

PROBLEMS IN COMMUNICATION: TWO STORIES *me*

by

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Clothes

The yard was full of the last of Rita's furniture: the sofa with the violent magenta spread thrown over it to disguise its worst defects, the antique bedroom set which needed to have the footboard to the bed repaired, and the black and white television with its own stand and accompanying audio defects.

Rita Chadwick sighed. There was nothing worth salvaging that wasn't already packed in her dying, but not yet dead, Volvo. She had had the car longer than she'd had pets or husbands. The latter had come and gone without taking too much of her or from her, and she was glad to be alone. Just as long as the car didn't conk out, things would be fine.

She shaded her eyes and watched the quiet street in the small college town for some prospective buyer, in a car or on foot, to take the rest of her furniture. But all she saw was her landlady, Mrs. Chen, who had come to inspect the premises so that Rita could get her deposit back.

"You a'ready to go?" Mrs. Chen asked in her broken, staccato English. Rita liked the older Chinese lady very much. Her business-like and sincere manner had remained constant throughout the two years that Rita had rented the basement apartment.

Li Chen had been a source of comfort to Rita. After a long day spent at the welfare office where she listened to the continual threats, complaints, and lies of her clients, and to the screaming and bickering of the dirty children who

invariably accompanied their equally dirty parents, Rita was glad to drive home and find Li Chen moving about her rental property, mowing the grass or sweeping the entry way. Somehow, Li's unobtrusive presence eased the tension which always remained like coils around her spine on those long days at a job which Rita hated. But now it was all over, and she was going back to her home town to teach English once more.

"Yes, I'm almost ready," she said. "But what am I going to do with the rest of this stuff that didn't sell?"

"I take. I buy from you. How much you want for the lot? I have other property I need furniture for."

They haggled, Li, offering more than she wanted to pay; and Rita, accepting less. But they settled the sale with Li saying that her husband could easily repair the footboard, and her son could work on the television.

"Cheap labor," she said, and her agate eyes sparkled.

Rita laughed and took one last look at her furniture. She would not miss it. She had owned the same pieces of second-hand, garage-sale merchandise since she had graduated from college ten years before. She would sooner sleep on the floor than move the junk one more time; she had moved so many times.

"I guess I'm ready then. You can mail me my check for the deposit and the furniture. Send it to my mother's house. Here, I'll write the address on this for you."

Rita tore a deposit slip from the check book she carried in her purse. On the back of the slip she wrote, "Rita Chadwick,

Carolyn Chadwick, 321 Odessa Terrace, La Rue, Kansas, 67219."

She handed the slip to Li.

Li folded it carefully then looked pointedly at Rita.

"Maybe with the money I send you, you buy new clothes."

Rita looked down at her blue, cotton, draw-string pants and her green t-shirt with its permanent grease spot from salad dressing just above her left breast. One of the nice things about working at the welfare office had been that no matter how badly she had dressed, she had still been better dressed than her clients. And she definitely had smelled better.

"Maybe," she said, but she had no intention of spending the money on clothes for teaching. Not much money, anyway. It had taken her a long time to complete her M. A., four years, including summer school, while working full time. Rita had no desire to spend her first available funds on clothes. Clothes didn't make the teacher, was Rita's argument; hard work, determination, and dedication did. It was her ability to teach and her credentials which had landed her the teaching position at La Rue High School, not the clothes which she had worn to her initial interview.

Li ran a finger judiciously across the wood of the vanity table she had just bought and flicked off a ladybug crawling along the surface.

"You glad to be going home to your mother's house?" she asked. "You get along?"

"I don't know, to your first question; and we try, to your second." They did try, too. They had for years. At

least Rita was trying harder each time she saw Carolyn. But she felt apprehension about the move home.

Home. Rita had felt homeless ever since she had begun work on her B. A. at the age of eighteen. Neither of Rita's two husbands had provided a home for her or security, but she had neither expected nor required it of them. Her attitude in all areas had been extremely independent, which was one of the reasons she was no longer married. Her independence was the major reason why she really didn't relish the thought of returning to Carolyn Chadwick's house after being on her own for so many years.

For all the years prior to college she had behaved and spoken as her mother had wished. Having no brothers or sisters, Rita had witnessed no rebellion against her mother's strength, no challenge to her power. But her own rebellion had come when she was safely at college, and with the rebellion had come the knowledge that she had her own strength and her own power.

Rita shook hands with Li Chen and handed her the key. It had been good living in Endicott, but Rita knew that one virtue she possessed was the ability to know when change was necessary and why. Working at the welfare office had served its purpose in her life as had completing her education. Both had been the means to an end; and now with her appointment all but secure, she was glad to be leaving.

It was hot work, driving into the August setting sun in her un-air-conditioned Volvo. Rita watched the road carefully as she reached into the glove compartment and pulled out a

covered rubber band. With a quick motion of her left wrist, and the added help of two fingers of her right hand, she was able to twist her long, dark hair into a pony-tail while steering with her knees.

A posted sign along the highway indicated that La Rue was one-hundred-and-twenty miles away. Rita resigned herself to another two hours of driving time and reached for the bottle of grapefruit juice wedged between the driver and passenger seats. She swallowed half of the juice, capped it, and looked at the country. The day was golden with the first haziness of late summer, impending fall. The buffalo grass on either side of the road was losing its lush green color and waved in hissing undulations. The hills of grass rose and fell into the horizon and were broken only by an occasional pond which shimmered bright blue when viewed from a distance and glittered darkly when seen from a few feet away.

Even though she enjoyed the scenic drive, she was glad when her ancient car finally made it to La Rue. The last opalescent streaks of dusk had faded from the sky, and a sliver of moon gleamed overhead. Winston Avenue was a flurry of traffic illuminated on all sides by the bright lights of the large city; neon lights indicated clubs, restaurants, car dealerships, motels, and shopping malls. As Rita drove west on Winston, she concentrated on the traffic, switching lanes and bearing north on Plum, west on Fairfax, and north once more on her mother's street of Odessa.

Finally, the car was gliding quietly down the three blocks of stately, well-kept homes with individually appro-

priate landscaping, and pulling into Carolyn Chadwick's driveway and through the back gates. Rita switched off the ignition.

Evening breezes swept through the trees, removing the last, lingering heat of the day. A bird called from the manicured shrubs which lined the stone wall of the back yard. Suddenly the surrounding darkness was lit by the brightness of flood lights, and a screen door slammed.

"Rita, is that you?"

"Yes, it's me." Rita's legs were numb from her extended drive, and she felt needles shoot upward while she moved slowly to the house.

Inside the kitchen, she was momentarily dazed by the ceiling light. A window air-conditioner, in addition to the central air system, circulated cool air. Tiny ice picks pricked her skin, and goosebumps formed on her forearms. She sneezed wetly.

"Bless you." Her mother's arms were around her. Her mother's fragrance enveloped her. Rita held her mother briefly before she reached for a kleenex.

Carolyn pushed wisps of her daughter's hair from her face and pronounced judgment. "You look awful. Good God! Are those the only clothes you have?"

"I thought they were a bargain. A quarter for the pants at Good Will. The t-shirt for free, courtesy of an old boyfriend. And thongs on sale for only sixty-nine cents. No one can call me a slave of fashion."

"That's for sure." Carolyn motioned for Rita to sit opposite to her at the kitchen table. "So," she said. "How long can you stay?"

Rita stared at her mother in amazement. "I thought you understood from the telephone conversation we had earlier in the week, Mother. I'm moving back to La Rue for good. I signed a contract which was mailed to me, and I'm taking it to the superintendent tomorrow morning."

"I guess I didn't realize your appointment to teach was definite," Carolyn said slowly. "I don't know where my mind was when we were talking. I thought you were considering taking the job if it was available." She paused and looked at Rita doubtfully. "Then this isn't a visit."

"No, it's not. But if you don't want me to stay here-- I had planned to find a place to rent just as soon as possible, anyway, and . . ."

"It's only that I'm just now getting used to being on my own again after so many years of being married to Nelson. In some ways I actually enjoy living alone. I can go to the symphony whenever I want without feeling guilty about it. Nelson never did like the symphony."

"I remember."

"I can have whatever I want to eat without listening to him scream at me for not buying generic brands. I do whatever I want, whenever I want. It's been quite an adjustment, but I'm getting used to doing things for myself without worrying about others."

"How's business?" asked Rita to divert the conversation which would, any time now, take a direction toward Carolyn's continuing interest, reading and reviewing self-help books for her own benefit and Rita's. Over the last five years she had heavily armed herself with them against Nelson in order to gain the courage for a divorce.

"Not so hot." Former nurse, erstwhile musician, and college graduate at the age of fifty-six in sociology, Carolyn had been selling Mercedes-Benzes in La Rue for three years and doing very well. She had a reputation in the community for honesty, intelligence, and sincerity which certainly helped her in the car business. Additionally, her quiet air of self-assurance and her willingness to work with a customer were assets.

Carolyn stood up. The plum and rose patterned designer "float" dress swirled mid-calf. Plump legs were encased in nylons and reached stockily from tortuously high, smooth, beige pumps. Rita looked, really looked at her mother's face beneath the silver, coiffed hair and was startled. "She's an old woman," she said to herself and remained silent.

"I can't do everything in a year: get a divorce, enjoy being on my own, and make a bundle in business. I can't do it all." Carolyn reached a hand toward her cigarettes which were on the window ledge, extracted⁺ one from her pack, and lit it. Diamond rings sparkled in the kitchen light as she shook out a match. An old woman but a powerful one, Rita thought to herself and wanted suddenly to escape.

"I'm going to bring some of my things in and take them upstairs, if that's all right."

"If you'll wait awhile, Nelson will be over; and he can unpack your car for you. There's no need for you to carry all of that heavy stuff in."

Rita shaded her eyes from the ceiling light, as she looked at her mother. "Nelson? I thought the two of you got a divorce because you couldn't stand each other. I thought you were making a new life for yourself."

"Are you hungry? You look too thin." Carolyn opened the refrigerator and stood aside. Rita saw milk, four kinds of juice, several cans of Pepsi, and a bottle of wine on the top shelf. Eggs, cheeses, two pounds of butter and cream were on the next shelf, in addition to a pecan pie and a container of whipped cream. Then came the sliced barbequed brisket, the smoked turkey breast, and shredded ham. Delicatessen containers of cole slaw, macaroni salad, and potato salad were labeled on the bottom shelf.

"Whatever you want: grapes, bing cherries, salad stuff are all in the produce drawer. Rosa baked a chocolate cake that is out of this world. It's over there." A glittering hand pointed to the pass-through which held, in addition to the cake, a portable color TV, antique dishes of costume and precious jewelry, and empty, washed Miracle Whip jars without lids.

"I'm not hungry, but I will get a glass of water."

Carolyn wandered into the dinette area off the kitchen and began dialing on one of the many phones in the house.

"That's fine, dear. I really want to hear about your job, but I have a few business calls to make first."

Knowing her mother's tendency for long phone conversations, Rita got her water, slipped off her thongs, and moved on bare feet into the carpeted hallway and through the mirrored door into the living room. Art deco and art nouveau lamps lit the corners of the lavender living room. A violin and bow were framed next to the old-fashioned pump organ which reached to the ceiling. A grandfather clock swung its pendulum heavily. Individual portraits of Carolyn and Rita hung over a parlor set and recliners. The sounds of chamber music came over the intercom system. Rita curled herself in one of the gray, velvet recliners and set her glass on the carved, teak coffee table. A chill was in the air, reminiscent of a mausoleum, and she rubbed her arms.

"If this were my house," she said aloud, "I'd decorate it in reds and yellows." Only silence answered her.

The doorbell rang, and she answered it. "Why, Nelson," she said drily and stood aside to let her step-father into the house.

Poor Nelson. At sixty-two he looked as he had always looked to Rita: short, balding, and belligerent. His only charm was the Paul Newman smile which slid across his face when he was amused. Generally he was too concerned about the arms race, the problem of his immediate financial situation, which always, in his own mind, bordered on bankruptcy, and the chronic disrepair of his ovens at the two exclusive bakeries which he owned.

A little man, thought Rita as she watched her mother, who outweighed Nelson by a good twenty pounds, come into the room and kiss him briefly. Even a little man is entitled to happiness, Rita realized with astonishment and felt mild pity. An adversary while Rita had been growing up, Nelson had seemed to take perverse pleasure in making her cry with his tactless personal remarks: her dress seemed too short, the color made her face appear green, the style made her "look like a bale of hay with a wire busted." He could never make any more comments about her poundage at any rate, Rita thought, as she slid easily onto the parlor set sofa and crossed her legs.

They were scrutinizing her.

"She's too thin, isn't she, Nelson?" Carolyn's second and third chins quivered as she spoke. Reaching for another cigarette, she paused, waiting for Nelson to light it for her. This ritual completed, Carolyn deposited herself in the recliner that no one else was permitted to use and waited for Nelson to agree with her.

"I don't know," he said. "She looks all right to me except for those God-awful clothes and that mop she calls her hair."

For Nelson, this was a compliment; and Rita knew it. Still, left-over anger from childhood and teenage years welled inside her. "You're in no position to criticize my hair or my clothes, Nelson! You have rather bizarre taste in hair styles as you exhibit through that draping effect of your two or three hairs across your skull. And as for your lime-green, polyester jumpsuit, it would make even

Herb Tarleck cringe." There, thought Rita. But she looked at him sitting quietly next to her mother, and she cursed inwardly. After being acquainted with Nelson for twenty-four of her twenty-eight years, she should have known better. Nelson could not help being Nelson.

Strangely enough, Carolyn was smiling. "Let's have some cake, she said.

The next morning Rita awakened early with a sense of disorientation from being in her mother's house. She was conscious of two things: she shouldn't have eaten the cake, (it still weighed heavily in her stomach), and she should have asked Nelson to help her lug the impossibly heavy suitcase up the back stairway. She rubbed her shoulder area and the small of her back as well as she could and sat upright in the bed, groaning. Still wearing the same t-shirt and a pair of bikini underwear, she slipped out of bed, opened the door of her old bedroom, and stared into the gloom of the hallway. A moth as big as a bat flew into her face, and she ran past it into the bathroom.

Moths: Why had God ever created them? Leaning her head against the bathroom door, she remembered how Carolyn had tried to reason with her about her phobia. It had been the summer after kindergarten.

"Rita, look at the miller in the jar. It can't hurt you." At Carolyn's command, Nelson had caught a miller and placed it in an empty jar with air holes punched in the metal lid.

"I hate it. It has teeth," Rita had said defiantly.

Carolyn had been adamant. "You hold the jar, Rita, and look at the miller."

"No, take it away! Kill it!" Rita remembered screaming.

"Leave her alone, Lyn," Nelson had said. "It doesn't matter." That one time he had been on Rita's side. Maybe it was just that he knew all about how it felt to be bullied.

The hapless miller had been disposed of, flushed down the toilet.

Now, in the safety of the bathroom, Rita turned on the light and ventured a glance at the mirror. Maybe she would look and feel better after a shower. Her final meeting with the superintendent was scheduled for ten o'clock. She began, in thinking of the meeting, to feel glad as she did on those rare occasions when she had a goal in sight or had reached it. She thought of the time, several years prior to her casework days, when a student who hated to read had asked her for the second book in a series and the time when she had been told by a principal that her work as a first-year teacher had been excellent.

The water beat on her face. She loved teaching. It actually frightened her sometimes that she loved it so much. It had taken her so long to finish her education and get on with her life. Rita parboiled her skin, turning her sore shoulder to the stinging spray.

The grandfather clock was striking nine as she closed the door to her bedroom and looked critically at herself in the hallway mirror. The dark-blue, India-print, peasant

blouse and skirt were probably, no, were definitely not the thing to wear; but it couldn't be helped. Rita sighed. Sometimes her dislike for dresses put her at a disadvantage.

A bleary-eyed Carolyn sat in her recliner. A cup of coffee steamed on the teakwood table. A lit cigarette was poised in her hand. She put the cigarette to her lips, inhaled, and coughed. Seating herself across the room, Rita felt slightly sick as she looked at her mother.

"I'll be going to my meeting soon," she said.

"Oh, that's right," Carolyn said. "You're returning your contract today to the superintendent. How much will you make next year?"

"Fifteen-five."

"Fifteen-five after your previous teaching experience and your M. A.?" Carolyn was incredulous and smiling. "You were making fourteen-eight without grading papers as a caseworker."

"I didn't like casework. I didn't like the people."

"You're being intolerant. It takes all kinds," Carolyn said primly.

"How would you know?" Rita asked angrily, suddenly annoyed by the opulence and safety which surrounded Carolyn. "You never meet the type of people I had to work with, Mother. Not at the Mercedes-Benz dealership, not at the symphony, and certainly not in this neighborhood."

"Well, who rattled your cage?" asked Carolyn coolly. "I was only commenting that you certainly aren't going to make enough money to justify career changes."

"That I want to do it is justification enough," said Rita flatly and looked at the grandfather clock.

"Not to change the subject, but when do you plan to move your furniture from Endicott?"

"I've sold my things, Mother. All but what's in the car."

The pendulum swung ponderously in the clock for a full minute before Carolyn spoke again in tones which conveyed tight displeasure. "That was very unwise of you."

"Listen, I'm tired of having my living quarters look like a junk yard. I'm going to buy what I want, piece by piece, to replace what I've sold."

"Some of those things can't be replaced, and I'm sorry you sold them. But that's the way your are." Carolyn's voice was husky with anger. "You've never been satisfied with anything--not jobs, not places to live, not furniture, not husbands, not anything."

"Your job isn't exactly making you jump for joy these days. And as for husbands, at least I knew enough to get out quickly enough to avoid getting pregnant and having a daughter that I never wanted."

Carolyn looked out the window next to her chair. "I'm sorry you hate me so much," she said.

Rita could tell it was going to be a wonderful day.

"I'm sorry I've been such a bad mother," Carolyn said, still looking out the window.

This had always been Rita's cue. "It's not your fault. I'm sorry that I've been so irritable and mean. Packing,

driving, and an interview, all in less than twenty-four hours, have left me a little crazed." But she knew that there was more to it than that.

Carolyn continued to sit, folded like a caterpillar, in the offended silence of a smoke cloud. Smoke had already begun, even this early in the morning, to fill the top third of the large living room.

"I'd better be going if I'm going to get to the interview on time." Rita stood up using her hands for leverage on the arms of the parlor set chair.

Still not looking at Rita, Carolyn managed a parting shot. "Your dress doesn't exactly fit the occasion." The sky outside the window was gray. "You'd better take an umbrella." Maternal concern prevailed at the end.

Rita left the house, slamming the back door behind her. She should never have apologized. The more she thought about the implicitly required apology, the madder she became. She had been forced into a corner and had retaliated. She forgave herself but not Carolyn as she backed her Volvo out of the driveway and drove to her appointment.

In an alley behind the Board of Education, a cat darted in front of Rita's car. Not being able to brake quickly enough, Rita felt an ominous bump beneath her tires. Slamming on her brakes and shifting into park, she jumped out of the car and ran back to the cat. It was a thin, yellow stray with scars on its ears and patches of hair gone from its coat. It gave a guttural moan, a hiss, and coughed as it tried to crawl between the trash cans lining the alley.

Rita stared wildly at the gray strip of sky above the old buildings. Shaking her fist at whatever malign influence seemed to be currently at work in her life, she threw herself into the car, noted that her meeting was in ten minutes, and shifted into drive.

Dr. Hart did not keep her waiting. At exactly ten o'clock, he ushered her politely into his office and asked her to take a seat. He looked through his bi-focals at the signed contract which she handed to him before she sat down.

"Rita Chadwick," he intoned seriously, "why do you want to teach in this school system?"

In this room at this meeting she was sure of herself. "I want it because it's right," she said slowly, deliberately. "Through years of unrelated jobs outside my field, and the relative poverty of graduate school, I have known two things: I enjoy teaching high school, and I enjoy my subject material. I want to teach again. Here." She began to pick up momentum. "La Rue is my home town, even though I have not lived here for ten years, and . . ."

"Dr. Hart held up a hand and laughed. "Just as long as you have good and sufficient reasons to stick with it. I don't want you to break contract three months from now because teaching in La Rue is not for you." He cleared his throat and continued to speak. "You will be teaching two Comp. II sections, one class of American Literature, one creative writing section, and one Business English course. That's four preparations daily."

"I don't mind having four preparations. The variety of classes to teach more than compensates for the extra time."

Dr. Hart smiled, took off his glasses, and pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. "Since you're so eager to begin, we're glad to have you. Fill out the necessary W-2's with Anna in the outer office and report to the principal of La Rue High School two weeks from today." He extended his hand and Rita shook it.

"There's just one thing," she said.

"There always is," he sat back, put his glasses back on, and waited.

"It's about my clothes."

"Ms. Chadwick, please spare me any stories about how you feel concerning dress codes. We stopped enforcing codes ten years ago; it was too difficult. As long as what you wear is clean and as long as your clothes are not a distraction to the students, I believe that there will be no difficulties. Do a good job, that's all we ask."

"I will," she answered firmly.

"If I didn't think you would, I wouldn't have hired you. Now, is there anything else?"

There was nothing else. After filling out the W-2's, Rita ran down the stairs in the old building, flung herself into the gray morning, and twirled until her peasant skirt flew high above her knees and passersby stared.

On the way to Carolyn's house, Rita felt her spirits become more subdued. It would never work, staying at Carolyn's.

They both made one another miserable. She would look for an apartment during the two weeks before school started. Li would send her the money she owed within the next few days.

Inside the house on the kitchen table, Rita found a note. "I'm at the dealership. Meet me at the Carriage House for lunch at noon. Love, Mother."

Rita paused in the living room to turn off the central air and took the front stairs two at a time. Undressing and flinging her skirt, blouse, hose, and heels in the closet of her bedroom, Rita reached for her suitcase and pulled out a pair of faded jeans, a clean t-shirt, socks, and a pair of tennis shoes.

Since it was only eleven-fifteen by the grandfather clock's reckoning, Rita decided to take an umbrella and walk to the Carriage House which was a chic lunch spot less than a mile from her mother's house. She enjoyed the open prosperity of her mother's neighborhood now that her own future seemed more secure, and she felt the tension of the early morning leave her as she walked by the well-tended houses. It was a quiet neighborhood with only the sound of gardener's shears snipping at hedges and lawns. The children who had been Rita's friends and play-mates had grown up, gone to college, and begun careers. Most of them had done well, but some of them, like Cory Wilson, hadn't. And Rudy Stark, valedictorian of Rita's class, had enlisted in the service because he hated his parents who wanted him to go to a prestigious Eastern university.

Rita remembered all of the games of kick-the-can, lemonade, murder-in-the-dark, army, and tag with the old gang. She never saw any of them any more. They never came home, just as she seldom came home. The animosity was still too fresh between her friends and their parents.

Block after block of soft, green lawns and stately homes passed. Only an occasional dog challenged her right to walk in the exclusive residential area. It was such a safe place to live. People could drive into their gated driveways, walk into their centrally air-conditioned houses, and feel secure behind years of accumulated power and money.

Rita knew all about it, had lived it, and realized that as a single woman and a teacher, she would never have it. Times had changed; lifestyles and goals had changed. At least hers had. She wanted more than safety.

She reached the Carriage House a little before noon and spotted her mother in a corner booth. Swinging her umbrella jauntily, she decided to be kind and forget the morning incident. Carolyn handed her a menu as she sat down.

"It's all good, but try the quiche," Carolyn said.

"What about the crab avocado salad?"

"Not bad, but the quiche is better."

A smiling waiter came to take their order and bring water. Looking around, Rita saw several acquaintances of her mother from her mother's side of town. They resembled one another and Carolyn in their expensive three-piece suits, diamond jewelry, and heaviness of body. Rita remembered, when she was thirteen, her mother's angry answer to a statement she had made.

Her mother's reply had been, "I don't care what your friends get to say, wear, and do. It has nothing to do with you."

But Carolyn was safe in her own anonymous conformity and had always been. Rita smiled to herself, but her mother had quick eyes.

"What's so funny?"

"I was just thinking about how you always wanted me to be different from everyone else, but you don't now. You and your friends are all the same."

"You think so?" Carolyn lit a cigarette and did not bother to keep the smoke out of Rita's face.

"Well, look at the ways in which you're alike: clothes, attitudes, hair styles. Originality in these and other areas is definitely not present."

"There are other things of value in life that count for as much as originality. Perhaps by the time you're my age you'll know what they are."

Rita laughed and reached for her mother's hand. "Being a member of the country club and voting Republican have to be two of those things."

"You've made it clear for the last several years that you really don't have any regard for my thoughts, values, or feelings. If you did, would you be dressed as you are now to have lunch with me? By wearing a dress, you would have compromised some lofty principle, I imagine. Well, let me tell you, a person's entire life is filled with compromises in order to get along in this world." Carolyn paused and ended with, "I hope you know that when you teach you'll have to wear dresses."

"That's where you're wrong. I can wear what I want, it doesn't matter. I don't have to compromise just yet, it would seem," Rita tried to laugh again and failed.

"You don't know the meaning of the word, compromise. You've always done exactly as you wanted, regardless of the wishes or feelings of those around you."

Rita recognized her mother's words and intentions as variations on the earlier morning theme. She declined another capitulation on her part. "You're the one who doesn't know the meaning of the word. And you're the one who always gets her way by intimidating others or by making them feel guilty for thinking and acting differently from you. Look at the way you've tried to bully Nelson and me all of these years."

The food arrived^d before Carolyn could answer. She stared stonily at her daughter until the waiter was gone.

"I never would have spoken to your grandmother as you do to me," she said.

Rita thought momentarily of the stately matriarch who was now dead. "No, but I'll bet you wish you had. And I'll bet you kept a lot inside and hated her sometimes. I don't want to hate you, Mother. I just don't want to be like you. You're wonderful to those outside of your home, but you've made life very hard sometimes for those of us who have lived with you."

Carolyn cut into her quiche and lifted the bite to her mouth. "Since I'm so hard to get along with, I think it would be better for you to find an apartment before school starts. I have some friends in real estate who can help." She chewed

and swallowed. "Yes, I do have friends, and they would be amazed to know what a terrible person I am. Listen, I don't think I'm very hungry, and I have to get back to work. Here's some money for lunch and whatever odds and ends you might need to get this afternoon," Carolyn handed her daughter a fifty-dollar bill and was gone.

Rita looked at the uneaten quiche. She tried to eat her crab avocado salad, but the crab wasn't very fresh. Suddenly, she felt uncomfortable and told herself that it was only because she was wearing jeans and a t-shirt. The jeweled friends of her mother eyed her with reproof and spoke in low undertones as she walked slowly to the cashier and paid the bill.

It had begun to rain in a drizzling soft mist. Outside the restaurant on the pavement she opened her umbrella and looked at the traffic. She told herself that she had tried and that some day it would be all right; Carolyn and she could be friends. She clutched the change from the meal tightly in her fist and began to walk.

Friends

Zoe awakened in the cool dimness of her basement apartment bedroom and listened to the squabbling of the blue jays in the bush outside her bedroom window. She raised her eyelids slowly and saw the silhouette of her black cat, Agatha, between the gold-paisley, India-print curtain and the window. Agatha's tail hung past the curtain and twitched furiously. The jays continued their harangue in the bush while Zoe yawned, slid out of bed, and pulled her cat's tail. Agatha poked her head quizzically half way under the curtain and then resumed her bird watching.

"Silly cat," Zoe spoke in early morning throatiness and flipped back the curtain in order to survey the May morning. The sun caught the blueness of the jays' wings in the bushes and dazzled Zoe's eyes momentarily. The movement of the curtain startled the birds, and they flew noisily away. In a way, she was sorry. They were noisy and obnoxious, but to her they were fascinating to watch, always in constant motion. The cat chattered her teeth at them.

"Don't worry, Aggie," Zoe rubbed sleep from her eyes. "They'll be back." She dropped the curtain and headed for a shower.

Half an hour later in the steam-filled bathroom, she wiped film from the mirror over the sink. Facing herself in the bathroom mirror had become difficult lately. It wasn't that she dreaded seeing the face in the mirror. She never looked that bad, even though more silver hair was appearing

on a regular basis. It was just that she felt a stranger to herself these days. There was somehow a sense of separateness which made looking at the face an invasion of privacy. Whose privacy, she didn't know. But after wrapping her freshly washed hair in a towel this Saturday morning, she did look.

It was the same face, all right. The one with the large, brown eyes which Rachel said made people feel uncomfortable, as if they were being examined. Maybe Rachel was right. The eyes were certainly staring now, looking for some sign of recognition.

"Hi, friend," Zoe said and smiled.

There, that was better. The smile softened the lips, made them gentle. The somewhat long, aquiline nose needed base to hide the pores and tiny, spider veins along the sides. She reached for her make-up in the medicine cabinet. Scrutinizing the round cheeks, she decided to use blush and sighed.

She didn't really mind spending the necessary time to keep her appearance attractive. She did it as much for herself as she did for others. Even if she planned to spend a day by herself, she never went without a shower or make-up. Going without a shower was tantamount to wearing the same underwear two days in a row. It just wasn't a clean practice, in her estimation; and Zoe strove for cleanliness in everything she did.

In the middle of applying a sparse coat of mascara, she heard the phone ring in the living room. Making a dive for the sofa, she caught the phone on the second ring and answered it.

It was Rachel. "Hi. I was afraid I might wake you."

"I'm awake, thanks to the blue jays outside my window this morning." Zoe towel-dried her mostly-auburn hair and peered out the uncurtained living room window to determine whether or not she should make a dash for her robe or crouch in a naked huddle on the couch. She decided in favor of her robe.

"Just a minute, Rachel." With her robe wrapped securely around her, she resumed her seat on the sofa and began again. "Are we still on for lunch and the art museum to celebrate your move?"

"That's why I'm calling." Rachel cleared her voice and went on. "I'm not through packing. Actually, I haven't even started. You know how I am."

Zoe did know, and it exasperated her at times. Especially today. "So, what are you saying? No lunch? No art museum?" She paused and counted to ten. "We've been planning this for the last week. I arranged to work only a few hours today so that we could spend some time together before you go."

"Zoe, you're being unreasonable." Rachel sounded far away, as if she were already in Albuquerque. "Instead of trying to make me feel guilty about ruining your Saturday, you could try to understand my situation. I have to finish packing before the new tenants get here."

Zoe remained silent, picking a piece of lint off the sofa. She stared upward at the ceiling and decided that the cobweb in the corner would have to come down. "All

right, Rachel. Listen, if you're so busy that you can't take time this afternoon, what about tonight? Let's go to Murray's for dinner and then to a show. I'll pay. Sort of a going-away dinner and . . ."

"I'll call you about it," Rachel said firmly. "I'm sorry if I ruined your plans, but the new tenants are moving into my place the day after tomorrow. I have to run. Bye."

Zoe replaced the receiver carefully and sat quietly on one corner of the sofa. Agatha glided into the room and cried loudly for her breakfast.

"Shut up," Zoe said and threw her towel at the cat. But the cat merely registered disgust and reiterated her demand for food. "Okay, okay. You win."

Zoe rose, picked up the wet towel, and walked into the kitchen where a box of Cat Chow sat on top of the refrigerator. She filled the cat's bowl and then returned to the bathroom which she straightened by wiping the sink and shower, returning the towel to its rack, and replacing her make-up in the medicine cabinet behind the mirror.

Deciding that red definitely reflected her state of mind, she slipped into her fire-engine red, cotton sundress and thongs, threw her brush and check book into her purse, which she slung over her shoulder, and headed for the front door. As she locked the door behind her, she decided to walk instead of taking her car to work. It would give her time to think.

Things had not been the same between Rachel and her for several months, maybe longer. Zoe tried to remember when she

and Rachel had stopped their daily phone calls, the easy camaraderie, and the closeness which had sprung up between them since the first day they had met at the Vibrant Vegetarian restaurant. They had shared a table at noon that day and exchanged conversation. Zoe smiled, remembering her instant attraction to Rachel's daffiness, her neatly concise and original turn of phrase, and her sunny disposition. The immediate friendship was a comfortable one; and since they both worked downtown, they had often gotten together for lunch after that initial meeting at the Vibrant Vegetarian. Soon, they were getting together in the evenings and on weekends for concerts, the theater, TV watching, whatever.

They had definitely had many good times together. Zoe forgot to watch where she was walking and stubbed her toe on the uneven sidewalk. It didn't actually hurt enough to make her cry, but she found herself in tears a block away from her office.

"Way to go, ace," a familiar voice called from behind her.

Zoe turned to see Stuart Vincent, the other writer from her office, ambling toward her and smiling. Zoe hastily wiped away her tears.

"You've smeared your mascara," Stuart offered helpfully as he surveyed the damage done by the unexpected tear shower.

"Mind your own business," Zoe flared while her face grew as red as her dress.

"Much better, much better. Now, do you care to tell me what you're boo-hooing about?"

"No, I don't," Zoe fished her sunglasses from her purse and stuck them in lop-sided defiance on her nose.

"Good. I didn't want to hear, anyway. I was just being polite." Stuart grabbed her arm and escorted her across the street. "My good deed for the day." He beamed broadly at himself and the world in general.

Zoe had never made up her mind completely about Stuart. He wrote the humorous inscriptions at Cards for Every Occasion Inc. while Zoe wrote the more serious, appropriately sensitive and sincere inscriptions. She and Stuart had worked together in a fairly congenial manner for over two years, but there was just something about him which made Zoe uncomfortable, a feeling of not ever wanting to turn her back on him. Not that she suspected him of anything sinister, she didn't. But eyeing him now through her angled sunglasses, she decided that he was perfectly capable of tossing a cream pie or two at people's faces and enjoying their discomfort. That tendency in Stuart made him perfect for his job, Zoe realized and smiled into his still grinning face.

"From tears to smiles in minutes, Williams. Has anyone ever told you that such sudden mood swings are indicative of mental problems?"

Zoe laughed. "That's probably true." Surprised to find herself feeling better than she had all morning, she realized that she had momentarily forgotten Rachel and Rachel's move. But now she remembered. "I don't know, it's probably normal for me to have these mood swings. A good friend of mine is moving in a few days."

"The earth mother that you eat lunch with? Where's she moving, to a commune?"

"Yes, Rachel. But she's not really an earth mother type. She's just big on physical health: eating right, getting exercise, and working in a non-stressful environment. She's moving to Albuquerque."

Stuart unlocked and held the door at Cards for Every Occasion Inc. He motioned Zoe inside. "Watch your step," he cautioned.

Zoe took off her sunglasses and blinked as Stuart flipped on the overhead fluorescent lights. "It looks as if we have the place to ourselves today. We must be the only employees who take their jobs seriously," he said.

They walked down the corridor together and paused at the doors of their adjoining offices. Stuart opened his door and called to her from inside his office.

"They're the same thing, you know."

"What are?" Zoe stepped to the door and watched him open the Venetian blinds and raise windows.

"Albuquerque and a commune."

"Not really."

"Yes, really. Also, being a potter, she won't become rich. So, even if she has a low-stress job, poverty can be fairly stressful and, subsequently, depressing."

"How do you know she's a potter?" Zoe asked as she turned to leave his office.

"I used to date her a while back. Nothing serious."

Stuart beamed and closed the door behind him. "Nothing ever is."

During the three hours that Zoe spent at her desk, she was able to accomplish a great deal. When her watch showed that it was two o'clock in the afternoon, she knew that it was time to quit. Her mind was beginning to wander, and she was growing restless: sure signs that her creativity was gone for the day.

A few minutes later, Zoe closed the door to her office and knocked briefly on Stuart's door.

"Come in, Williams," he called. "I'm not in the middle of anything."

"And he wasn't. He was in a classic daydream pose with his chair tilted back, his head leaning back on arms crossed behind his head, and his long legs resting on the desk top. His eyes were staring not at Zoe, but at a colorful, geometric poster on the opposite side of the room.

"I'm knocking off for the day," Zoe began, but felt as though he were not hearing her.

"She's not a bad person, you know," Stuart said, and his short moustache twitched in a Chaplinesque manner. "I didn't stop seeing her because she was a bad person."

"Who are you talking about?" Zoe asked.

"For an English major, your grammar is less than perfect. Of whom are you speaking, would be much better. Rachel, the earth-mother-potter, vegetarian zealot, former acquaintance of mine, lunch buddy and erstwhile friend of yours." Stuart's chair squeaked as he recrossed his legs and settled his posterior more firmly in the padded seat.

But Zoe didn't want to speak of Rachel. Not now. Things had been so uncertain between them for so long. In a way, she'd feel a sense of relief that Rachel would be gone. There would no longer be any unfinished business between them, nothing to figure out or regret. The geographical distance would finally equal the distance of two friends who had become strangers and who still had memories of being friends.

No, she did not want to speak of Rachel to Stuart. He was being nice. He was being friendly. But in Zoe's mind he was still a pie-thrower.

"I'm going now," she said.

"It always seemed strange to me," Stuart continued to stare at the geometric poster, "the two of you being friends."

Now she was caught in spite of herself. She twisted the door knob to his office and ran a finger under the shoulder strap of her sundress. "I don't know why."

"Granted, I don't know you very well, but I can tell a lot about a person by his habits, or in this case, her habits. You are invariably punctual and neatly dressed at work. Additionally, you are serious about your work as your extra time on Saturday would indicate. You're probably neat at home since your desk here is always neat. You're not flamboyant, but," Stuart's eyes shifted to Zoe's red dress, "you do let your moods communicate in your clothes. I generally like to talke to you on your red, yellow, and orange days, you're more expansive and gregarious, but I shy away from you on your green and navy days. And as for purple and black,"

he laughed. "Rachel, on the other hand, is not neat, not highly motivated, nor is she concerned with hygiene to a high degree. She doesn't care to make a career for herself with her pottery. It's just as well, since she's no potter extraordinaire, nor does she have the patience to perfect her craft. She's destined to obscurity in Albuquerque. She'll probably love living there, though; until she realizes that her days as a rosebud gatherer are quickly coming to an end."

"I think you sell her short," Zoe startled herself by interrupting Stuart's observations. "And as for me, you don't know me at all. Rachel and I have a lot in common. In fact, I was tempted to move with her when she asked me to go partners in a vegetarian restaurant in Albuquerque."

Stuart rolled his eyes. "The fact that you're staying in a job which offers a future and advancement while she traipses off to the desert and all but certain poverty proves my point. You're a realist; she's not. You may not always like being a realist . . ."

"It's no problem for me. I like working here. I like my life," Zoe thought momentarily about the stranger who lived in her bathroom mirror and went on. "I have nothing to tempt me to move as Rachel does. She's artistic, she's creative in the kitchen. She's talented in a number of areas."

"Sometimes our strengths are also our weaknesses," Stuart said, sitting forward abruptly and standing up. "My candor and ability to observe accurately could be construed as tactlessness and nosiness, for example. Don't get me wrong; I like

Rachel. At one point, I more than liked her. But there's an elusiveness about her. It's as if she's always standing with a wall between herself and you, holding the mortar and trowel, ready to run in the opposite direction."

Outside in the hot sunshine of the May afternoon, Zoe thought of her friend with longing and loneliness. Maybe her dark hair was oily at times, and maybe she did wear her orange sweat-pants a little too often. But her pottery was beautiful and serviceable. Zoe knew that if Rachel had only half a chance, she'd make it as either a chef of vegetarian cuisine or a potter.

Again, she tried to analyze when the friendship had begun to lose the enthusiastic momentum which had made it such a special thing to her. All she could come up with was the time several months past which she had mentioned to Stuart, the time when she had not been receptive to Rachel's idea of accompanying her to Albuquerque as a partner. When she had told Rachel that she liked her own job and the feeling of accomplishment it gave her, Rachel had been derisive, almost insulting.

"Come on, Zoe. You're not serious. Do you plan on spending the rest of your life in some little cubbyhole of an office, cranking out sentimental slop for cretins who don't have it together to say what they want to say themselves? I just want you to know that researchers in California have done studies on the type of overhead fluorescent lights which you have at work; and there is a definite correlation between the presence of the lights and hypertension, bordering on schizophrenia."

Maybe that accounted for the estrangement, which Zoe felt for the person in her bathroom mirror. She smiled to herself and remembered to pick up her feet as she walked. Sometimes, it seemed to her that the motions of her body did not come normally. She had to remind herself not to walk into buildings and fences, not to stub her toes on the sidewalks, not to cross against the lights in heavy traffic. Her absent-mindedness and total disregard for her surroundings had resulted in amazingly few accidents, but each new day represented a challenge

Once more, she placed her lop-sided sunglasses on top of her nose and tried to focus through the brown, finger-smudged lenses. Her attention was caught by the flower shop across the street. It featured a special on lilies-of-the-valley.

Suddenly, Zoe knew what she would do. Resolutely watching for cars, she crossed the street and entered the flower shop. A young shop girl of eighteen or nineteen, dressed in a delicate, white, lace blouse and green slacks, helped her with her purchase.

"Thank you very much," Zoe said as she tore a check from her check book and handed it to the girl. She took the green, tissue-wrapped bundle gently in hand and left the shop.

Once again on the glittering pavement, she stood, blinking and futilely trying to adjust her glasses. A car horn honked close by, and Stuart called to her in a nastily suggestive voice.

"Hey, little girl, want some candy?"

Zoe laughed, even though she felt some minor exasperation. She had already had more than her fill of Stuart for one day. But when he swung the passenger door wide for her, she felt a certain relief to hop inside, only banging her shin as she deposited herself in the seat next to him.

"My time was wasted today, Williams, utterly wasted," Stuart said in mock gloom.

Zoe watched him check carefully in rear and side view mirrors of his rather dilapidated Volkswagon before he swung back into traffic. "It happens," she said.

Stuart gave her a baleful look and asked her where she lived. A moment later he inhaled deeply. "Lilies-of-the-valley. They're almost too fragile and sweet-smelling to be real."

Zoe said nothing and watched traffic as she never watched it when she drove. But then, she knew her car, and she knew her driving. Stuart was an unknown quantity. In her worst imaginings she saw herself maimed and disfigured in a car wreck with her brown contacts smashed into her near-sighted eyes, blinding her forever.

"A penny for your thoughts," Stuart said.

Zoe laughed at his interested expression and at her fear of death and destruction. His timing was perfect. The ache eased a little. "I somehow can't picture you and Rachel together," she said. "Granted, I don't know you very well, but I think I know Rachel. And . . ." Zoe stopped. She couldn't continue without seeming rude.

"Go on."

"Well, Rachel takes things pretty seriously. And you don't seem to take anything very seriously."

"You mean like relationships, people, ideas?"

"Exactly."

"Let me clue you in. The only thing Rachel takes seriously is herself. If she'd only realize that her search for the Holy Grail is just so much ca ca, she'd be a much happier person and a much easier one to be around."

A few minutes later, Stuart pulled in front of Zoe's apartment. He eyed the white, stucco house, circa 1920. The house was freshly-painted and had contrasting green shutters. Tulips and irises lined the curved sidewalk leading up to the house.

"Nice house," he commented.

"I live in the basement apartment."

"I'll come in if you invite me."

"Some other time," Zoe said and started to open her car door, but there was no handle on the inside.

"Just a sec and I'll let you out." Stuart reached for her sunglasses, bent and twisted the wire frame, balanced the glasses on his lap, wiped them briskly on a corner of his brightly-colored Madras shirt, and placed them back on her nose.

She could see.

"No charge," he said.

Inside the apartment Agatha railed crossly at Zoe for having been gone. Zoe laid her purse and sunglasses on the

coffee table next to the phone. She continued to hold the flowers in her hand as she sat on the sofa and inhaled the fragrance once more. Maybe it was all true, what Stuart had said about Rachel. But as far as Zoe was concerned, his perceptions were just that: his. Rachel and she had a special understanding between them, even though it seemed to be strained these days.

The fragile white bells on the slender stalks would not be able to take much more handling. Zoe leaned back against the sofa cushions and wondered momentarily what to do. She would just drop by and leave the flowers. That was the thing to do; and then if Rachel wanted her to stay, she would.

Zoe checked her hair in the bathroom mirror, touched lipstick to her lips, patted a little powder on her nose, and stroked her cat until the plaintive wails, which had been increasing in volume, subsided to a deep-throated purr.

"See you later, Aggie," she told the cat and snatched up the flowers from the back of the toilet where she had dropped them.

Even though Rachel lived only a mile away, Zoe did not feel like walking any more. Besides, weirdos had a way of accosting women who walked, as she had found out. Carefully she pulled her yellow Toyota away from the curb, put on her sunglasses, and appreciated the fact that they now fit her head and were clean enough to see through.

There was nothing really wrong with Stuart. After all, he had never thrown pies at her. But he was indiscreet and offered unsolicited opinions about a friend whom she valued.

Zoe had always distrusted people who spent time gossiping. She wondered what those people said about her when she was not around.

The sun was still bright and hot when she stepped, flowers in hand, from her car in front of the small Spanish-style house which Rachel rented. Rachel's dog pulled at the end of its chain in the front yard and barked while it wagged its tail in enthusiastic greeting. Zoe felt mild disgust at the sight of Loner. The dog was always unkempt as was the yard which needed to be cleared of accumulated droppings. Flies buzzed near Zoe's ears, and she stepped carefully to the front door. Only the screen door was closed.

"Hey, Rachel," she called into the house and listened for a response before stepping into the brightly-painted, yellow living room.

Zoe had always appreciated Rachel's love of art. The living room with its walls covered by skillful etchings, tapestries, African masks, and antique candle holders reflected Rachel's eclectic but discriminating taste. The dog continued to bark outside, but all else was quiet.

"Rachel!" Zoe called louder.

Finally, from the bedroom came a muffled voice. "Here!"

She appeared in green draw-string pants and a dirty, white t-shirt which said "Ski the Andes." Her dark hair was pulled back in a shiny pony-tail. Mascara underscored the bottom halves of her eyelids. She was pale and did not smile.

"Zoe," she said, "I was just going to call you. Let's go to the kitchen, I want something to drink."

In the kitchen Zoe looked around as Rachel poured herself a Pepsi. Nothing was packed, nothing was in the process of being packed--not in the kitchen, nor in any other part of the house.

"You haven't even begun," Zoe said aloud, not so much to Rachel as to herself in observation of her friend's state of affairs.

"Don't start with me," Rachel warned, her voice having the tense quality which Zoe had come to recognize as a signal not to press an issue further. "I'm not in a mood to put up with your accusations. And don't try to lay a guilt trip on me about lunch or about the fact that I'll be too busy to have dinner tonight with you."

"When are you going to pack?" Zoe played with the edge of the table cloth and looked out the kitchen window.

"Tonight. Do you want a Pepsi? There's plenty here." Rachel hesitated momentarily before returning the bottle to the refrigerator after Zoe shook her head.

"What have you been doing today?" Zoe asked.

"Look, not everyone operates like a ticker tape machine the way you do. Some of us take time out to live, to appreciate life. You probably fed your cat, went to work, wrote a few little ditties at your office, and called it a day. I got up, meditated, jogged, took a sauna, read, and worked in my garden. I'm just now getting to the place where I'm ready to box things up. So, don't look at me that way! Who are you to pass judgment on my lifestyle and the way I do things? I'm able to experience many feelings and thoughts you'll never have."

"It's just that I don't understand what's happened to our friendship, Rachel. That's all. Please tell me. I don't want it to end with your leaving."

Rachel's hand that held the Pepsi trembled. She set the glass on the table.

"It's not my fault," she said. "You don't value the right things. I thought I knew you, but I guess I don't. You don't have any goals or want to experience any new things in your life. Unlike you, I'm not ready to call it quits at thirty-four. I'm just getting started."

"I know you are."

"Your life is over, though."

She should have seen it coming, the fist which crashed into her face. She was down for the count.

"I don't think so," she said and heard herself as a voice behind a mirror. "I don't think so at all."

Rachel turned away. "Then you're fooling yourself."

Zoe was very careful with her eyes, keeping them strictly focused on the red linoleum of the kitchen floor. "You never told me in all of this time that you knew Stuart Vincent."

"There was nothing to tell. I went out with him for a few months, once upon a time; and that was it. He was nothing special."

Zoe felt the tissue-paper which held the flowers growing hot and sticky in her hand. She extended the flowers to Rachel.

"Here. I thought they might make packing more cheerful."

Their hands touched briefly as the lilies were exchanged. Already wilting, the bells were beginning to turn brown.

Rachel pushed a strand of hair behind her ear. "Packing more cheerful?"

She smiled at Zoe, finally, and for a moment they were friends again, still. Not trusting the moment to last, Zoe hugged Rachel and left her standing in the middle of the kitchen, staring at the flowers.

The interior of the car was hot, and the vinyl burned her legs and arms. The sunglasses fit securely on the bridge of her nose as she checked traffic carefully before pulling away from the curb. There were so many on-coming walls in the world.

Critical Apparatus

Spoken language is frequently the source of, rather than the alleviation for, many difficulties between people who care for one another but who cannot express their feelings in words. In addition to the problems inherent in spoken communication are the barriers resulting from non-verbal communication: silence, withdrawal, and indifference. These attitudes, which may not be the intentional goal of an individual, can be perceived in a negative way by others. Especially is this true if there is not sufficient ease of mutual verbal understanding.

It was my goal in "Clothes" and "Friends" to create situations in which main characters were understandable to the reader but were not sympathetic to the other characters in the stories. For example, in "Clothes" Rita was apprehensive about returning to her mother's house in La Rue. I wished to convey her fear to the reader and show how it became intensified by Carolyn's, her mother's, apparent reluctance to have her daughter remain in her home for very long. Rita's fear quickly turned to defensiveness and antipathy toward her mother even though Carolyn attempted to clarify in words that she had an immediate personal need to be alone. Unfortunately, Carolyn did not try to use non-verbal means of reassurance other than to offer food and money. As a result, Rita's hostility increased as did Carolyn's withdrawn attitude and aloofness. By the end of the story, both women were so estranged that it seemed improbable they could ever find ways to empathize with each other.

A similar difficulty in communication resulted in "Friends." Zoe, wishing to spend as much time as possible with her friend, Rachel, suggested they go to dinner after Rachel canceled their lunch date. Rachel's detachment and apparent disinterest resulted in Zoe's depression and determination for a verbal confrontation with Rachel. Unfortunately, Rachel refused to be convinced that a problem existed. Since she was leaving town, she felt there was no need for continued interaction between the two of them. The friendship was over.

Having determined to make the deterioration of all forms of communication the theme for my stories and deciding upon the essential plot lines for each, I resolved the setting for each story should be consistent with the action. "La Rue," originally from hrēowan (to regret), was perhaps a little heavy-handed for the name of a city in which there was so much sadness between mother and daughter. However, the city was distinguished by little else; it could have been any large, Midwestern town. In a similar way, the setting for "Friends" was non-descript. Perhaps that was one of the reasons for Zoe's apparent security in her job and in her life and for Rachel's restlessness and desire to move to Albuquerque.

I believe that stories should have unity of time, that they should begin and end within twenty-four hours. Whatever must be resolved or learned must be done in that time frame. There are several reasons why I try to observe this convention: a sense of urgency is created, and directness from the characters in their actions and in their speech

is imperative. As a result of limiting my time in this manner, I created characters in "Clothes" and "Friends" who were often rude as well as direct. Emotions ran high; actions were spontaneous rather than pre-meditated. If the time had been extended, perhaps problems might have been resolved. However, the dispositions of the characters make that possibility remote.

In writing stories, I find that the one thing that invariably happens is they never turn out as I had planned. More often than not, by the time I get a third of the way through my first rough draft, one or several of the main characters develop in such a way as to change or subvert my original plot line or to make it necessary for me to do a complete re-evaluation and revision of my premises.

For instance, in "Clothes" Carolyn was initially so cold and unfeeling as to be unreal. She was completely (hence, unconvincingly) insensitive to Rita's good fortune in landing a job she really wanted and to her desire to remain temporarily in Carolyn's house. Knowing that this problem of Carolyn's one-sidedness must somehow be resolved, I completed my first draft with the realization that even though the story was essentially Rita's, Rita was not blameless in her interaction with Carolyn, nor was Carolyn as evil as I had managed to depict. The story did not "ring true."

For a story to ring true to me, it must have several things going for it: a believable plot line (no matter how trivial); a setting which either actually helps or quietly complements the development of plot and characters; and,

characters who act and speak like real people without actually being real or having their conversations lifted from real life.

I had wanted to write a mother/daughter story, a story in which the accompanying problems of such a relationship could be viewed through the eyes of a daughter as she emerged into adulthood and fought for equality with her mother. In the story, I wished to show that Rita was a competent person who had many good qualities (independence, a sense of humor, vitality); but in the initial draft she was as unbelievably above reproach as Carolyn was witch-like. I knew that changes had to be made, I just wasn't sure what changes to make or where.

The story became a headache: how to make Rita and Carolyn more even and still have the story remain Rita's. The answer was obvious when I finally discovered it. The reason why Rita and Carolyn could not resolve their differences in the story was that they were essentially the same type of individual. Rita was educated and versatile. So was Carolyn. Rita was on her own. So was Carolyn. Each wanted her own way as indicated by Rita's refusal to wear certain clothes and Carolyn's determination that her daughter should behave in a certain manner, keep her furniture, try the quiche, etc. Both women wanted desperately to get along, but their basic natures kept them apart. Rita's impulsiveness and Carolyn's cool, steady manner were the real sources of conflict.

Once I had realized the essential similarity, I had to revise the dialogue, omit situations which had made Rita

saintly and Carolyn contemptible and self-destructive, and substitute dialogue and incidents which would be consistent with my new-found understanding of the characters. No small-task. The decisions of what to keep and what to delete made writing very difficult. Additionally, I became aware that the narrator was unreliable because of my corrections and balancing act. This last problem remains essentially unresolved.

I still feel that the final story is more or less a composite jig-saw puzzle with a piece of this draft, here, and a piece of that draft, there. I'm not sure the plot coalesces, but I am at last fully convinced of the reality of the characters.

Although any concrete item would have worked, I used clothes in the story as a symbol of the essential disagreement between mother and daughter. Clothes, for so long, have been a matter of contention between generations. And given Carolyn's and Rita's polarized perspectives regarding values and ideals, I felt clothes were more of a personal symbol than anything else might be. Actually, every concrete item could and did become a source of disagreement which came from basically different temperaments and inability to communicate effectively. Therefore, even though Rita and Carolyn seemed to be arguing about apparently meaningless topics, the topics became of singular importance to them and a signal of the inevitable fact which became obvious to both of them: they could not live in the same house together.

Because the psychology of the women's love/hate relationship seemed so convoluted to me, I had to keep the language simple and straight-forward. I eliminated many narrative and descriptive passages which I had included in earlier drafts, to no purpose.

The difficulty I face in my writing has to do with knowing what background information to include and where to put it. In my first draft of "Clothes" I had Rita engaged in an internal monologue so that readers would know why she was going home. This was longer and seemed much more contrived than having her speak with Li Chen about her appointment in La Rue. Simple is better; but arriving at the simplest way to present material can be, and usually is, very difficult for me.

Also, simple can become formulaic. Sometimes in my desire to get the story on paper I find myself resorting to certain writing techniques which are very familiar and comfortable. In my first few drafts of "Clothes" I began many of my sentences with verbals or verbal phrases. It was difficult to change that pattern without disturbing the flow of the story or altering the essential meaning. Now I find, in my most recent version, an excessive number of dependent clauses beginning with "as" and "as if" which I'll attribute to my newly-acquired appreciation of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Fortunately, I believe my ability to write realistic dialogue compensates for some of my deficiencies or excesses in other areas. "Who rattled your cage?" is one of my favorite lines from Carolyn.

The necessity of Li-Chen's, Nelson's, and Dr. Hart's presence in the story might be questioned. However, I felt that each served a purpose in revealing more aspects of Rita; and Nelson additionally served to bring out elements in Carolyn's nature. Even though these three characters were not developed beyond their interaction with Rita and Carolyn, I felt that more background material on the secondary characters would have detracted from the original intention that the story be essentially a mother/daughter story.

Even though the story was told primarily from Rita's point of view, the voice was not consistent. This inconsistency was due in part to the story's jig-saw formation, but my problem with point of view has a history. I have now written four chapters of a novel, more than a few stories, and a play. Except for the play which is, of course, entirely dialogue, the narrative voice in all the rest seemed to take on an analytical, dignified, and distant quality bordering on polite superciliousness--not a quality geared for getting and keeping readers' interest. I'm hoping that time, work, and awareness of this deficiency will cure it. I would like to bring a lighter voice to my fiction than I seem able to at present.

Seriousness of tone and voice is probably consistent with the underlying symbolism in my fiction. Although I try not to overwhelm readers with an excess of symbols and their significance, I usually select one or two concrete items in each of my stories to represent some intangible thought

or quality I wish to express, such as clothes representing rebellion, lack of consideration for another's feelings, and/or the inability to say what one is thinking. In Rita's case clothes represented those concepts. Additionally, she believed that she should be able to wear what she wished whenever she wished.

A final note on "Clothes." It was very difficult for me to keep a sense of detachment while writing the story. In my work I write about what I know or have experienced from meeting and/or knowing various individuals in my life. I take these individuals, alter them sufficiently for the purpose of using them in fiction, and create stories in which they can come to life. As a result, the plot is entirely fictitious, but the people remain as my imagination tells me they are. A mother is a mother through my experiencing and knowing one. A daughter is a daughter through my being one. Until I could get some distance and drafts between my initial and my final concept of the story, I felt that it was largely autobiographical. Only many revisions and alterations gave me the essential distance and perspective I needed.

The second story, "Friends," was not nearly as difficult to write. I don't know if easier means better, but I do not have the unresolved feeling toward the story that I have toward "Clothes."

In "Friends" Zoe and Rachel represented individuals who must, during the course of their lives and their association with one another, part company. How they handled this separation differed markedly as the story indicated.

I intentionally left one essential question unanswered: what was there in Rachel, on the basis of her interaction with Zoe, for Zoe to like? From that question, others arise. Why was Zoe so compelled to understand, do nice things for, and defend Rachel, who not only did not reciprocate, but who, at best, only tolerated Zoe's interest? These were questions answered in the eventually revealed psyches of the characters.

Traditionally, characters are revealed in four ways: what the author says of them, what others say of them, what they say of themselves, and what they do. Even though Stuart and Zoe exposed their feelings about and reactions to Rachel through much of the story, Rachel did not reveal herself or her attitudes extensively to them. This omission on Rachel's part seemed deliberate and, therefore, an indication of her desire to be left alone and undisturbed.

Stuart was, perhaps, the most enjoyable character I have created. Again, selecting his personality from the entourage of people I have known, I made him larger than life, a man preposterous but perceptive. Though he appeared to communicate with Zoe, he remained an unknown quantity who revealed little of himself, (except his tactlessness and nosiness.) Yet, through his dialogue he revealed a great deal about Zoe and Rita. I left the pie-thrower epithet unresolved in the story, but answered it in my own mind. And whether answered or not, it merited Zoe's wariness in "Friends."

Writing "Friends" was like writing a who-dun-it. Who were the friends and why were they friends? There was an

initial attraction between Zoe and Rachel which was satisfying, at least to Zoe, but why did it dissipate? Was it simply because Rachel was leaving?

Usually unanswered questions in a story indicate that a writer has not done his/her job. But I endeavored to leave certain questions unanswered in order to show that often no one really knows why a friendship ends, why people no longer are essential to one another's happiness, if they ever were. This last possibility is the kicker and the one that Zoe had to come to terms with.

Finally, "Friends" could have been a schmaltzy story, especially with the lilies-of-the-valley symbolism. I tried to avoid maudlin overtones and too-serious treatment of a failing friendship through the creation and presence of Stuart.

In giving credit to writers for their influence in my own writing, I feel at a loss. I can give credit for inspiration but not for influence. My life, my experiences, and my observations are the sources for my writing. The people I have known are, with major and minor alterations, my characters.

When I was six, my step-father built me a doll-house which lined one entire wall of my bedroom and which reached almost to the ceiling. (Actually it was only a little larger than a good-sized bookcase.) On top of it sat all the books I was to read through the sixth grade: Little Women, Heidi, Elsie Dinsmore, The Five Little Peppers, Alice in Wonderland, Black Beauty, Hans Brinker, and many more of a similar type. Even at the age of six or seven, I was able to create stories for my dolls to enact. I arranged them in positions which I

imagined. And the books on top of the doll-house provided me with the dreams and inspiration so necessary for an inventive mind.

The doll-house has long been gone, and those early books have been replaced by others. Much of the innocence of that time has been lost or turned into disenchantment. Perhaps that is why I can identify with those who write of disillusionment or loss such as many contemporary writers do. I admire the work of J. D. Salinger, Phillip Roth, Joyce Carol Oates, Jerzy Kosinski, and particularly Bernard Malamud, and I believe in their abilities to perceive, describe, and assess their characters. In all of these writers' works, plot is of secondary importance, which is as I believe it should be.

J. D. Salinger showed Holden Caulfield's troubled anarchism of youth. Phillip Roth presented Brenda Patimkin's smugness of the nouveau riche. Joyce Carol Oates exposed Arnold Friend's obscenity. Jerzy Kosinski wrote of Jonathan Whalen's decadent disregard for his and others' lives, and Bernard Malamud depicted William Dubin's despair of aging and related discontent. All of these authors managed to show the darker, very real side of humanity. Through knowing the psychology of their characters, the writers were able to portray weaknesses with convincing accuracy; and in doing so, these same writers were able to show that it is our own weaknesses and the weaknesses of others which undermine the world bearing in upon us.

Characters are everything. If a doll-house is empty, it is nothing but a collection of empty rooms which collect dust.

If a story has vague or unrevealed characters, it becomes forgettable and inconsequential. Though my work is significantly different from that of the writers I admire, I will be able through time, hard work, and many drafts to achieve the integrity of characterization so necessary to a good story.

PROBLEMS IN COMMUNICATION: TWO STORIES

by

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Abstract. Problems in Communication: Two Stories contains "Clothes" and "Friends" and a critical afterword. In "Clothes" Rita, a young woman of twenty-eight, returns to her hometown and to her mother's house. Carolyn, her mother, neither expects nor wishes her daughter to stay in her home for long; Carolyn is going through a series of changes which leave no room for a daughter's presence. An ambivalent antipathy is defined between mother and daughter. The source of the problem is unclear, and therefore, unable to be resolved. However, side issues, which are insignificant in themselves, such as the inappropriateness of Rita's clothes for a job interview and for a lunch with her mother, widen the gulf between the two women.

In "Friends" two young women, Zoe and Rachel, end their friendship on the day that Rachel is packing to move to Albuquerque. Zoe does not understand why her friend is trying to put emotional as well as physical distance between them and confronts Rachel on the phone and at her house. Zoe receives no plausible reason for her friend's aloof and withdrawn manner other than the rationale that Stuart, a co-worker of Zoe's and a former lover of Rachel's, suggests. His explanation is that Rachel likes to keep a wall between herself and others.

The critical afterword explains the problems involved in the writing of the two stories, the resolution of the problems, stylistic considerations, and the influence of major writers on the author.