

I Looked At Her As She Stooped

I looked at her as she stooped towards the smoking blaze. She was sixty-nine and the steeplechase of her whole life had come to a halt.

"Well," I said. "I just thought I'd come over to see how you were getting along."

She turned and brandished the fire iron at me.

"Don't hit me with that," I said.

"I ought to."

"But you know how it is, Atlanta. I have been so busy I haven't had time."

"I ought to hit you with it."

"I wish you wouldn't."

"I ought to."

I approached her and took it away from her. Of course she raised her arm to strike. And there was a time when she could have made good her threat. She was much bigger than I. But her bones had knit. She had been robust and almost six foot, auburn haired. Now she was gaunt and haggard, white headed.

"How can you take away an old lady's cane?" she asked.

I put it in her hand and she sat down with it. She sat up straight with the fire iron gripped tightly and I couldn't take it. My heart came up in my throat.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I said, and I let myself out, crying.

Without Warning Her Whole Body

Without warning her whole body was swamped with a sense of utter misery, a sensation of sadness that she had never known before. And there was nothing she could do about it. She had lost her job and she would never find another and if she did she would lose that. She didn't want to work in the first place. She was only doing a favor to her stomach that seemed to think she ought to work for a living to support it.

She was tired of its constant belly aching. Her stomach was just lucky she wasn't Japanese, she would take a knife to it, that would shut it up for good.

She lay back and shut her ears to the growling. "Good for you to have hunger pangs once in awhile," she said. "We all have to suffer. Count your-

self fortunate I don't feed you glass. I'm tempted sometimes. The way things are."

Her stomach was nice and warm. It didn't have to go about in a thread-bare coat. "The next time it snows I'm going to stuff you full of snow. You never had it so good. What if I were a sword swallower? What if I were always jabbing you all the time, day after day, down where you live? How about that, huh?" Her stomach growled the whole night through.

The next day for a change she wrote "circus performer" on her application at the employment agency.

"They're training in Florida," she was told.

She got out on the road. She rode to Florida with a succession of truck drivers. She told each one of them she was going to Florida to join the circus as a sword swallower and when she got there that's what she did and the man with the cigar handed her a sword. She threw back her head and put it down easy.

"Don't swallow! Don't swallow!" the man said, getting out of his chair. "I can see you've never done this before. Bring it up easy. Easy. Easy. Easy does it. Attagirl!"

He swabbed her throat with tincture of Merthiolate and hired her. "You gotta lotta tits for a woman," he said:

"What do you mean?" she said. "You can see I'm half starved!"

"You get something to eat."

She threw her suitcase in with the bearded lady and took her place in the chow line.

The bearded lady asked, "What made you take this job?"

She patted her stomach. "You know. Got tired of the growling."

"What is the mission of art, Laramie?"

"You want to know what good it is? It has a very high mission. Art gives courage to the viewer that life can be ordered."

"That's what I mean, Laramie. You talk about it with conviction. It means something to you."

"I played hard at it. I'm still a little stove up." (from "Ghin")

What makes my life content is to be writing. To be up early and writing. This is wisdom . . . When I'm not writing I feel at the prey of

things. With writing I can overcome everything. I'm prey to no one. I dare more when I'm writing. My life has balance . . . I don't try to do anything but entertain . . . I don't try to present a picture of life . . . If there is a message it is to make life as it comes. Life can be ordered because look at me, I am ordering it through this story, even if I have to live in a dream world to do it . . . Creation is not a random butterfly flight. New art is anarchic. Traditional art is reinforcing to the culture. Art is not concerned with morals, only with faith. Art believes in the world and in man. It is a statement of hope, however disguised . . . I'm still learning how to write. I really have a lot of things wrong in my thinking abt stories but I've been coming to my senses for thirty years, no reason I should stop now . . . (from A Diary of Women, Della, "A Sequel to Monique," and letters to the editor)

Not to Worry

The terrace was in utter darkness but at every flash of lightning the harmonious figure of a woman was revealed, illumined by a bluish light.

From the garden came the sound of rain hitting the earth, and the scent of wet roses somewhere in the blackness. Wet rose bushes and wet roses. No telling what was out there.

"Not to worry," she said.

She put a reassuring arm around my shoulders. "No telling what's out there," I said. "Maybe crocodiles."

"Not to worry."

She put a reassuring arm around my shoulders. I was having a nervous breakdown. Not to worry, she kept repeating with every flash of lightning. Her arms exerted a gentle pressure that I loved. Many women had put their arms around my shoulders.

I turned and buried myself in the woman's arms, still standing there next to me in the dark. I thought she was a childhood sweetheart. I was having a nervous breakdown. I used to bury myself in Jane Allen's wonderful girth. Where was that Jane Allen now? If this were really Jane Allen she would be gray headed.

Edna May Oliver scurried through my mind, a flash from my frightened childhood, where the Bride of Frankenstein was born.

I was being held. It was rainy and dark.

I struggled in her arms. The lightning flashed and I saw her face, strong