horses ear and felled him with one shot. The men then set the horse on fire. The young man would walk over the spot and imagine the horse once again galloping over the snow.

### Corporal

A boy tries to collect as much paper as he can. He can be made an honorary private, corporal or even general if he collects an adequate amount during the paper drive. He walks to all the houses in the neighborhood and finally gets enough to become a private, then a corporal. He gives up on his hopes of becoming a general. He concludes that the rank of general is reserved for the wealthy kids who have lots of magazines in their houses and parents with cars who can drive them around to different neighborhoods. Later as an adult, paper comes to mean a bounced check or a bad report card or a letter that ends a love affair and words that hurt people when they read them.



### Subtotals

This man sums up the total amount of times he has done things. For example, he is unfaithful to his wife 2 times; he has a hole in one in golf 0 times; he kicks a dog 6 times; he chokes on a chicken bone 4 times and on a fish bone 6 times; he walks up stairs 745,821 times; he is seasick once; and has 16 bloody noses.

## Snow through Subtotals Analysis

### Snow

Yolanda is greeted in her new country with the prospect of being bombed and with the beauty of snowflakes. When Sister Zoe tells her that the snow flakes are like people—every one is beautiful and different—she is telling Yolanda that she is beautiful and unique. The sister is trying to build up the self-worth of a new child in a foreign country and divert her attention from nuclear attack.

### Everything Is Green

Mitch, the older man, sees the stark reality of his life while his young girlfriend looks past the dismal trailer park to the green trees and grass. While Mitch is cynical his young girlfriend is young and hopeful. Mitch has become bitter with life. The only bright spot and hope he has in life is his young girlfriend. The phrase "she is my morning" means that she makes him feel young again.

### Draft Horse

The man tenderly remembers the story of the horse his grandfather had to put down. Even though the man has never been in the presence of the animal, it leaves an indelible impression on him the rest of his life. The story illustrates man's humanity and respect for the dignity of other living beings.

### Corporal

The young man has big aspirations for his future. However, he gives up when he concludes that the higher levels of achievement are reserved for the privileged class. Although bitter, he accepts the mundane life he is destined to have.

### Subtotals

This man who has lived a long life is summing up his existence by the number of times he has done things. He shows no regrets nor aspirations—it is just a clinical approach to his life that seems joyless. His life is a drudgery and he will almost be glad when it is over.





# Fingers through Grace Period

## Fingers through Grace Period Summary

### Fingers

Ronald comes home from the war. His behavior is strange. All he does for the first two weeks is shoot baskets. He buys a car but abandons it when it gets a flat tire. At a museum, he buys a dozen postcards of Benjamin Franklin because he looks funny with his bald head and long hair. He takes a bus to New York City and finds a room near Yankee Stadium. He lies in the bed and counts the fingers on his shooting hand.

### Nadine at 35: A Synopsis

A 35-year-old woman, Nadine, is told by her husband that he needs to find himself. She knows she is not what she used to be but neither is he. She says, "What the hell, go." He takes off for California and she is left with no money, three kids and various pets. She gets a job and does well, even gets promoted and a raise. She would like to have a lover but she does not have much luck in finding one. The sink backs up, her son is caught stealing, the dog eats the goldfish and the cat gets distemper. After several years away, her husband calls and tells her he is tired of the single life and wants to come home. She says, "What the hell."

### Feeding the Hungry

A man has never been hungry. He does not know what it is to want to eat. He eats only because when he forgot to eat at one point in his life, he almost died. It scared him so that he eats all the time. He is annoyed when homeless people beg for money and tell him that they are hungry. He angrily tells them that they are lucky. The only pleasure he gets out of eating is knowing that other people are hungry and cannot eat. He hopes they all die of hunger.

### Dish Night

A girl likes to go to the movies on dish night when she will receive a free plate or saucer or cup for attending. The man who is telling the story went to war in Europe. He saw broken china laying everywhere. It made him think of the girl and that he was fighting the war so she could have her china. She writes to him that she almost has a full set of china. Years later, when they are old, every Sunday after church, they go to flea markets where many items are on sale including china. The woman still is looking for pieces to complete her set.

### Grace Period

A man is trimming bushes outside when he senses a rumbling. There are other noises—a barking dog, a semi-truck rattling down a nearby road—perhaps he is mistaken



about the rumbling. The sensation goes away for a short while then he feels the movement again. He observes a strange glowing light over the horizon. He tries to reach neighbors and even the police, but their lines are all busy. He tries to reach his father-in-law who is a scientist but cannot get through. As the house shudders, he looks outside and the strange light is growing brighter and brighter.

## Fingers through Grace Period Analysis

### Fingers

Ronald's strange behavior after returning from a war stem from the experiences he had in the war. He is trying to forget some probably very traumatic events—one of which include him shooting at and possibly killing someone.

### Nadine at 35: A Synopsis

Nadine takes her husband leaving in stride and tries to do the best she can. She goes through life putting out fires and accepts what happens to her. Her passivity is perhaps what helped to drive her husband away. Her life has not gotten better in the years since her husband left but she has been able to cope. When he calls and wants to come back, the passive Nadine agrees. She will cope with his return.

### Feeding the Hungry

The man who is never hungry represents a man who cannot feel. He would like to feel but has gone through life emotionally starved. He thinks that by pretending to feel emotions, he will actually feel them. He envies those who are less fortunate than he because they can feel.

### Dish Night

The man loves the girl so much that he does not criticize her for collecting china, in fact he feels he is fighting for her right to be free to do so. Even when he is at war, he thinks of her. She is self-centered, writing to a man in the thick of a war to boast about her china collection. Towards the ends of their lives, the woman is still looking for pieces of china to complete her set. She has lived a life hoping for more and has never been fulfilled unlike her husband who has been devoted to her and has forgiven her for wanting more.

### Grace Period

The man is experiencing an invasion of some sort—perhaps by a military enemy or even by aliens. He is in the nightmare scenario of being in a frightening position without being able to get help. Just like in a nightmare when someone is chasing you, you are not quite caught but yet you cannot get away. The man in the story may be having a nightmare. If his greatest fear is being alone, he is having the perfect nightmare.



# The Haircut through the The Burlington Northern, Southbound

## The Haircut through the The Burlington Northern, Southbound Summary

### The Haircut

A woman is estranged from her husband. They were together five years and had a child together. The man has two older sons by a previous marriage. They decide to try it again and meet at the airport in Florida where they will spend time with her family. The woman feels unsettled. There is something amiss. The man looks handsome and is dressed well. She recalls how the man hates to go to barbershops. His first wife always cut his hair and the woman has cut his hair for the past five years. That is it. She has not seen him for two months yet his hair is neat and trimmed. She has one question for him: who has been cutting his hair?

### Vines

A man is noticing signs that he is aging. He is concerned about getting older and deteriorating. He asks his wife if she ever feels like rotten fruit that is about ready to fall off the vine. She is annoyed by his remarks, reminding him that everyone will eventually die. His friend Norman angers him by telling him he had thought for a long time that the man was in bad health. He decides that his best confidant is his wife. He comes to terms with his ultimate death and tells his wife that he really truly loves her. His wife clutches his hand and tells him to shut up.

### How to Touch a Bleeding Dog

A man is sleeping alone in his bed, reaching for his wife who is no longer there. His dog is hit by a car on the road. He does not like the dog. It was his wife's dog. She found it at a shelter. The vet tells the man to bring the injured dog in. He wraps it in his blanket, reluctant to touch the bloody wound. The vet tells the man that the dog will not survive. As soon as the man pets the dog's head, he dies. Later that evening at home, the man recalls touching the dog but takes comfort in knowing that the touch will be forgotten.

### Girl

This story lists all the things that make a girl. For example, do not walk bareheaded in the hot sun; this is how you set a table for breakfast; this is how to bully a man; and, this is how to make ends meet.

### The Burlington Northern, Southbound



A man who is taken with a woman named Christine writes a poem to her. As a young boy, he loves when the Burlington Northern, Southbound is on its way down the tracks. He recalls his excitement when he could feel the ground begin to rumble as it approached. As the speedy train passed by, he would stand near the tracks and feel exhilarated by the beauty and danger of the fast-moving train. In his poem, the man compares Christine to the train. The work includes a line about his dream of riding her home. After sending her the poem, the man never hears from her again.

## **The Haircut through the The Burlington Northern, Southbound Analysis**

### The Haircut

A woman reunites with her husband after being estranged for two months. She realizes that he has been unfaithful to her because he has only allowed her and his previous wife to cut his hair. He never goes to barbershops. The reconciliation will probably not last because she has lost her ability to trust him.

### Vines

The woman enjoys her husband's emotional dependence on her. When he turns the tables and displays inner strength, she feels insecure. She does not want to be comforted by him, she wants to be the strong one. She tells him to "shut up" so that she can take back control of their relationship. The fact that she clutches his hand while she is telling him to shut up, shows that she has affection for him but she does not want to change roles with him.

### How to Touch a Bleeding Dog

The man misses his wife who has passed away. The man has been bitter that his wife died and the dog he hated lived. As a loving gesture to the memory of his dead wife who loved the dog, he pets the dying dog. Later when he thinks of petting the dog, he knows he will soon forget that moment but he will never forget the touch of his wife.

### Girl

The writer is having fun with what it means to be a "girl." Some entries are comical and some are sarcastic. Reading in between the lines, the author is implying that a woman has so much more substance than conventional wisdom suggests.

### The Burlington Northern, Southbound

The man, though romantic and imaginative, lacks the sensibility to not compare the woman of his dreams to a train. Although he sees the train as beautiful and exciting, she apparently does not. The imagery of his "riding her home" like a train is, not surprisingly,

unappealing to the woman. Since the man does not understand why Christine did not acknowledge his poem, he will probably suffer from similar gaffs in the future.



# The Cage through The Paring Knife

## The Cage through The Paring Knife Summary

### The Cage

A man is trying to make his way through a thicket that is peppered with barbed wire. He is miserable—the sun is hot and scorching. He feels trapped and there is no one in sight to help him. He becomes entangled in some barbed wire when he spots some beautiful tree branches. He grasps at the branches but they are just out of reach. While he is flailing and struggling, policemen arrive and free him with their wire cutters.

### The Restraints

To earn money, a man forces his young daughter to dance in taverns. One night she runs away and finds a family who cares for her as their own. Her father finds her and makes her choose between him and the beautiful dress the family have given her. She returns to her father who from that point on ties a rope between her leg and his at night so she cannot run away. As an old lady, she is tied to her bed in a nursing home thinking of the days she danced on the bars.

### Blackberries

A man has picked blackberries for his wife. They are having a picnic in the woods. She says they cannot eat them because they are out of milk. He says they do not need milk. She tells him friends are on a tour in New York—everything is included in one cost. He says powdered milk works. He says they could pick cattails and fry some in butter. She says they do not have butter, they have margarine. She would like to go to the movies. He says they probably are not open. She says the summer is almost over. He says it is not. They have plenty of time.

### The Continuity of Parks

A businessman takes time off in his study to read a novel. The setting is soothing, as his study looks over pleasant wooded area. He is enjoying the exciting tale and the dilemmas that face the hero and heroine. He is totally absorbed in the book. A man and woman enter the cabin. The man is carrying a long dagger. They find no one in the first few rooms they come to. Then they finally find a man in his study, reading a book.

### The Paring Knife

A man is helping the woman he loves clean the kitchen. He finds a paring knife under the refrigerator. It had been lost for years. He recalls to himself the argument they had the night that they lost sight of the knife. He had become incensed and had thrown the dinner dishes angrily on the floor. He asks the woman he loves if she remembers the



night they argued and lost the knife. She makes no response but takes the knife and throws it back under the refrigerator.

## The Cage through The Paring Knife Analysis

### The Cage

The man has escaped from prison. The barbed wire thicket he must go through makes him regret that he escaped. When he is close to gaining his freedom, represented by the beautiful branches just out of reach, he becomes entangled in barbed wire. It is ironic that the policemen who free him from the barbed wire will quickly end that freedom by returning him to prison. The man goes from one cage to another, and then back to the first one.

### The Restraints

The little girl is used by her father to make money. When he loses her, he forces her to stay with him so he can continue to use her. As an old lady, she has long been free of his restraints. However, there are new restraints now but she is left alone to dream of her dancing days. No one is ever completely free. There are the restraints of loved ones and of society.

### Blackberries

The man is very frugal and does not want to spend much money. The wife feels like they are wasting their lives. They are not in agreement about the kind of life to lead. She wants to go on trips and have fun. The man ignores her or makes excuses why they cannot or should not go. He has the last word. The woman probably cannot look forward to a very exciting future.

### The Continuity of Parks

The man is enjoying the tranquility of reading a book. He is a busy man and does not often get this luxury. He is so caught up in every word of the book, that he becomes part of it. Is it the epitome of escapism or is he part of the book all along? Is he murdered by the hero and heroine? The reader can only speculate.

### The Paring Knife

Finding the paring knife dredges up old memories of a terrible argument the man and woman had. Although he can recall the incident, the woman is not willing to deal with it. She buries the memories once again so that they remain in their past. She does not want to relive that moment.



# The Widow through the Parents

## The Widow through the Parents Summary

### The Widow

A seventy-year-old woman is being interviewed by a writer or researcher. She speaks of losing her husband without warning. After he is gone, she realizes how much space she has and how she is not pushed or pulled in one direction or another by someone else's space. She no longer has someone around to tell her she is crazy for weeding the garden at four in the morning while singing to herself. The writer appreciates her time with the widow. Her words will give comfort to others who are alone.

### What Happened During the Ice Storm

An ice storm is freezing everything. Animals are led inside the barn and frozen branches are breaking off trees. Dozens of pheasants are huddled in the storm, their eyes frozen shut. They are blinded and do not know how vulnerable they are and how easily they are spotted in the whiteness. Several boys sneak up on them. All they would have to do is grab them—they would not need a weapon to capture them. After a few moments, the boys take off their jackets and cover the freezing birds. The boys are freezing and soaking wet as they run back inside.

### Teddy's Canary

Friends are gathered at a tavern. They are laughing about their friend Teddy and his wife, Louise. The water pipe breaks under Louise's kitchen sink. She panics and screams for Teddy. He yells at her to go to the basement and turn off the water. When she returns from the basement, she finds Teddy's naked body lying motionless on the floor. She becomes hysterical and prays to God, promising that if He brings Teddy back to life, she will make him start attending church. The room is in chaos—the canary is flying around the room and the dog starts licking Teddy's face. Teddy wakes up and yells at Louise to get the dog off of him. Louise thanks God for the miracle. The friends are glad their friend did not die. They hope they all get to stay around for a long time.

### The Nicest Kid in the Universe

Franky Gorky is the nicest kid in the universe. Wild animals eat out of his hands. Birds will not sing in the morning until he wakes up. However, Franky is not very bright. He does not know there is a moon until his parents point it out one day. He observes the moon that night and wishes it was rounder. When he looks again in a few days, he notices that the moon is getting rounder. Since wishes come in threes, he then wishes the moon will get smaller because it is scary to see it big and round. For the third wish, he wishes that his grandmother would come for Christmas. On Christmas morning, his grandmother arrives and parks across the street. Franky tears out of his house to meet her. He runs across the street without looking and is killed by a drunk driver.





### The Parents

Parents bring their babies to a parade. Then they think they have lost them. Instead, they have grown into teenagers and then just as suddenly, they are driving the parents home because their eyes are sharper and their hands are steadier. Finally, these grown babies are helping their parents pick out caskets.

## The Widow through the Parents Analysis

### The Widow

Although the widow misses her husband, it is not clear that she wants him back. She is having a new life experience and is enjoying her freedom. When the writer refers to her as alone, she corrects him. She may be alone but she is not lonely.

### What Happened During the Ice Storm

The pheasants blinded by the ice storm are easy prey. They would have made a delicious dinner for the boys' families. However, there are warm hearts in the cold night. The humaneness of the boys comes shining through.

### Teddy's Canary

Even though they find humor in the way their friend almost died, the prospect of his passing strikes an emotional chord within the group of friends. When contemporaries pass away, it brings home one's own mortality.

### The Nicest Kid in the Universe

The story starts out as light and comical, luring the reader in with its whimsy. The author lowers the boom at the end, however, and turns what is a silly story into what can only be termed black humor.

### The Parents

The short tale depicts the cycle of life—how quickly people grow from babies to responsible adults who are caring for the old people that, not that long ago, were their parents and holding them in their arms.



# Water through Space

## Water through Space Summary

### Water

A woman waters plants for her ex-boyfriend—he has given her a key to his apartment for that purpose. Walking over to his apartment, she sees him and his new lover sitting by the river. She enters the apartment and turns the gas stove on without lighting it. She leaves and locks the door behind her. She imagines that her ex and his new lover will soon be lighting their cigarettes after sex. She finally recognizes that it is over between her and her former lover.

### Stockings

Henry Dobbins is a big strong fellow. On raids in Vietnam, he always puts a pair of his girlfriend's pantyhose over his face. He feels it protects him. The platoon starts to believe it protects them as well. When Henry gets a dear john letter from his girlfriend, he is saddened but then eases everyone's mind by saying it does not matter. The magic is not gone because he still loves her. Everyone in the platoon is relieved.

### The Philosophical Cobbler

Noah Grant, the grandfather of Ulysses Grant, tans hides and cobbles shoes. He keeps to himself and does not talk much. He hates killing, unlike his grandson who later leads a multitude to their graves. He tries to think of ways to get the hides of animals without killing them. He even thinks that perhaps a vegetable could be grown to produce a hide-like covering. He figures out how many skins it would take to buy a horse and to stay drunk for a week. If one thinks about such things long enough, one might be able to figure out the path of stars and the causes of wars.

### Corners

Mildred and Jessie's sister, Marie, dies. The funeral director shows them their sister's body. Mildred thinks she looks good. Jessie does not like the smile on her face. The funeral director uses his index finger and pulls down the corners of Marie's mouth so she is not smiling quite as big. That upsets Jessie who runs crying from the room. Mildred finds her outside. Jessie tells her that she and Marie were so close that she always felt left out. Mildred takes her finger and lifts the corners of Jessie's mouth. Jessie pulls the corners of Mildred's mouth down. They begin laughing and enjoying the moment.

### Space

A young woman is on the ledge of a building's roof, ready to jump. A young man comes on the roof to sunbathe. He sees that she is in peril and invites her to have dinner with



him. She does not respond. He feels attracted to her. He tells her he will marry her and take her to Italy for a honeymoon. Still no response. He closes his eyes for a few moments. When he looks up there is a space between her feet and the ledge. Then she is gone.

## Water through Space Analysis

### Water

The woman is depressed over the loss of her lover to another woman. She sets a death trap for her ex-lover and his new girlfriend. She knows it is over between her and her ex-lover and she does not want anyone else to have him.

### Stockings

Henry Dobbins knows the secret of true love. It is not whether someone loves you. What matters is that you love someone. The concept is both powerful and magical.

### The Philosophical Cobbler

Noah Grant was a philosopher without knowing it. He was a quiet man. Had he been one to speak about what he was thinking, perhaps he would have raised a son that was against war who could have convinced his son not to go to war. The author has an anti-war political leaning.

### Corners

The youngest sister, Jessie, feels left out because her older sisters have a close relationship. Mildred teases her sister out of her sadness and the two become closer. Jessie needs a close relationship with her sister and Mildred does as well since Marie has died. The two become closer in the midst of tragedy.

### Space

The good intentions of the man mean nothing to the young woman who has decided to end her life. Why does he happen upon her? He is not able to save her. Her last thought is of a stranger who is trying to save her life. His last thought of her is the space he sees between her feet and the ledge. She is out of her misery. Perhaps that space he sees will haunt him.



# Fear: Four Examples through The Factory

## Fear: Four Examples through The Factory Summary

### Fear: Four Examples

A man has four fearful experiences in one evening. First, his daughter is two hours late returning from college. At dinner, his daughter doubles over in pain. He takes her to the hospital where the pain subsides although the reason for the pain remains a mystery. As father and daughter return home, they see a young man trying to break into cars. At home, the man recalls how a young man in the hospital across from his daughter is moaning in pain from stitches he is receiving in his hand.

### The Last Parakeet

A woman is watching the today show where the last in a species of Brazilian parakeets has turned himself in. He will be giving his account of how it feels to be the last of the species. A neighbor interrupts the woman's viewing. She asks to borrow a condiment and later returns it. The woman is anxiously waiting for the parakeet's interview. However, there are segments with the president, some astronauts, a 100-year-old woman and the weatherman. There is no time left and the show concludes without the interview with the parakeet.

### Snapshot, Harvey Cedars: 1948

A woman looks at a photo of her attractive parents when they were young and on the beach. Her mother is beautiful and her father handsome and strong. Her father wants to be a builder and will one day be proud of all he accomplished. The picture shows her parents' shoulders touching but her mother's head is tilted away from her father. The woman wonders whether another man has caught her mother's eye or is her mother trying to get away from the sound from the gun that her father would press into his head twenty years after the photo is taken.

### August Evening

A man cruises around in his late model, glitzy car. It is reminiscent of the fast cars he had as a youth. He drives around the old haunts of his younger days. He runs into Jacky, a girlfriend from high school. Both he and Jacky have been married and divorced from other people. Though she looks good from a distance, there are signs of aging and wear and tear up close. She has on shorts and a flimsy top, an outfit better suited for a younger woman. They talk for a while about old times and their former classmates. Soon there is nothing more to say and an awkwardness sets in. The man tells Jacky to take care of herself and the woman wishes him well. He speeds off, not bothering to look back at her in his rear view mirror.



## The Factory

A woman describes how her husband, Eric, loves the factory which she has always hated. Eric's daily routine is always the same. He reads the newspaper, then folds it into fours. He telephones home with a two-ring code to tell his wife he will be home for lunch. He has a cup of tea in the afternoon in the office and works until 6 pm each day. He rings the phone twice when he leaves work so that dinner will be waiting for him. This day is different for Eric. When he goes to bed, his wife sees that he is crying. She has never seen him cry before. That night, the woman watches as the factory burns down. No one ever determines how the fire starts.

## Fear: Four Examples through The Factory Analysis

### Fear: Four Examples

A largest element of fear is the unknown. The man fears his daughter is in an accident when she does not arrive on time. Fear over her condition is more frightening when there is no explanation for it. The man fears that he might become the next victim of the man who is trying to break into cars. The agony of the young man who is having his hand sewn up is frightening since the reason for his injury is unknown.

### The Last Parakeet

The woman is most interested in something that affects her the least. She has no interest in what the president, astronauts or an elderly woman might have to say or what the weather might be that day. She would prefer hearing from the bird and how it feels to be the last of a species. How does the bird know he is the last one of his kind? A fascination with things that have no relevance in one's life defies logic.

### Snapshot, Harvey Cedars: 1948

The daughter inspects the photo of her father and mother. She is trying to figure out if her parents were really happy then or were there already signs of a collapse in their relationship that would, twenty years later, lead to her father's suicide. The daughter is trying to understand whether something went wrong in her parent's marriage or if they were unhappy all along. She seems to blame her mother's infidelity for her father's suicide.

### August Evening

The man is trying to regain his youth with his late-model car and by visiting the old neighborhood. He has gone through a marriage and divorce and wants to connect back to the man he was before those experiences. He runs into an old girlfriend who has been through similar experiences. That she is wearing clothes better suited to a younger woman shows her own struggle to regain her youth. When the two have to face each other, they see the pathetic and futile attempts they are each making to regain



their old youth, as if doing so would erase the years that have been filled with disappointment.

### The Factory

Eric loves the factory and operates his own life in a structured fashion, much like that of a factory. After years of his mundane, daily routine which never varies from one day to the next, Eric reaches his limit. In order to free himself of his tedious life, he sets the factory on fire before he leaves the office. He will now be free to begin a different kind of life. His wife is delighted that the factory burns down. She never liked it and knows that Eric will be forced to lead a different life.



# The Sewers of Salt Lake through Yoghurt

## The Sewers of Salt Lake through Yoghurt Summary

### The Sewers of Salt Lake

Jerry Lee Lewis music is blaring. Dogs have dug a complicated system of tunnels in the backyard of a couple's home. The couples' twin babies have disappeared. Martha, their mother, goes down in the tunnels after them. A while later, Martha emerges with one twin. One of the dogs is bringing the other twin up. Marsha is impressed that the dogs have created a small, comfortable bedroom in the tunnels below. There is a sign at the entrance of the sewers that forbids anyone from feeding any animals they may see in the sewers. A tour of the sewer underground is given once each year. Martha and her husband and the twins take part in the tour. Guides are armed with nightsticks in case anyone gets out of line. One woman feeds a crocodile floating down the sewer stream a piece of bread. She is pummeled by the guards. Everyone sings songs by Eric Clapton.

### Jane

Rachel is beautiful and blond. She preens in the mirror practicing her smile. Rachel goes to a home in the country to recover. She is too hysterical to stay at home. The bruises are healing but the internal wounds are still deep and raw. The baby growing inside her will have to be aborted. Jane, who is giving the account of the story, is Rachel's sister. She has long dark hair. Her parents promise they will be back soon. They are going to visit Rachel. They tell Jane she must bring in the papers everyday, feed the cat and water the plants. Most important, no one must know she is home alone. Jane has other plans. She will disregard the to-do list and she will smile naked in the mirror and at every open window.

### Offerings

Emily often feels invisible. The dentist's assistant forgets to call her name for her appointment then apologizes profusely. The hairdresser overdoes a permanent causing Emily to lose some of her hair. The hairdresser apologizes at least twice. People apologize to her so often that she collects them and saves them in her pockets or in the hems of her dresses. She receives an apology from a sweepstakes she entered because they forgot to notify her of a consolation prize she won which is waiting for her at the book store. The clerk at the bookstore apologizes that the book she was supposed to receive is out of stock but gives her a book on origami instead. Emily begins taking all the apologies she receives and shaping them into origami animals. When she visits her husband's grave, she has an apology for him. It takes her a long time to properly shape the apology for him. Once she does, she sets it on top of his gravestone and the bird she shapes takes flight.



## Bread

Imagine eating bread. Brown bread with honey or white bread with butter. Imagine bread and famine. In a hut with dirt walls, a little girl with a swollen stomach is starving. The older sister is healthier. Both are hungry but who should have the bread—the sick child or the child who is stronger and could survive? A prisoner of war has been starved by his captives. He is offered bread in exchange for telling the whereabouts of his troops. However, can his captors be trusted to feed him if the prisoner reveals where the soldiers are? A rich woman with no children refuses to give her poor sister with five children any bread. With all these possibilities in mind, should one really be tempted to eat bread?

## Yoghurt

A man and his wife are walking home from having yoghurt. They have been fighting lately. When he places a box of sugary cereal in the cart at the grocery store recently, she throws it out telling him that she will not allow him to buy that kind of food. He thinks about being free, doing his own thing, living apart. However, then there are the kids, the house, the cars, the money. Just then a man runs up to him and throws yoghurt in his face. The man yells that he hates couples. He and his wife agree that the man's action is a real violation of his privacy. He puts his arm around his wife and she tucks her arm behind his back. He looks at his wife. She looks serene and valuable.

# The Sewers of Salt Lake through Yoghurt Analysis

## The Sewers of Salt Lake

This story places humans on an even keel with animals. The human twins are taken by the couple's dogs down into the tunnels leading to the sewers. Martha and her husband take it in stride. Although Martha goes down to retrieve the twins, she is unconcerned and impressed with the bedroom the dogs have made. The town is protective of the animals that live in the sewer, to the point where they will abuse people who pose a threat to them. This is an upside down tale where abuse of humans is more tolerated than abuse against animals. Perhaps it is a chance to understand how animals can suffer at the hands of humans. Music at the beginning of the story is from the fifties while it ends with music of the seventies. This shows a passage of time as well as a distinction in cultural mores.

## Jane

Jane is the less attractive sister, or at least believes that she is, and envies her sister's beauty and the attention she receives from everyone especially their parents. Rachel's beauty attracts a man who brutalizes and rapes her. Although Jane's parents are protective of Jane, she would prefer to take risks to achieve the same level of attention as her sister is given. The behavior she is contemplating when her parents leave may place her in danger. Despite the horror that her sister has gone through, Jane wants to emulate her sister's life, even the most sordid parts of it.





### Offerings

Emily feels like an unworthy person because she has a deep-seated guilt about her husband's death. Perhaps she did not get the opportunity to say important final words to him or they argued before he died or she was somehow responsible for his death or feels that she was. The apologies she receives from others are not important to her. She is able to quickly forget about them but when it comes to the apology she feels she owes her husband, it takes her a great deal of time to form the appropriate apology. The slights from strangers are far less hurtful than the ones that are inflicted upon loved ones.

### Bread

People who are not hungry take food for granted. For those who are hungry, bread can mean life or death, patriotism or treason or greed and humanity. The author wants the reader to stop and think the next time he sits down to a meal how life-altering even the simplest form of food can be to others.

### Yoghurt

The man contemplates leaving his wife over petty arguments. He lists all the reasons it would be difficult to leave. He does not include her as a reason not to leave. When the man's peace is violated by a stranger, his wife fully supports him. He then realizes why he could not leave home—his wife is actually his most precious valuable.



# A Chronicler's Sin through Deportation at Breakfast

## A Chronicler's Sin through Deportation at Breakfast Summary

### A Chronicler's Sin

During the reign of terror, nightly arrests are made throughout the land. Hooded men knock on doors in the middle of the night and take whole families away. The population of the town begins to shrink because there are so many people in jail. Houses, abandoned by families taken prisoner, are turned into jails. Priests and merchants alike are arrested. People begin to spy on one another. So many people are arrested it is difficult to say who is in charge of the town. Eventually, all the prisoners are like everyday citizens and begin leading normal lives and seem happy. Several years later, everyone denies that the night raids ever occurred.

### Here

Elvis lives three houses away from a man. He watches him come and go and waves at him. In a poor neighborhood like the man lives in, there is not much socializing. Usually waves are about the extent of social contact. There is a small woman, perhaps a dwarf, who lives nearby, too. She always waves and smiles. Elvis comes out and puts his sunglasses over his swollen eyes. The man calls out one the lines of his songs sometimes, like, "Takin' a walk down Lonely Street." One night the man waves with two hands and Elvis stops and points at him like a cowboy does. Elvis knows this guy.

### Here's Another Ending

Owners of a Doberman are shocked when the dog brings a dead rabbit home in its mouth. The rabbit belongs to a neighbor. They do not want the neighborhood to think their dog is a killer, so they shampoo the rabbit and sneak it back in the cage at night. The next day the neighbors will think the rabbit died of natural causes. They hear a scream the next day. The neighbor is holding the rabbit up in the air. He tells everyone that they buried the rabbit two days ago. The dog owners say nothing.

### 108 John Street

A large number of young people live together as roommates on John Street. Their activities include reading, cooking, showering, waiting to use the bathroom, listening to Mozart, talking on the phone, eating, mocking each other. One fellow announces he is gay. One thinks he should read about Vietnam. It is God who has put all the people in this bag and mixed it up.



### Deportation at Breakfast

A man goes to a restaurant and orders breakfast. The chef, Javier, is cooking his eggs and toast when authorities come in and arrest Javier and take him away. The man sees his eggs sizzling and runs behind the counter and finishes cooking his breakfast. In the mean time, some customers are checking out and give the man the money to pay for their breakfast. One person gives him a dollar tip. More customers come in and give the man their orders. More customers want to pay and leave. The man is so busy that he decides to put a want ad in the paper the next day for help.

## **A Chronicler's Sin through Deportation at Breakfast Analysis**

### A Chronicler's Sin

There is so much corruption in the land that those unfairly arrested begin to outnumber the officials who are ordering their imprisonment. When these prisoners are once again able to live regular lives, they choose to reject their past since it really does not represent the lives they lived. Justice is finally served. The good people are once again able to take control of their own lives. A corrupt government that is not of the people will ultimately fail.

### Here

This is a comment on people's obsessions with Elvis Presley or icons like Elvis. The man lives a narrow life—he considers a wave hello social contact. He feels compelled to make his mundane existence more exciting, which he does through his fantasy about a famous person.

### Here's Another Ending

The dog owners think their dog is a killer. Instead of being honest, they try to hide their assumption that he has killed a pet rabbit from the neighborhood. Had they been open about the incident, they would have learned more about themselves, their dog, the neighbors and the neighbor's animals.

### 108 John Street

This is a comment on the diversity of people and of the ability of people to live with one another and be able to cope with their God-given differences.

### Deportation at Breakfast

This is a light-hearted tale about a man who just wants to enjoy a breakfast but surprisingly winds up with a business to run. The name of the story indicates that Javier is deported and must have been an illegal alien. The man is congenial enough to take care of Javier's business and begins to like running the place. It is a commentary on the

surprises that life has in store for people. One never knows what normally routine activity might wind up changing one's entire life.



# Characters

## Franky Gorky appears in The Nicest Kid in the Universe

Franky Gorky, is the nicest kid in the universe. Franky is so nice that the forest animals eat out of his hands. The birds wait on the window ledge outside the boy's bedroom and will only sing when the boy wakes up. He always listens to his parents and always shares his toys and candy with the other kids in the neighborhood. Every kid who ever lived on 24th Street has heard the tale of Franky Gorky, the nicest kid in the universe.

Unfortunately, Franky Gorky is not the smartest kid in the universe. In fact, he is far from being the smartest kid. He has never noticed or heard of the moon. His parents want to remedy his lack of lunar knowledge. One night in December, they take him outside late at night and show him the moon. He thinks it is a strange street light at first. When he realizes it is an object far out in space, he decides to observe it. One thing he does not like is its irregular shape. He wishes that it was rounder. Several nights later, he looks at the moon again and is astounded to see that his wish has been granted. He is rather afraid of the big, round moon and then wishes it was smaller. Sure enough, as the days wear on, the moon grows smaller.

Franky knows that wishes come in threes. He uses his third wish to ask that his grandmother come for a visit. That wish is granted as well when Franky learns she will be coming for Christmas. Early on Christmas morning, Franky looks out the window and sees his grandmother parking her car across the street from his house. He bolts out of the door and runs to greet her. Tragically, he does not look both ways before crossing and is killed by a drunk driver.

## Teddy and Louise appears in Teddy's Canary

Friends of Teddy and Louise, a middle-aged married couple, are reminiscing about the time Teddy almost dies, or appears to be near death. Louise is in the kitchen washing dishes, when a pipe bursts under the sink and water is shooting everywhere. She panics and screams for Teddy. The friends laugh, thinking of Teddy trying to rush to the kitchen with his major-league beer belly leading the way. When Teddy arrives in the kitchen, he shouts at Louise to go downstairs and shut off the water.

Louise rushes down to the basement and shuts off the water. When she returns, she finds a naked Teddy lying in a prone position. He is motionless and Louise becomes hysterical thinking he is dead. The friends figure that Teddy must have taken his clothes off because they were wet from the leak. The friends all laugh thinking about Teddy dripping wet and leaving a trail of water behind him. Louise kneels down on her knees and prays to God to bring Teddy back to life. If God answers her prayer, she vows to make Teddy start going to church.



Chaos ensues as Louise's canary flies around and around in the room. Their dog is barking and starts licking Teddy's face. Teddy comes to and Louise is jubilant. She immediately thanks God for answering her prayer. Teddy yells at Louise to get the G-D dog off of him. Teddy survives, which makes all his friends very happy.

## **Jimmy appears in Ponderosa**

Jimmy has been cheating on his wife and lying to his minister father about it. His father confronts him with a shot gun, which goes off "accidentally" and takes off half of Jimmy's jaw. He cannot tell lies any more because he cannot talk.

## **Mr. Mumsford appears in Mr. Mumsford**

Everyone calls the school janitor Bibs because he wears bib overalls. His real name is Mr. Mumsford. After 27 years, Bibs is upset that no one knows his real name and threatens to kill the principal unless he orders everyone to start calling him Mr. Mumsford.

## **Yolanda appears in Snow**

Yolanda is a young Hispanic school girl who moves to New York City. That winter is the first time she has ever seen snow in her life.

## **Ronald appears in Fingers**

When Ronald comes home from the war, he begins displaying strange behavior. He is distressed because he has either shot or killed someone in the course of his duties.

## **Beth appears in How to Touch a Bleeding Dog**

Beth passes away and leaves behind her bereaved husband and her favorite dog. Her husband hates the dog and resents that it outlives his beloved wife.

## **Christine appears in The Burlington Northern/Southbound**

A man writes a poem to his girlfriend, Christine. As a young boy, the man finds trains exciting and exhilarating. He makes the mistake of comparing Christine to a train in his poem. He never hears from her again.



## **Henry Dobbins appears in Stockings**

As a soldier in Vietnam, Henry Dobbins always wears a pair of his girlfriend's stockings over his face during a night raid. He continues to wear them even after he gets a dear john letter from her because he still loves the girl.

## **Rachel appears in Jane**

Rachel is the beautiful sister of Jane. Rachel is raped and brutalized and will have to undergo an abortion. Jane is envious of the lovely Rachel and decides to engage in some risky behavior in an effort to emulate her sister's life, even the sordid parts.



## Objects/Places

### Chile appears in Brilliant Silence

In "Brilliant Silence," the dancing bears perform in Chile where they escape from the animal trainer. Years later, the ancestors of the bears somehow know the same dances as the original bears.

### Spider Creek appears in Crossing Spider Creek

In "Crossing Spider Creek," a man on horseback is attempting to cross Spider Creek. His horse spooks and he is thrown to the ground where he sustains a broken femur and other serious injuries.

### Mexico appears in The Lampshade Vendor

In "The Lampshade Vendor," the vendor tells a woman he is trying to sell a lampshade to that he used to tour Mexico with a flea circus he owned and operated.

### Gold Coast appears in Gold Coast

In "Gold Coast," a man awakens on the 37th floor of a high-rise hotel in a large city. He compares the view of the skyline with the Gold Coast where he used to go as a young man with his friends.

### The Appalachian Trail appears in The Appalachian Trail

In "The Appalachian Trail," a young woman tells her husband that she is going to walk a 2,000 mile path on the The Appalachian Trail. The husband first tries to talk her out of it but then decides to join her.

### Crystal Beach appears in Mandy Shupe

In "Mandy Shupe," a young girl is told about a young woman who was a Mennonite. The woman abandoned her church, headed for Crystal Beach, drank too much and danced naked with a man.

### New York City appears in Snow

Yolanda moves to New York City from a South American country in "Snow." Yolanda must adjust to seeing snow for the first time and to hearing talk of nuclear attack.





## **Fargo appears in Draft Horse**

In "Draft Horse," a man in Fargo recalls how his grandfather had to put down a beautiful Belgian mare that had fallen and broken a leg on the ice.

## **Vietnam appears in Stockings**

In "Stockings," a young soldier always wears a pair of his girlfriend's stockings over his face when his unit has to go on a raid. He thinks it protects him from being injured or killed.

## **Salt Lake appears in The Sewers of Salt Lake**

In "The Sewers of Salt Lake," a couple's dogs dig complicated tunnels that connect with the sewer system in Salt Lake City. The dogs take the couple's twin babies down into the tunnel system.



# Themes

## Youth/Lost Youth

A number of stories in "Flash Fiction" have themes that focus on youth or the recapturing of one's youth. In "Stones," the writer likes to watch the stones on the desert. The young stones like to move about which worries their elders, especially as the youngsters edge their way to the water. The old stones like to stay put in the warm desert floor and consider all movement as dangerous.

In "Roseville," a man recalls how he meets his love in an antique store. She is holding a blue Roseville vase. When he bumps into her, he sends her flying into a large cabinet of breakables. When she stands up, the Roseville vase is the only unbroken item in the store. On their 50th anniversary, he thinks back to the Roseville piece and how it represents their love and the purity of their youth.

In "Gold Coast," a man is in an unsatisfactory relationship. He thinks back to his youth when he and his friends would visit the "Gold Coast." In his mind, the Gold Coast still holds the lure of freedom it held so many years before in his youth.

In "August Evening," a middle-aged man purchases a glitzy sports car—a speedy vehicle similar to ones he drove as a young man. The man cruises in his old haunts and runs into an old girlfriend from high school. She is wearing shorts and a flimsy top that are more suitable to a younger woman. The two have had similar experiences, both having been married and divorced. As they face each other, they realize the futile attempts they are making to recapture their youth, a time before life held so many disappointments for them. The man speeds off, leaving the woman behind and not bothering to look at her in his rear-view mirror.

In "Here," a man is obsessed with Elvis. He fantasizes that Elvis is a neighbor who waves at the man as he comes and goes. Not only is Elvis an icon to this man, he represents his youth and a better and more hopeful time of his life.

## Envy

Envy, and its residual effects, is the theme in a number of stories in "Flash Fiction." In "Pumpkins," a woman is traumatized by an automobile accident involving a stranger. She imagines that her husband's reaction to the incident indicates that he is being unfaithful to her because the accident happens near the residence of his former mistress. Her hysterical confrontation of him sends him packing and sends her to the therapist. In "From the Floodlands," a man is complaining about the humidity and flooding in his southern locale. When an envious farmer from Illinois appears in the town begging for water, the man realizes that he is in a much better position than his drought-stricken neighbor from the north.



In "232-9979," the mistress of a man is planning to call her lover's wife and tell all. The woman envies the life her lover has—a nice home and two young children—and decides that she wants to take his wife's place. She has gotten pregnant to force her lover's hand. In "Feeding the Hungry," a man is never hungry—he must always force himself to eat. He is angered when homeless people ask him for money because they are hungry. He envies their ability to feel hunger. The only joy he gets out of eating is that the hungry envy him. He is bitter and angry—he hopes the hungry people will all die of hunger.

In "The Haircut," a couple is trying to reconcile after a separation. When the woman reunites with the man, she is upset to see that his hair has recently been cut. The man hates to go to the barbershop. The woman is the only person who has cut his hair for the past five years. Looking at his haircut with jealous eyes, she asks him who cut his hair. In "Water," the jealousy of an ex-lover leads to homicide. A woman still waters the plants for her ex-lover. Everyday, she passes by the river where she sees her ex-lover with his new girlfriend. One day, accessing his apartment with the key he has given her, she turns on the gas on his stove without lighting the flame. She leaves the apartment, envisioning how later his ex-lover and girlfriend will be lighting their cigarettes after sex.

## Devotion/Love

Many of the stories in "Flash Fiction" touch on love and devotion as well as love gone wrong. In "Crossing Spider Creek," a man falls off his horse and sustains a serious injury. He is alone and unsure whether he can survive. The horse that throws him is the favorite horse of his wife, Carol. He regrets how he has spent too much time away from her pursuing his own interests. He contemplates shooting the horse with his shotgun, curling up in its warmth and dying with his wife's favorite horse as a way to be near her at his end.

In "Pendergast's Daughter," a man is madly in love with a woman. They are on their way to her parent's house where he plans to ask for her hand in marriage. They arrive when the parents are in a physical fight with one another. The girl pleads with her boyfriend to help her mother. The man is immobilized and unable to respond. The man is heartbroken when later, the girl, refuses to answer his phone calls. The girl does not want to replicate her parents relationship with her own.

In "Wedding Night," a forlorn bus station clerk has hopes he will find his true love from among the travelers passing through the station. One evening, he notices a young girl who looks lost. He buys her dinner and provides a place for her to stay. She falls into a deep sleep for many hours. Unnoticed, he lovingly caresses her during her sleep. When he wakes the next day, she is gone. The man is happy, however, that he finally finds his true love—even though it does not last very long.

In "The Appalachian Trail," a young woman proclaims that she will be taking a 2,000 mile hike down the trail from Maine to Georgia. The man tries to talk her out of it but she is not dissuaded. As she gathers her items for the walk, he tells her to pack his gear up

as well. He apologizes to his feet in advance but he loves her too much to let her go alone.

# Style

## Point of View

The short stories contained in "Flash Fiction," are either third person omniscient narrative or first person narrative. In "Pumpkins," the narrator describes the domino effect that an automobile accident has on strangers who do not know the victim of the accident. In "The Stones," a man describes how he likes to observe the movement of the stones in the desert. A woman must throw her food away because of a power failure in "The One Sitting There." This tale is written in first person narrative, as the woman describes her struggle over the tragic death of her sister many years before.

A grandson is trying to defend his grandfather's death in "A Public Denial." Many think that the old man has committed suicide while trying to execute a stunt. The denial of this rumor is proclaimed in the first person by the loving grandson. In "232-9979," the story has a first-person perspective but that person is addressing her soliloquy to another character in the story. In the "Appalachian Trail," a man describes the debate he has with his wife about her goal to go on a 2,000 hike. A woman describes the process by which she dumps one man for another in "I Get Smart."

In "Snow," Yolanda describes her transition to New York City from another country. In "Corporal," a man recalls his childhood when he tries to raise enough paper in his community to be made an honorary Corporal. In "Subtotals," a man lists all the times he has done things during his life. For example: Number of rotten eggs I've thrown: 1; number of embarrassing moments: 2,258; and, number of time born again: 0. In "Vines," a man tells his readers about the signs of aging he is beginning to notice about himself.

## Setting

The seventy-two stories that comprise "Flash Fiction" take place in many diverse settings. "Brilliant Silence" describes dancing bears touring in the United States, Mexico and South America. In "The Stones," a man observes the movement of stones on the dry desert floor. In "Crossing Spider Creek," a man is thrown from his horse in a remote area in the Rocky Mountains. In "Ponderosa," a minister gets wind of his son's infidelity at a Ponderosa restaurant. In the "Gold Coast," a man who is not in a satisfying relationship compares his view out his window of the downtown skyline to the Gold Coast he used to visit in happier days.

The narrator in "From the Floodlands" is describing the floods and oppressive heat in her southern town. A man meets his true love in a bus station in "Wedding Night," while a prostitute steals the wallet of a flirtatious man while both are traveling on a city bus. Two insect researchers, who both resemble their subjects, fall in love at a national entomology conference in "True Love." New York City is the setting for "Snow" where a young Hispanic girl has been transplanted from her country to the Big Apple.



A man writes a poem to the woman he loves. Since he admires trains, in his poem he makes a comparison to his love and a freight train. In this story, "The Burlington Northern, Southbound," the man fails to understand why the woman will not return his calls after she reads the poem. "Corners" takes place in a funeral parlor. Two sisters lose another sister and react quite differently to the funeral director's attempt to make the dead sister look happy in the casket. The story, "108 John Street," is the story of a diverse group of roommates who must learn to cope with one another's differences. A man who simply wants a cheap breakfast winds up running the restaurant in "Deportation at Breakfast."

## Language and Meaning

As one can imagine, there are diverse styles of writing, word usage and rhetoric in the over seventy stories contained in "Flash Fiction." The first story, "Brilliant Silence," is written in a light-hearted, whimsical manner. Since this is a story about magical dancing bears, a fanciful approach is perfectly fitting. In "From the Floodlands," the writer uses a metonym and hyperbole to describe the oppressive weather in his southern town: "Here at the bottom of the country our windows drip with summer....This weekend seven people went for afternoon walks and drowned on the air," (p. 47).

In "The Stones," the author uses personification when describing the youthful stones who revolt against their conservative elders. In "The Father," understatement is used to subtly infer that the son of the older woman in the story is fathered by her lover. The body language of the two, who will not face each other when his children are curious why he "looks like no one," tells the underlying story far more effectively than words. In "The Love Poem," the man is first presented as a romantic but by the end of the short tale the man, through inference, is exposed as a self-centered egoist.

The story, "Dinner Time," is a metaphor for a man who strives to gain the attention of his wife. While she is focused on making his life better, the man is impatient and starved for her undivided attention which leads to his self-destruction. Irony is used in several stories, among them "Here's Another Ending" and "The Cage." In "Here's Another Ending," the owner of a Doberman tries to hide his dog's murderous ways. When the dog comes home holding the neighbor's pet rabbit in his mouth, the man shampoos the dead animal and furtively replaces it in its pen. The next day, the neighbor holds up the dead rabbit, shocked that it is back in its pen after he buried it two days before. In "The Cage," a prisoner escapes into a thicket, but becomes entangled by barbed wire in the woods and is freed by the policemen following him who will return him to his imprisoned state.

## Structure

The book "Flash Fiction" is a compilation of some seventy short stories. There is no particular organization to the structure of the book. The stories are varied and do not focus upon one particular topic or genre. In the introduction, the editors explain the

criteria they set out in their initial plans for the book. They decided that the book would be comprised of short stories that were between 250 and 750 words. The stories, although short, had to be complete stories that contained what the editors refer to as depth, clarity and a human connection.

The intention of the editors was that the book be comprised of stories that would hold the reader's attention and be a satisfying experience. When searching for the appropriate stories for their book, the editors focused on stories that would contain no break in vision—stories that could be absorbed "at once." It was the editors hope that they would be helping to launch a new genre of fiction—flash fiction—which would satisfy the reader in short order. In the high-tech age when people are multi-tasking and have short attention spans, the editors wanted to facilitate those realities by providing instant gratification that required limited time.

Preceding the stories, there is an introduction which explains the efforts of the editors in putting this book together. The stories are followed by an acknowledgment section which credits the sources of these stories and, as appropriate, the publications where the stories first appeared.



## Quotes

"Paw in paw, stepping in unison...what music can they possibly hear inside their heads as they dance under the full moon and the Aurora Australis, as they dance in brilliant silence?" (Brilliant Silence, p. 18)

"It isn't dawn yet. It's still a gradation of night, but night with tomorrow already luminous behind it like the silver behind the glass of a cobalt mirror." (Gold Coast, p. 42)

"Then I was swept along by the passengers getting off the bus and now I'm sorry I lost him so suddenly because there were only 7,400 pesos in his wallet and I'd have gotten more out of him if we'd been alone. He seemed affectionate. And very generous." (Vision Out of the Corner of One Eye, p. 76)

"I brought a halt to my glorious military career and entered into the disenchanted paper shadows of America where failure is a bounced check or a bad report card or a letter ending a love affair and all the words that hurt people when they read them." (Corporal, p. 96)

"I asked my wife recently whether or not she ever got that rotten fruit feeling, that sense of galloping inner deterioration before falling from the vine with a sickening plush." (Vines, p. 118)

"He tried to put this in the poem. It was four pages long and ended: 'I want to ride you home, Christine, and beyond. I want to ride you into mornings sharp and cold and blue and never run the same track twice.' He never heard a word from her....What woman wants to hear she is like the Burlington Northern southbound?" (the Burlington Northern Southbound, p. 127)

"The sun passed its zenith and she saw a stripe of shadow appear on the grass beside her husband, a silhouette slim as a boy, tender as memory." (The Blackberries, p. 136)

"I was about to ask the woman I love if she remembered that incident when she came in from the next room and without saying a word, picked up the knife from the table and slid it back under the refrigerator." (The Paring Knife, p. 141)

"The man shut his eyes and tried to think of how else to change her mind. When he opened them, he saw that between her feet and the ledge was a space, a space that would always exist now between herself and the world." (Space, p. 172)

"It's night now, and soon the dawn will come. In the night, the sky was red. A brilliant red. That was beautiful. Black against red. Like a devil with horns on the final crashing chords of a great concerto." (The Factory, p. 186)





"You didn't touch the bread though. What stopped you? You don't want to know whether the bread is real or whether it's a hallucination I've somehow duped you into seeing."  
(Bread, p. 200)

"In the light of the street lamp, she looked serene, and, he thought, well, valuable. He put his arm around her and drew her close. Slowly, she put her arm around him."  
(Yogurt, p. 201)



## Topics for Discussion

In "Pumpkins" what kind of vehicle does the woman who dies in an accident run into? What is the other young woman concerned about when she hears about the accident? What does the accident remind the therapist of?

In the "Public Denial," what kind of business did the man's grandfather want to open in his hometown? What did the old man do to prove what a good car the Toyota was? What does the grandson want the public to know about his grandfather's death?

In "Snow," why does Yolanda sit near the nun's desk at school? What is Yolanda afraid of after moving to New York City? What does Yolanda mistake snow for? How does the nun calm Yolanda's nerves?

In "Blackberries," why does the woman not want to eat the blackberries her husband picked? What plant does the husband suggest they pick and fry in butter? How does the wife respond? What does the husband say when the wife suggests they see a movie?

In "What Happened During the Ice Storm," what birds' eyes are frozen shut? Why are the birds unaware that they are vulnerable to predators? What is the intention of the boys who venture out to where the birds are huddled? What do the boys do after they reach the birds?

In "August Evening," how does the man try to recapture his youth? How does Jacky try to recapture her youth? What do they realize about themselves and each other when the man and Jacky confront each other?

In "Bread," what is the decision the young girl in a hut must make about herself and her little sister? What dilemma does the starving prisoner-of-war face? How does the rich woman with no children respond to her sister with five children who asks for some bread?