

MARY

KATHERINE MANSFIELD

What does Kass give her sister besides a “green-plush bracket with a yellow china frog”? Why does she have second thoughts about her generosity? Which is her most generous act?

On poetry afternoons Grandmother let Mary and me wear Mrs. Gardner’s white hemstitched pinafores because we had nothing to do with ink or pencil.

Triumphant and feeling unspeakably beautiful, we would fly along the road, swinging our kits* and half chanting, half singing our new piece. I always knew my poetry, but Mary, who was a year and a half older, never knew hers. In fact, lessons of any sort worried her soul and body. She could never distinguish between “m” and “n.”

kits: bags

“Now, Kass—turmip,” she would say, wrinkling her nose, “t-o-u-r-m-i-p, isn’t it?”

Also in words like “celery” or “gallery” she invariably* said “cerely” and “garrely.”

invariably: constantly

I was a strong, fat little child who burst my buttons and shot out of my skirts to Grandmother’s entire satisfaction, but Mary was a “weed.” She had a continual little cough. “Poor old Mary’s bark,” as Father called it.

Every spare moment of her time seemed to be occupied in journeying with Mother to the pantry and being forced to take something out of a spoon—cod-liver oil, Easton’s syrup, malt extract. And though she had her nose held and a piece of barley sugar* after, these sorties,* I am sure, told on her spirits.

barley sugar: hard candy

sorties: trips

“I can’t bear lessons,” she would say woefully. “I’m all tired in my elbows and my feet.”

And yet, when she was well she was elfishly* gay and bright—danced like a fairy and sang like a bird. And heroic! She would hold a rooster by the legs while Pat chopped his head off. She loved boys, and played with a fine sense of honor and purity. In fact, I think she loved everybody; and I, who did not, worshiped her. I suffered untold agonies when the girls laughed at her in class, and when she answered wrongly I put up my hand and cried, “Please, Teacher, she means something quite different.” Then I would turn to Mary and say, “You meant ‘island’ and not ‘peninsula,’ didn’t you, dear?”

elfishly: mischievously

“Of course,” she would say—“how very silly!”

But on poetry afternoons I could be of no help at all. The class was divided into two and ranged on both sides of the room. Two of us drew lots as to which side must begin, and when the first half had each in turn said their piece, they left the room while Teacher and the remaining ones voted for the best reciter. Time and again I was top of my side, and time and again Mary was bottom. To stand before all those girls and Teacher, knowing my piece, loving it so much that I . . . shivered all over, was joy; but she would stand twisting “Mrs. Gardner’s white linen stitched,” blundering



and finally breaking down ignominiously.* There came a day when we had learned the whole of Thomas Hood's "I remember, I remember," and Teacher offered a prize for the best girl on each side. The prize for our side was a green-plush bracket* with a yellow china frog stuck on it. All the morning these treasures had stood on Teacher's table; all through playtime and the dinner hour we had talked of nothing else. It was agreed that it was bound to fall to me. I saw pictures of myself carrying it home to Grandmother—I saw it hanging on her wall—never doubting for one moment that she would think it the most desirable ornament in life. But as we ran to afternoon school, Mary's memory seemed weaker than ever before, and suddenly she stopped on the road.

ignominiously: shamefully

green-plush bracket: a velvet L-shaped wall fixture

"Kass," she said, "think what a s'rise if I got it after all; I believe Mother would go mad with joy. I know I should. But then—I'm so stupid, I know."

She sighed, and we ran on. Oh, from that moment I longed that the prize might fall to Mary. I said the "piece" to her three times over as we ran up the last hill and across the playground. Sides were chosen. She and I, as

our names began with "B," were the first to begin. And alas! that she was older, her turn was before mine.

The first verse went splendidly. I prayed viciously for another miracle.

"Oh please, God, dear, do be nice!—If you won't—"

. . . Mary broke down. I saw her standing there all alone, her pale little freckled face flushed, her mouth quivering, and the thin fingers twisting and twisting at the unfortunate pinafore frill.* She was helped, in a critical condition, to the very end. I saw Teacher's face smiling at me suddenly—the cold, shivering feeling came over me—and then I saw the house and "the little window where the sun came peeping in at morn."

frill: ruffle

When it was over the girls clapped, and the look of pride and love on Mary's face decided me.

"Kass has got it; there's no good trying now," was the spirit on the rest of my side. Finally they left the room. I waited until the moment the door was shut. Then I went over to Teacher and whispered:

"If I've got it, put Mary's name. Don't tell anybody, and don't let the others tell her—oh, *please*."

I shot out the last word at her, and Teacher looked astounded.

She shook her head at me in a way I could not understand. I ran out and joined the others. They were gathered in the passage, twittering like birds. Only Mary stood apart, clearing her throat and trying to hum a little tune. I knew she would cry if I talked to her, so I paid no attention. I felt I would like to run out of school and never come back again. Trying not to be sorry for what I had done—trying not to think of that heavenly green bracket, which seemed big and beautiful enough now to

give Queen Victoria*—and longing for the voting to be over kept me busy. At last the door opened, and we trooped in. Teacher stood by the table. The girls were radiant. I shut my mouth hard and looked down at my slippers.

Queen Victoria: English queen, 1837–1901

“The first prize,” said Teacher, “is awarded to Mary Beetham.” A great burst of clapping; but above it all I heard Mary’s little cry of joy. For a moment I could not look up; but when I did, and saw her walking to the desk, so happy, so confident, so utterly unsuspecting, when I saw her going back to her place with that green-plush bracket in her hands, it needed all my wildest expostulations with* the Deity to keep back my tears. The rest of the afternoon passed like a dream; but when school broke up, Mary was the heroine of the hour. Boys and girls followed her—held the prize in their “own hands”—and all looked at me with pitying contempt, especially those who were in on the secret and knew what I had done.

expostulations with: prayers to

On the way home we passed the Karori* bus going home from town full of businessmen. The driver gave us a lift, and we bundled in. We knew all the people.

Karori: city in New Zealand

“I’ve won a prize for po’try!” cried Mary, in a high, excited voice.

“Good old Mary!” they chorused.

Again she was the center of admiring popularity.

“Well, Kass, you needn’t look so doleful,”* said Mr. England, laughing at me, “you aren’t clever enough to win everything.”

doleful: cheerless

“I know,” I answered, wishing I were dead and buried.

I did not go into the house when we reached home, but wandered down to the loft and watched Pat mixing the chicken food.

But the bell rang at last, and with slow steps I crept up to the nursery.

Mother and Grandmother were there with two callers. Alice had come up from the kitchen; Vera was sitting with her arms around Mary’s neck.

“Well, that’s wonderful, Mary,” Mother was saying. “Such a lovely prize, too. Now, you see what you really can do, darling.”

“That will be nice for you to show your little girls when you grow up,” said Grandmother.

Slowly I slipped into my chair.



"Well, Kass, you don't look very pleased," cried one of the tactful* callers.

tactful: having a sense of appropriate manners. Here, however, the term is meant to be read ironically. Kass is saying that the speaker is tactless.

Mother looked at me severely.

"Don't say you are going to be a sulky* child about your sister," she said.

sulky: pouting

Even Mary's bright little face clouded.

"You are glad, aren't you?" she questioned.

"I'm frightfully glad," I said, holding on to the handle of my mug, and seeing all too plainly the glance of understanding that passed between the grownups.

We had the yellow frog for tea, we had the green-plush bracket for the entire evening when Father came home, and even when Mary and I had been sent to bed she sang a little song made out of her own head:

I got a yellow frog for a prize,
An' it had china eyes.

But she tried to fit this to the tune of "Sun of My Soul," which Grandmother thought a little irreverent,* and stopped.

irreverent: disrespectful

Mary's bed was in the opposite corner of the room. I lay with my head pressed into the pillow. Then the tears came. I pulled the clothes over my head. The sacrifice was too great. I stuffed a corner of the sheet into my mouth to stop me from shouting out the truth. Nobody loved me, nobody understood me, and they loved Mary without the frog, and now that she had it I decided they loved me less.

A long time seemed to pass. I got hot and stuffy, and came up to breathe. And the Devil entered my soul. I decided to tell Mary the truth. From that moment I was happy and light again, but I felt savage. I sat up—

then got out of bed. The linoleum was very cold. I crossed over to the other corner.

The moon shone through the window straight on to Mary's bed. She lay on her side, one hand against her cheek, soundly sleeping. Her little plait* of hair stood straight up from her head; it was tied with a piece of pink wool. Very white was her small face, and the funny freckles I could see even in this light; she had thrown off half the bedclothes; one button of her nightdress was undone, showing her flannel chest protector.

plait: braid

I stood there for one moment, on one leg, watching her sleep. I looked at the green-plush bracket already hung on the wall above her head, at that perfect yellow frog with china eyes, and then again at Mary, who stirred and flung out one arm across the bed.

Suddenly I stooped and kissed her.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The works of Katherine Mansfield (1888–1923) are almost all autobiographical in a way. Growing up near Wellington, New Zealand, she attended the local school, in much the same circumstances as the children of this story. She was a published short story writer by age nine and at age thirteen was sent to London's Queen's College, where she became an accomplished cellist. Although she eventually became a successful writer, her literary career was hampered by her poor health. She often went for months or years without publishing anything.

Mansfield, whose New Zealand stories are considered her best, was more concerned with leading the reader into flashes of insight into truth than with plot. She relied heavily on symbols and atmosphere to communicate the emotions of her characters. Her characters often experience deep disappointment as she did in life and as do all men who seek truth and satisfaction from any source other than God.



THINKING ZONE

We have already looked at points of view as they relate to literature. You may remember that a story with a first-person point of view is told by a narrator who refers to himself or herself as “I.” In some stories the first-person narrator is also one of the main characters. In other stories the first-person narrator is a minor character, one who plays only a small role in the plot. Occasionally, a first-person narrator may be just an observer who tells the reader what he witnessed, even though he was not involved in the action of the story himself.

Point of view—
*the perspective
from which the
story is told*

1. List some differences between Kass and Mary.
2. What does Kass give Mary other than the prize?
3. In what way might Kass be considered generous?
4. Why does Kass regret her generosity?
5. What kind of narrator tells this story? How do you know?
6. Was Kass right in making her “sacrifice”? Why or why not?
7. Do you think Kass changes her mind about telling Mary the truth at the end? If so, what do you think makes her decide?
8. Does the fact that Kass struggles with regret about her “sacrifice” make her less of an admirable character? Why or why not?
9. How would you encourage a person like Mary?