



# MORNING

KAREN ROSENBAUM

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"Siddhartha sat under the mango tree like Buddha."

Circle Buddha

"Who sat under a fig tree"

Marginal notation: *abo* tree, (Whatever that is.)

"And Siddhartha received"

i before e except  
except why bother.

Draw a circle around the word. Now draw a line to the margin. Connect all the circles and lines and the dots on the i's. Now there. Doesn't that look nice?

I'm dissolving, thinks Monica M., and she puts down the sliding purple pen and folds Ramsey Ulton's Hesse paper neatly in two and drops it on the heap of papers to come back to. Oh Ramsey, the point, where is the point? She eyes the point of the purple pen lying across the thinly-lined scrawl of Joe Rees.

"Siddhartha," writes Joe Rees, "found the purpose of life and the meaning therein. What is relevant is the river, for in the river Siddhartha found peace." Joe Rees is a new veteran with creased bell-bottomed overalls and stiff sandals and he isn't

comfortable yet with peace. She fingers through the yet-to-reads for Byron Coombs, who hasn't been to class for two days.

To teach. For four years she has taught and still the word — in all its inflections — teach, teaching, taught — leaves her with a faint suggestion of awe. But what is teaching? Sitting on the floor and at her feet, not her students, but their notebook paper hieroglyphs which she deciphers and judges on the basis of some obscure, never-worded standard. Or in the classroom, conducting, pulling open the voices for the crescendos of perception, and pushing them back down when the ideas become sloppy and slurred.

And why? Isn't it after all the need to have eyes fastened on her, the mesmerism of her own voice. Attention. Frank doesn't seem to require that; he's happy locked up in his lab. But she is always starved for or surfeited with, it seems, attention.

There is something else. Nora says it is a noble something. Nora says it every day when she comes in from Reading Improvement A. To affect for good the lives of others. And then Nora, what is good? And how is it measured? Is a scrawling paper on relevance good? Is studying Siddhartha even good? Will it make them happier, wholer? Will they have stronger bones and fewer cavities and cleaner teeth? Are all ideas good, the Idea of ideas?

She knows she has effect. The letters they write her — on the bottoms of their essays or appearing in her box in fat sealed envelopes — some sputtering ink and anger.

*I think your comments on Heinlein are narrow. If you had read Stranger with more sensitivity and less of that fancy literary criticism, you might have grasped it . . .*

Dear Miss M:

*I wrote my paper viciously because I understand why Rabbit ran. My mother's just like his wife, sucking, clutching . . .*

one on an index card inside a brown paper bag of very dead roses

*Get out of my insides! Bitch!* or offering, unquipping themselves

*Here are some thoughts I had last week at Santa Cruz. DON'T READ THEM IN CLASS. They are for your eyes alone . . .*  
Miss M:

*I couldn't come to class last week. I was in Phoenix getting an abortion. My father has a friend there . . .*

or confessing feelings they flush for the next day — wondering with a ballpoint pen how old she is and whom she spends her evenings with; noticing everything — her toenail polish and little blue earrings that hang like fish hooks; attaching significance to things which astonish her — glances in their direction, or glances away, or no glances at all. And one once from a girl, obsessively enamored, she said, with a history of attachments to women teachers, but she knew this time, she knew from Monica's brusque impatience with her lack of preparation, she knew.

They want so much of her. Not just the hours in the cool dark library stacks which she likes really and the hours at home indexing and organizing the reading material and translating and digesting their papers, and the hours at school when she collects all her energy and compresses it into a ball somewhere inside her and then, for an hour at a time, emits it bit by bit in a shower of little sparks. They want more than that, they want her, too — they want to dissect, to disembowel her.

What do you think (*Cat's Cradle, The Female Eunuch, Sly and the Family Stone, scuba-diving, mauve, bamboo shoots in Oriental dishes*)?

Could you (turn in Jesus, live on abalone, sleep next to your dead mother)?

"Read us something you write," said Byron Coombs one day, the day after she'd asked him to read them a story he had written and had shown to her — some really modern fiction, she had said, and he had glowed. She'd thought they'd like his surfer's story, but they didn't because they didn't much like Byron Coombs.

She said, when he asked her to read, "No." She remembered one of her teachers reading a novel he was working on and afterwards the strained silence, and she smiled tightly and said to Byron Coombs and the class watching them,

"Sorry. My bottom drawer asked first."

She looks at Byron's slashed, dogmatic handwriting. The paper is longer than usual. Usual is skimpy, barely suggested, but peculiarly delightful insights which she rewards with As. She glances through. She sees why the paper is long. His treatment of Hesse is shorter than usual, hardly a page and a half. But then

*Miss M:*

*I feel you insulted us last week by implying we were not a worthy audience to hear any of your writing. My disappointment at your behavior caused my absence the last two class periods and was responsible for my almost dropping the class altogether. I had thought this was the sort of situation where we all shared. . . .*

Reading, reddening, the absurdity of it. Everyone sees the world through his own personal distorting little kaleidoscope. Insulting — oh! She loves these students, she has loved most of her students, but especially these. And especially Byron Coombs. When she tells Frank about them, about Byron riding up to her office window on his red Honda 80, about their excitement over Woodie Guthrie's old *Grapes of Wrath* stuff, her eyes get wet and she has to look down.

She chews the top of the purple pen and when she has bitten off the caphead, she begins to construct a reply

*Byron,*

*I had certainly not intended to insult the class. On the contrary. . . .*

A knock. Frank comes in, stands over her so she can have the best possible view of his knee. He has on the levis she mended with purple thread because she didn't have any blue.

"Lotta work?" he asks. He doesn't sound too interested.

"Yes." She turns over the letter to Byron Coombs. "You have a grouch?"

"Yeah." His eyes are rimmed below the circles of his glasses. "Bernard wants the Tungsten stuff in by June." He leans down and yanks on a strand of her hair. "How are the jolly greenimps?"

"In wretched writing form," she says. "You hungry?"

"With a bowl of cherries under my belt?"

He flips out the waistband of his levis and drops his voice an octave. "I'm hungry. I'll go make friends with your refrigerator."

When he's making kitchen noises, moving jars, she looks again at her letter to Byron Coombs.

There was a community college conference in February. The kind where teachers signed up for sections that sounded interesting — Chicano drama or transformational grammar in freshmen comp or the remedial adult — and she had picked the one on teaching the writing of imaginative poetry because there wasn't one on the writing of imaginative prose. She remembers now the aging and tanned blonde woman with the face like the faces that glazedly smile out of the society pages, the woman who looked so out of place in thick white lace pants and blouse, and who carefully seated herself in the circle next to a full-habited nun — and who was very conscious of why.

The white lace lady was the poet. She told of writing poetry *with* her class. She'd show them the poem she was working on and they'd help find better words or point up symbols she was only semi-aware of. One poem was about Janis Joplin and was called "Death of a Gypsy" and the students had supplied the dope talk so the poem sounded real.

But it hadn't sounded real to her. It sounded to her like the white lace lady in a strip show — though she wasn't quite used to being in strip shows — and the students all shouting olé as each white lace layer was peeled off. It was the great emotional burlesque.

Frank comes back with what looks like a ham and sardine sandwich. He scoots over the piles of papers and sits next to her. "Now tell me," he says, "the problems of your day. Then I can put them up there with Bernard's and Fielding's and see which is the most deserving of my immediate attention. I'll give you a twenty-point handicap."

She chews on her lower lip. Then she says, "Did you think of putting a little spaghetti on top of the sardines?" She rubs his back with her elbow and her heel wrinkles Joe Rees' reflections on the relevance of Siddhartha.

She has gone through the drawer full of stories — carboned copies mostly, some which she has sent out to magazines under the name Forsythe Heald which she is as proud of as most of the stories. But Forsythe Heald is a name to be easily reckoned with, alas, and Forsythe Heald's stories have come back slipped under her door by a discreet mailman who must have wondered.

She has searched through the stories for the one that would compromise her least — her favorite, too, in a way, a story about a child — about her as a child, but then her childhood seems so far away. She has carried it in a yellow folder with her books and notes and now in the hour before her first class, she opens the folder and sees it — the carboned letters look fuzzy but how clearly, she thinks, they give her away.

Last night she had forgotten she'd begun the story with a poem. She reads it over now. It is light — and harmless. She starts to read, mumbling in rehearsal. Oh. That — the "spring-green dress" — it sounds so affected. And the name Amanda, ought-to-be-loved, the symbolism is so overt. And what about the child — isn't she more than the child of her own past, isn't she, too, the child of her future — the embryo grown womb big and warm and embodying even now her dreams?

Her lips are open, her eyes closed when Nora comes in from her 8 o'clock, drops her books on the desk. "How are you?" she says. "I had maybe fourteen there this morning. I'll have the other fourteen tomorrow. I wish they'd all pick the same day to stay home. Then I could sleep in, too."

Monica opens her eyes and tries to smile at Nora. "It's May," she shrugs. "And it's morning."

"And they're remedial," says Nora. "And they ought to be there. It's good for them."

Monica stands up. "And that's why they're remedial," Nora is saying. Monica picks up her books. "All they care about is the passgrade," says Nora, Monica nodding quietly out of the office.

The hallway seems too quiet. Tucked under the Hesse papers is the yellow folder. Tucked under the Hesse papers is a diary almost, a dictionary at least, the Harbrace Guide to Monica M.

There they sit. Teresa Ligo arguing with Gary Height about Kamala being a feminist. Ah Teresa you're wearing a spring-green dress. Joe Rees is sitting upright as though his spine is steel. He has a band-aid on his foot where the sandal rubs. She moves the overhead projector under the front desk and slides the note stand out of the way by the window. Next to the window Ramsey Ulton is sprawled over two chairs. Ramsey, do you mind playing second to a bottom drawer? Are you very insulted? Byron Coombs, head down, is reading, so she will notice, *Magister Ludi*.

She sits tentatively on the front desk and breathes hard against her stomach. The eyes all come to focus on her. Some of the eyes are on a long iron key Frank found to hang around her neck. "I'm going to try something new," she says, noting clinically the strangeness echoing in her own voice. They watch and wait. They like something new.

"I'm going to read you a little story I wrote." She looks down, opens the yellow folder, and says without looking up again, where she knows she would see first the eager face of Byron Coombs, "It's just a little thing — quite old." Then tightening her lips in the tiniest of smiles, she purges out that apology.

"Take, Eat," she thinks. "It's called 'The Gingerbread Girl,'" she says.

They are very quiet. She begins.