

# To Test the Joy

Selected Prose and Poetry

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# Engaged



She had gone to work for a week of mornings now, feeling as if she had an enemy inside her body. All the nights for a week she had stiffened and cringed in her bed and begged God not to give her a baby. She was not going to work this morning, but it was the same ferryboat. She went to the rail and tried to take her mind between her hands and make it look fixedly at the city, pushing up its gray towers against the sky.

“God doesn’t answer. God’s away on a vacation.”

She was pleased with this sentence. God and her lover were both away on vacations at the same time.

“I’m not losing my nerve in the least,” she said. “I still watch the seagulls. I still look at the early sun on the water. I’ll make sense of it somehow today. I’m getting used to the idea now.”

It was such a lovely, disarming morning, that her body unstiffened a little. The caught feeling between her breasts went away, and left her giddy, saying and re-saying these motherly sentences to herself. Perhaps she could decide what to do before the ferryboat

got to the other side, before it bumped against the piles of the slip; it would be nice to have one's mind all made up, and her mouth drawn resolutely when the boat jerked with that bump.

For instance, before she walked off the boat, she might have decided to marry him. In spite of her heart. ...

There was the hat of the girl who worked in the same office!

To meet the blithe ways of the office-girl was the most intolerable thing she could think of. Get away, get away from the office-girl — the neat, mannerly, opinioned office-girl, who would look at her shoes all muddy from tramping the hills last night; look at her hair only half done. The office-girl always talked of where you could get bath towels cheap for your hope-chest.

But the office-girl came over, leaning on the breeze, breezy herself.

"Hello, Lady Fair. Had breakfast yet? Let's!"

Well, it might help to eat; anyway, to do something, go down the stairs, talk about anything. It will be easy in a minute. Eating on the ferryboat always made you feel as if you were starting off on a journey, as if you were running away. ...

There was a pregnant Portuguese woman over by some piles of rope on the lower deck. She had a striped shawl on her head. Oh, what a monster of a woman. She was smiling at the sea-gulls! The woman looked up at a bird that veered into the sky; she staggered on her flat feet.

Down more steps, before a mirror where you see first your muddy shoes and your ankles, then your legs, the bottom of your skirt. And nothing looks wrong yet. Even a smile can be managed, a big laugh for the office-girl, and a quick glance to see how the smile looks, how brave the whole face looks.

The office-girl has thin white fingers and an engagement ring. The ring flashes while her hands butter the corn muffins. The ring comes from a red-haired doctor who probably knows all about this dizzy feeling, who would tell her to get married quick

and take care of herself. She danced with him once. He was a good dancer....

Which is it, the ring, or the office-girl talking of hope-chests and bath towels and embroidered sheets? Anyway the ring stabs at her, seems to comprehend why her cramped blue hands across the table push away those steel knives....

Bump, and a second bump. There is the slip. What is it that might have been decided before hitting those piles? Well, anyway, here is the city and a chance to walk, to think, and yet not think too hard. Leisurely, with a cool head — not in a panic any more.

The office-girl determines to ride to work.

"I'm going to walk," says the other girl.

"Oh, come on, squander a whole nickel."

"No."

"Well — see you in ten minutes."

The morning sunlight is all gone out of her now. Even that walk in the hills last night, and the quiet beauty that covered a heap of stones up there where she sat alone, is far off. Here comes the city, framed by the arch of the ferry building door, whistling, clanging, smoking with the day's work.

She chooses to walk in the dirtiest streets, where people look desolate but still keep on living. Walk through the mean little parks, listen to street birds and the talk of old, red-faced men, the drip of water in fountains, look at the Chinese women sitting with their oiled hair in the sun, don't even avoid the rigid dead cats in the gutters.

After a while she gets a feeling of numbness; she is indifferent to the hateful thing inside her. She knows she can't solve the problem of what is right about it. It is too mixed up with all the dark beginnings. "Anyway," she says spaciouly, "I'm on the high-tide. Let me ride the wave, not understand it."

A lovely mood is coming over her. She takes an envelope out of her purse, and tries to write.

*"Along with the smoke of your factories and sky-scrappers,  
I will send up the smoke of my soul, casual city.  
I will pile the rubbish of old swamps, tangled vines,  
Torn-up stumps, into a mouldy autumn heap;*

(Well, it is wordy poetry, numb poetry, dead poetry. Nobody in the world would think she meant very much by tangled vines!)

*Where with fire they become a white vine,  
Trailing and caressing ugliness,  
Folding and unfolding into the air breathed by your multitudes,  
casual city."*

## II

Hours later, when she has ceased to be pleased with her poem, she decides not to marry him.

Her body dreads violence so today. It is a sharp agony, as if a knife cut her, today, for anyone to look at her. She doesn't want to be touched. That was why it had seemed needful to marry him. Her body wants a bed and a night-gown and sleep. She wants to be insensible and stupid, like the big swelling Portuguese woman.

But when she decides not to marry him she is happy. It is almost as if she were right again, a girl, back in college talking about freedom and life, a light-footed girl. She gets up and begins to walk, trying to walk as she walked then, pretending to dance. The people in the park look at her. Suddenly she feels heavy, wounded, altered, old.

She goes down to a chewing-gum machine and looks at herself in the mirror. She can only see part of her face at a time. It isn't a nice face any more. Her chin looks weak.

She decides to wash her face somewhere, to have a shine.

That will make a difference with her chin. She buys a newspaper. There is a great deal of very important news in it, she says to herself, perched up in a shoe-shine chair. The boy slaps the flannel band over her shoe-tips. Just think, he was born once, came out of some woman, like the Portuguese woman, curled up like a pink cockle-shell, and grew up and shined her shoes. She wanted to draw her feet in to herself, to tell him to stop. She couldn't have him bending down, cutting the mud off her shoes.

"That's all right." She got down, fumbling with money. "I'm in a hurry." It was hard to get down without tripping and catching on the steel foot-holders. She felt clumsy, she who had always been so scornful of heavy people.

"Here I am, old and clumsy." She walked off repeating old when she stepped with her right shiny foot, and clumsy when she stepped with her muddy left.

"Is that what love does to a girl?"

"But what we have together isn't love."

It gave her great relief to say, "It isn't love." She had never dared to say that before. Now she stood waiting for the horizontal traffic to pass and said louder and louder, almost in a frenzy:

"It isn't love. It's hideous. It's hideous."

She found that she was talking out loud. In another moment she would have said into the ear of a cane-swinging gentleman, "I won't make a baby out of that."

In the wash place there is a telephone book with a yellow section. Doctors advertise themselves. Two of them sound as if they might listen to her.

Her face still looks blurred in the wash-place. When she smiles her lips stretch like rubber bands. There are hostile glances, astonished scrutinies from women with little girls and babies, in the wash room, but she undoes her dress and tears off the laundry marks on her underwear. She throws away the envelope with the poem on it because her name is on the other side.

So she goes, a little dizzily, across to the nearest doctor, stopping at a drug-store to get out the yellow advertisement, torn from the phone book. For a while she reads the labels on the jars of drugs behind the counters. But not one of the clerks looks as though he would reach down the right bottle, if she should ask.

In the building where the doctor ought to be, his name is gone from the little black-velvet board. When she asks the elevator girl, the girl stares and says that the doctor is in prison.

"It will be hard," she comments.

Down the block at the curb is a familiar car, familiar blue monogram on the door, and cut-glass vase full of fresh flowers. She remembers a blue-eyed freshman that she rushed for her sorority in that car. She repeats to herself some of the chatter she had given the poor baby. Oh, how splendid and sophisticated and strutting she had once been. The profile of her face slides by across the limousine window. Now she would like nothing better than to crawl in there and lie down on the soft cushions, let the car slip away, and go plunging off somewhere.

Then she sees the coat-tails and the backs of her friends on the *Star*, Sam and Joe. They are laughing. The paper is put to bed for three hours. Sam and Joe are off to a matinee after lunch. They are matching for something now, as they go down the street, saluting cops and flower-women.

Before she knows it, there is the other doctor's place, across the street, far up on the building. Yes, there is his name in big black letters on six windows.

And a cab is just coming up to the door with a beautiful girl in it. They go in together past a policeman. It is a dirty place, and the elevator man is a hunchback. He looks at her, at the beautiful girl (who seems by now not so beautiful), opens the iron door with a sniff, and points at another door down the hall.

There are more girls inside, who all look up. They all sit or stand as she feels that she sits, with a great self-conscious girdle

around her waist. They are all alike, with uneasy hands, moving as if their corsets or their bodies hurt.

One girl has blue eyes, like that freshman's. Another has red hands and a wide wedding-ring. She is crying. Most of them are silent, stiff as stone, hardly looking at each other, just keeping their eyes to themselves, cursing their luck.

One by one they go into a side door. There is a kind of mute raising of faces every time a girl goes in. Everyone looks at the girl's back as she goes in, before the door closes. There is a lot to see in that instant, in that girl's back. While she is there in the room, she isn't much, but when she gets up to go in at the door, you want to call her back and tell her that you love her.

At last the nurse says, "You're next, girly, ain't you?"

Inside the nurse's room, she begins to say things that are hard to say.

"Now, dearie, you don't have to go and make a speech. All you young kids think you've got to tell us something. Just put down your money!"

"How much is it?"

"Say, don't you know anything about this business? It's twenty-five. Who sent you, anyway?"

Thank goodness, it's no more than twenty-five.

When she says she found the name in the telephone book, something goes wrong. The nurse puts the money back on the desk, almost shoves it at her.

"Now, that's not what we care for in a customer usually."

Close scrutiny. The nurse goes behind the screen. A woman has been groaning a little back there. The girl seems to be forgotten. They help someone into the hall, and the doctor tells the nurse to get a cab.

After a while a little man comes out wiping his hands on a towel. He looks at everything she wears, at her muddy shoe, her shiny one. There is a lot of talking.



"Can you rest ten days after the operation, and no questions asked?"

"I – I don't know. Do I have to? Yes; yes, I can."

"Not at home?"

"No," swiftly. "At a friend's. I'm a stranger here. I'm from up north. I can stay quiet."

"You see," says the little man, looking at the fat of his thumb, "there's danger, and we can't take no risks." And they talk some more.

"After lunch," he says at last, and puts on a coat and derby. "Three o'clock. Miss Boyd, tell the rest of the girls outside to go home and come tomorrow."

At three o'clock she is back again with a second-hand copy of Whitman. She takes the book with her, when the nurse says, "Now come along in, girlie."

At half-past four she stumbles down the iron stairs — seven flights, stepping slowly, escaping. On the street she holds Whitman against her, wonders if she will ever hold a baby, and tries not to walk like a drunken woman.

### III

The sun is sweet in the tangled grass on the hill, just before she gets home. It slants down into the little roots of some weedy flowers. People are playing tennis beyond the hill, calling in the late afternoon air. Girls are coming home from the movies, saying good-by to each other at street partings.

It is almost time to collapse now, to lie down, perhaps cry. When she gets to her room she will lock the door and put up her writing sign; let them think she is writing through supper.

Her door stands open down the hall. Just as she gets there she sees her mother in her own room by the window, sewing.

This is her mother's favorite place, because she likes to watch the sunset as she sews.

"Jean, is that you?"

She was starting to tiptoe away.

"Come in, here, in your room. Aren't you back early?"

Early!

"I'm grimy, mother. Just a minute while I wash a bit."

"Look here," says her mother, who has been creaking away by the window. She holds up some white stuff. "I feel like a girl again. I've been making doll dresses for the church fair! Tell me about your day, dear."

Dante's face is there on the wall at the bottom of the bed as she stretches out. Lean old hound, Dante. "We'll be damnably mouldy a hundred years hence." Nonsense. Gentle mother, doll dresses, church fairs....

The snappers down the front of her dress rip open and loosen the band of pain. Mother's rocker creaks on and on.

"Are you too tired to talk to mother?"

"Never too tired to talk, mother." This she manages with a little laugh. "But I'm just about too tired to work in that awful office any longer. I've decided to give it up, and freelance a while. And college is coming — my biggest year. I want to loaf a little, mother. Not that college is so much, but I seem to want a little quiet space."

"Well, I'm glad. I've felt all along that you were under a nervous strain in that city work."

"I went looking at park fountains today. They'll take an article on historic fountains at the *Star*, I'm pretty sure."

"And you could help me at home, too, for a change. I'd like to have you to myself a little. There are several letters for you, and three phone calls down on the telephone-stand. And I think that Horace phoned long-distance, saying he'd be back to-night, and is going to drive right over to see you."

"Oh, dear!"

"I'm not sure of it. Your father took the call."

The creak of the chair again, and then mother's voice hesitatingly, "Don't you want to see Horace?"

"I don't want to see anybody."

"Well, you rest now, anyway, while I go down and glance at the dinner. I'm glad you're done with the office, dear. Suppose you finish putting in the lace on this little neck for me."

Mother dropped the doll dress right upon her, and went out humming to herself. The needle slid off the thread onto the rug. She sat and stared at it, stared until her father came to tell her about Horace.

In spite of his coming, she was going to bed.

Father thought it rather hard on Horace.

"Oh, tell him that I'll expect to see him tomorrow, or tomorrow night."

Father went away dubiously down the hall. He liked Horace.

And now if she could only tell herself what *she* would say to Horace tomorrow night. Some elaborate way of saying, "Go away! Don't touch me!" Perhaps by tomorrow she would have hundreds of words, hundreds of ways.

The sleeping-porch got blessedly dark, and wounded as she felt she lay limp and at ease, at last, after so many rigid nights. Perhaps she would lie there and bleed to death, as the doctor had said she might, if she wasn't careful.

Either die or go to sleep, before Horace drove up.

#### IV

But she did neither. He came with quite a toot of his horn, tore open the door and plunged to the porch where father sat waiting.

"Gone to bed. Well, I like *that*. Go tell her to get up and come

and see what I brought down with me. The most wonderful little twelve-pound bass you ever saw! For her; on ice. Come out and see it."

Father went out and complimented Horace.

"Now, where's the girl?" she heard him say, laughing a little, trying not to be hurt. She felt for her kimona and wrapped it around herself and went to the railing.

"Here I am, Horace. Hello!"

"Well, Jean, you *are* a pill. Here I drive down a hundred and twenty-five miles to see you tonight. Just because there's the kind of moon you like. Haven't even had supper."

Father went in with a soft click to the door. Horace stood looking up.

"You can't cheat me out of a kiss tonight, do you hear?" With a little grunt he dashed at the window-sill below, swung up to the porch and caught her angrily in his arms.

It was an unsatisfactory kiss.

"Why don't you *kiss* me?" he growled.

He took off his cap and levelled his face at her.

"Look here, Jean. I drive down all that way dreaming of the woman you used to be — a woman with a little affection in her. Can't you ever be that again?"

Yes, he was bitterly disappointed.

"Here we are in all this romantic pose and everything. You in a window of roses. But I must say, Jean, you don't play the Juliet part very well."

"No. I don't. I know I don't. Juliet was fourteen."

Here he was. She tried to tell him that she had discovered something. "It isn't love. It's hideous. It's hideous," she kept trying to tell him.

But he was talking louder. "Well, I hate to say it, Jean, but you're fully forty tonight. I'd almost rather have found you out gadding with one of those newspaper boys than here, looking at

me this way. Aren't you ever going to be the same again, Jean?"

He waited.

"I'm always prepared to find you gone out with another man."

She couldn't stand and push him off much longer.

"I'm tired. I wish you'd go home, Horace. It's terrible to stand here in the moonlight and roses. I'm — I'm afraid I can't be much of a sweetheart tonight. Go home, Horace. Tomorrow you'll forgive me."

But Horace was looking at her breast that showed when she leaned down to say she was sorry. He wrenched her nightgown open, fastened his mouth to her in fury.

"Do you want to drive me crazy?" he said under his breath, and lifted his face — so full of drawn passion, so like a hungry little boy — the face that always made her into nothingness....

She had fooled herself. She thought that in not having the baby she was not having Horace any more. Up there with the prostitutes and the antiseptics and the level pain, she had begun to dream of her own heart's love, of love and loving.

Now she knew she had fooled herself. Her bones would turn to chalk, and she would find herself caught, hatefully smothered all over again, one of these sharp moonlit nights.

The college clock struck ten times. It was broad moonlight. The night was vast. The soft dark hills were full of lovers.

Horace was groping between her breasts blindly.

She wasn't Juliet. She couldn't admire herself any more. She wasn't even the blue-eyed prostitute girl in the doctor's office. She was a wife to this man.

"I'm sorry. Am I a brute?" Horace was kissing her throat. "Poor little girl."

This day might even happen all over again.