

IN THE GOOD OLD SUMMERTIME

A STORY

BY HELEN EUSTIS

"Hi-yi!" he would say, with his creaky gaiety, "Tay, tay, t'hell wid yer coffee!" and he would laugh reminiscently, a slightly forced laugh. But no one ever laughed with him, because no one but himself ever knew what the rest of the joke was. At last his wife would lose her temper when he threw off these meaningless bits and tag-lines from his unshared past, and would lash out at him savagely.

But Julia, their daughter, sat by, silent and rather meditative, enjoying the wisdom bought with her nineteen years. She had weathered the dreadful sea-sickness of adolescence, the tempests and wasteful thrashings of revolt, and now knew when to keep her mouth shut. Let them fight. She would soon be out of it. Before her glowed the effulgent future, outlining the past as the dawn outlines the horizon. Then — ah then! — she would break all bonds, and no single thing or person in her life would be as before.

Seeing freedom so close, she was savoring the last days of her slavery; she was being gentle with her parents,

being appreciative of them as never before. *Ave atque vale*, she told them daily, without their hearing a word of it. Yes, they had wounded her, been unjust to her, had not sufficiently loved her — she did not forget her grievances; it was not that. But now she recognized the uselessness of remembering, and dwelt on them no more. She floated in the sweet air of omniscience, positively sublime. On these last days before her mother set off for the summer visit to Aunt Marcella, Julia shopped with her, lunched with her, made out as politely as she would have with a not-quite-congenial acquaintance. She was proud of herself, smug in her own forbearance, which lasted quite as long as it was needed — until they put her mother on the train.

"Hi-yi!" said her father with a jaunty wink as the train pulled out. "Like to take in a movie?"

"Sure," said Julia gently, happily, from her height. "Anything you say."

Yet later, alone in the house with only her father and a maid in the full

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blast of the valley summer, it was not so easy as that. She was bored — all her friends were away and there was not enough money for her to go too — and it was so hot. How could she remain cool when it was so hot? The feeling she had had that the future was near, just beyond another year of college, changed; she began to feel the heaviness of waiting — waiting for the telephone to ring, for a car to drive up the drive, for the mailman to come — anything! Suspense! That was the watchword of the season. Every night she lay in her hot room and tried to let go of her suspense, while from the river banks, trains called mournful, important, incomprehensible messages to her. Every morning she woke sweating, on twisted sheets, and felt the great suspense that kept the city alive during the breathlessly hot hours, the suspense that made it nearly unbearable to while away the empty days, when, bored with books, she only sat in the shade-dimmed house and heard the dog's toenails click lazily on the rugless floors. Why didn't she do something? What was there to do? What were they all waiting for, all the people like herself, left in this half-empty city? Nothing would happen. Cool weather would come and they would forget that they ever had waited for anything. Yet each time Julia perceived a break in the routine, some nearly imperceptible fissure in the surface of everyday, she would think before she could stop herself. Look out! This is it! Here it comes!

and be obliged to curse herself for a fool. How she resented the loss of that serenity she had so nearly had!

Still, in the evening, when it was time for her father to come home, she would take a bath, powder her damp skin, dress in fresh clothes, and be nearly the way she wished to be when he arrived.

"Hello, baby," he would say, laying his hard straw hat with the ribbon on the hall chair. "What'd you do today?" He would take the cigar out of his mouth to kiss her, and she would smile, trying not to touch his hot soiled skin, and say,

"Oh, nothing. The marketing. Not really anything at all." Then he would go upstairs to wash, and she would make a cocktail for them to drink together before dinner.

How her father expanded in her mother's absence! Without her daily reproaches for his inadequacies, his digestion improved, and with it his temper; he sought out entertainments he would ordinarily have avoided. Then why did you stay married to her? she wanted to ask him a thousand times, but she did not say a word. No, all that was behind her. How coolly, how serenely, she presided at his table. There was not a word of conflict in that house.

II

Then one Sunday, as they sat over breakfast in pajamas with the curtains drawn against the sun, her father said, "How'd you like to drive out to Stillwater, to the Takes' place to-

day?" and her heart pounded as if some great hammer blow had jarred her calm. Why, what —

"Oh, that would be fun!" she said at once, stepping back neatly from the abyss at her feet. "I'd love to. Do you think anybody will be there?"

"Well," he said, "even if nobody is, it's a nice drive."

When she came downstairs from dressing, he came in from the garden and met her at the screen door with a posy of midsummer flowers in his hand. "Here's a tussy-mussy for you," he took the cigar out of his mouth to say. She tucked the flowers in her belt, and kissed him on the cheek, like a girl in a movie or play.

"Oh, thank you!" she said in a bright voice. Why can't Mother be like this? she could not help thinking. Life would be so much easier.

She opened the garage doors, stood by while he backed the car out, then closed them again. She climbed in beside him, rolled down her window, and they were off.

They were off for the Takes, out through the city, smoky with morning haze, out to the end of the street-car tracks, and into the lush Ohio countryside. The river curled beside them for a while.

"*La belle rivière*," he said. "Audubon calls it *la belle rivière*."

His accent was terrible, but all the same she felt pleased with him. Some of his out-of-the-way tidbits of information made her proud. He knew the oldest houses and pointed them out as they passed through the little

river towns. Some of his insistent attachment to the past seemed to her truly romantic. The Takes seemed to her a romantic part of his past. They had moved away from Stillwater now, lived scattered across the country, and only came back to the old house in summer, one or two members of the family at a time. But her father had known them before he married her mother, before she had been born, and all her life Julia had heard his stories about them. Those tales had caught her imagination and made her picture it all, made her sometimes yearn to have lived in these picturesque days of long skirts and long hair; high-laced shoes and house parties — people were always having house parties in her father's youth, if photograph albums were to be trusted. They played mandolins and practical jokes on each other, they posed for foolish snapshots, they went on picnics and hayrides and moonlight sings, and the prevailing impression that Julia had was that then life had not been so — difficult. Was that true? But this she could not ask. . . . Then how queer and unlikely it had been that she herself had known Belle Take's daughter Edith briefly — and romantically too — for a fleeting summer at camp. When she was thirteen, and Edith seventeen, if she remembered rightly. Edith had been her — well, her *hero* that summer.

All at once the faint freshness of morning had disappeared, the day had declared itself as terribly hot.

Beads formed on Julia's upper lip as fast as she could blot them away; the air came in the car window in a solid rush of heat. The road glimmered with mirages, then a sign appeared: Stillwater, Unincorporated. They turned onto a brick paved street which divided rows of enormous elms. Green lawns floated in liquid shade that looked as cool as water, but was not. On shadowy porches, old ladies sat in rockers, moving fans; here two children squirted each other with a hose, half naked and enviably dripping. Down between the rows of shops, past the bank, the movie house, the Civil War monument, people crossed the streets bemusedly, as if drunk on summer heat. Watching them, Julia mopped her own face and gasped.

"Hot!"

"Hot as Sam Hill!" agreed her father. "Hot as the hinges of Tunket!"

III

They came out on the other side of town and passed through the gray stone gateposts of the Takes' place. *Pin Oaks* was carved on each of them on a smoother stone plaque. Up the long shade-drowned drive they went, past the deserted tennis court, the rusted iron stag. Now I am going back to that time, Julia amused herself by thinking, I am going back before my birth to the prenatal past. Where the established middle-aged will have become young and uncertain, where old Mrs. Take will hold out her punch glass and say, "Oh, I

couldn't possibly drink another!" where my father and Willy Harrison will be ambushed in the forsythia to listen to stammering Harold Hargrave propose to Belle, where Hannah Take, the tomboy, will put the cat down the laundry chute, where Ben Todd's pants will fall off in the middle of a set of mixed doubles. I will be wholesome, but with a small waist, and everything will be jolly. No one will worry about anything.

"Daddy," she said abruptly, "was it as much fun as it sounds like when you were young?"

He waited to throw his cigar stump out of the window before he answered, chuckling and wagging his head, "Pretty near. It pretty darn near was."

Then the house came in sight, enormous yet homely, standing in the shade of its own turrets and porches, enclosed in yet independent of trees. It looked unkempt and vacant.

"D'you think anybody will be home?" Julia asked her father anxiously, uselessly, and he,

"Well, if not we can always turn around and go home."

But he would have been disappointed too; he must have been immersed in real memories of which she had only the accounts. Suddenly, illogically, there fled across her mind the image of Edith as she had known her, late adolescent, straight-haired, Indian-browed, dark and dashing with a silver bracelet wide as a cuff on her arm. Good God, what could Edith be like, grown up now, com-

mitted to being pretty or ugly, — yes, male or female — having a permanent wave, wearing red fingernail polish, high heels? Oh, God, she prayed, I hope nobody's here!

They descended from the car and a hot breeze followed them up the steps; they found the front door open and stared through the screen into the dark, dark-walled hall, waiting for someone to answer the bell.

Soon rubber-soled footsteps sounded on the parquetry and Hannah Take — Hannah Parsons now — came through the gloom, squinting into the light. She was dressed in a short tennis dress and sneakers, her hair looked grayer than when Julia had seen her a few years ago, but her narrow sunburnt face still wore its little-boyish look under the middle-aged flesh. She grinned welcomingly, showing her long teeth, as she made out their faces.

"Well, Linc Wilson!" she exclaimed. "Come in! Come in, Julia."

She held the screen for them to pass inside, into the cooler darkness of the big square hall, where antlered heads of deer brooded from the paneling. Awkwardly, Julia's father put his hands on Hannah Take's shoulders and kissed her cheek. "How's the old girl?" he said, a bit breathless.

"Never better," said Hannah, patting his arm.

"How's George?" he asked her, and Julia had to struggle a little to remember that George, of course, was Hannah's husband, that Hannah even had a son older than herself whom she

had never met. Whenever she thought of Hannah, it was as a fifteen-year-old in a sailor dress, pestering everybody in those old days when her father had come to call. It gave Julia a dislocated feeling, seeing Hannah now, to think of her that way.

"Julia's gotten pretty," Hannah said, but not patronizingly at all, and Julia smiled.

Then Hannah and her father plainly forgot her, chatting along eagerly as they moved toward the doorway of the library. Every few minutes, one would take hold of the other's arm and shake it a little, exclaiming, "Long time no see," and they would grin at each other. If Mother were here, thought Julia, it couldn't be happening this way. Jolly, that was how they behaved together, jolly and innocent, just as she had always imagined everyone being in the old days. Then they were at the library, and suddenly her heart turned upside down when a figure rose from the dimness there. Edith? her mind cried wildly, but then she made out that it was a stranger, a plain girl of indeterminate age, in a white tennis dress like Hannah's, with a hard brown face, marble eyes, and straight brown hair turned behind her ears.

"This is Norma —" said Hannah, half turning to Julia, who missed the last name.

"How do you do?" said Julia, to which the girl answered, "Hullo," very coolly.

"We just had some tennis," said Hannah to Julia and her father, and

then, to them all, "What will you have to drink?" Julia and the stranger said coke, while Julia's father said a highball, and went off with Hannah to mix it, leaving the girls in the library alone.

IV

Here the walls were dark, like the hall, the chintz slipcovers were faded and worn, and the sunlight filtered bright green through the heavy foliage, laying pale cool light on the massive dusty furniture. The girl lounged back in a corner of the couch, staring at Julia, twiddling the screws of the racket press that lay beside her, and Julia didn't like her, didn't like her at all. She was neither jolly nor innocent, that was plain, yet how at home she seemed! Probably she knew how all the rooms upstairs looked that Julia had never seen; she came here to play tennis with Hannah, she must play with Edith, when Edith was here. . . . "Do you live in Stillwater?" asked Julia.

"Oh, yes," said the girl shortly.

"Do you play a lot of tennis here?"

"You mean at Pin Oaks? Only when the girls are around. I have to drag Hannah."

"Do you know Edith?" asked Julia.

"Edith? Oh sure. She doesn't come back much any more. We used to play together when we were kids."

When they were kids. If she and Edith were the same age, then this Norma was only four years older than Julia — twenty-three. She looked old-

er. She acted older — making Julia feel as if she were doing a conversation exercise in a foreign language. A need to make some expression — expression of anything — come into her hard face made Julia say, before she could think better of it, "I went to camp with Edith when I was a kid. I had a crush on her."

The girl leaned forward from the corner of the sofa into the dim light, an emotion gathering on her face at last, a curious yet familiar look of demanding eagerness. "Oh, do tell me!" she said, in a cold teasing voice, "What does it feel like to have a crush on someone?"

Were they adults or were they children? Julia wondered wildly, searching for what to answer. Like how many encounters with how many schoolmates this was — mean little girls of ten or twelve to whom you told your dearest secrets in the hope of winning their regard, but who next day would recount them publicly, with ridicule, in front of the rest of the class. But I'm grown up! she assured herself. Still she was under that miserable childhood compulsion not to lie. "It feels like being in love," she blurted, doing her best to make her tone, at least, distant. She laughed falsely and took a package of cigarettes out of her purse. "Have one?" she said defiantly to the girl, who only shook her head no.

"Just like being in love — really?"

But now, with the smoke curling out of her mouth and nostrils, with her eyelids downcast while she inspected

her light, Julia was able to make herself sound adult and cool. "It's a kind of pastime at all girls' camps, I guess. The head counselor warned against it at the beginning of the season, I remember; so of course, after that, it wasn't chic *not* to have a crush. The little girls had them on the big girls and the big girls had them on the counselors." That was true. It was not, after all, simply personal. It was a phenomenon.

But the girl only showed a look of satisfaction on her unpowdered face. "How about Edith? Did she have a crush on someone?"

Oh, Julia was grown up all right! This time she would not be caught. "She was too old, I suppose," she lied. But she had. Edith had had a crush on Mary Webster, who was a counselor. Mary was sweet — not like Edith at all — with soft eyes and protruding teeth that kept her lips a little apart all the time. How easy it was to visualize Mary, but it took a moment to picture Edith, call to mind her features and marshal them into a single image. . . . When she did, Julia saw her with awful clarity, night dark, with the wide silver bracelet on her arm, daring and gallant in the barelegged camp costume.

Still the questioner was not satisfied, still she leaned forward, silhouetted on luminescent, moving leaves, as she blocked out light from the French windows. "What did you *do* when you had a crush?" she demanded of Julia, with her incredibly brazen mocking.

Now Julia turned her head away, caught, unable to stop remembering the sight and smell of it, the wet bathing suits on the line, the Crib, where beginners learned to swim, the canoeing test, when you tipped over a canoe with all your clothes on, the being dragged unbearably from your warm bed by your teammates to take a before-breakfast dip, the homesickness and the knowledge that you could not go home, and standing before the head counselor on one occasion while she said, "You have the most discontented face I have ever seen on any child!" — had she meant it? — and the time she found Edith's fountain pen that was stamped with her name in the boathouse, and kept it; the time she had gone with Edith and Mary in a canoe when they had paddled all the way across the lake to the inn. The mountains came down to the lake's edge all around, and Julia had said loudly, to startle them, "I hate mountains!" but Mary and Edith had only laughed and told her that mountains were beautiful, as if she had no right to an opinion, as if she were hardly there at all. How loveless it was! she thought urgently, her heart melting for her poor, plump, breastless thirteen-year-old self.

"Oh," she said at last, tardily answering the question, "just — worshipped."

At this the girl took a cigarette from a box on the table beside her and lit it, lowering her eyes like a spy in a movie who has got the desired information and has only to make his

getaway to report it all to headquarters. Knowing she had said enough and then some, Julia began to want to talk more, to explain it, show how innocent it all had been. When you're thirteen you aren't anything yet, you have these feelings, but you don't know where to direct them — I'm not (call it a spade!) a lesbian or anything! I've been in love with lots of boys!

But watching the stranger's eyes as she stared in secret judgment at her cigarette, this began to sound over-protected even to herself; she began to try to remember more minutely how it had been. Suppose, she thought wildly, there really were something I can't remember, something that I'm hiding in my subconscious. But that seemed terribly far-fetched; after all, it was only six years ago, and if there *had* been anything — well, she wouldn't have forgotten it, that was all. What she did remember was — the time her father had come up to visit her. He had taken her and Edith — Edith as Belle Take's daughter rather than as Julia's friend — out to luncheon in the old Hupmobile that was her mother's shame. She had tried to impress Edith by telling her that she was learning to drive, and after Daddy left she had cried for hours with homesickness. She had never wanted to go to camp. She had hated it. She had eaten a whole box of laxatives in the hope of being sent home — or possibly dying — but all that had resulted was a mild case of the trots. But that wasn't what she

had set out to recall. Edith — yes, walking with the other girls, in bathrobe and slippers, through the rows of cabins in the cool mountain nights, to the wash shack, before Taps. There, where it smelled of kerosene lanterns and toothpaste, she would kiss Edith goodnight, if she were lucky enough to meet her. Perfectly public — she was sure most of the other girls kissed somebody goodnight — otherwise how would she have dared? Like kissing your parents, when you were home. No, be honest. Not like that. Pleasant soft lips. Like kissing yourself, if you could.

v

The strange girl had got up and was wandering around the room, looking affectedly at pictures she must have seen a thousand times before. Then, with a kind of strutting step, toes turned in, she walked out between the long doors without a word, onto the grass, down the slope in the sun. Julia sighed and closed her eyes. Tension flowed from her. When she looked about again, there was the dark cool room, probably very little changed in the last thirty years, the gently glowing gold picture frames, the collected refuse of the past — a mandolin with broken strings on top of the secretary, a cabinet of curios, a small crystal ball on a quartz base, ivory spheres carved one inside another, a porcelain mandarin whose head must surely nod, and behind her, on the big oak table, a photograph album. This she seized and took on

her lap. Here was a party, done up in dusts, posed beside an antique automobile; here was a comedy of Hannah pouring from an empty pitcher on the neat center part of some young man's hair; next, Belle Take, in a riding habit and derby. Desperately she tried to call these to her, to see them all, here in a crowd, in this very room, Hannah, Belle, old Mrs. Take, Ben Todd, her father, dressed in their stiff collars and tight knickers, formidable blouses and bell-shaped skirts. One of them would strum the mandolin, would sing some foolish song she'd heard her father sing:

Ruby lips, sweeter than
Sugar or plum,
Smiling, guiling,
Never look glum.
Seem to say
All the day
Kissy come, come!
Yummy yum!
Yummy yum!
Yum yum yum!

But for all her straining her imagination it was no good, it was no good at all. For something went wrong with her fantasy, it ran away from her control and took a shape of its own. Through the happy, noisy crowd, a dark, almost sinister figure broke its way: Edith, wearing the white middy and maroon bloomers of their camp over her flat body, scattering the other ghosts from her path, while they stood aghast and silenced by her nudity and rudeness. Straight to Julia's chair she strode, and Julia's heart nearly burst from her breast for wondering what she had come for.

But in the moment before Edith would have spoken, Julia's father, now his middle-aged stocky self, frowning with authority, left the crowd of ghosts and clapped his hand on the barelegged Edith's shoulder. What are you up to? What's the idea? his most awful voice cried, and Julia shuddered and cringed with guilt, turned chilly in the heat, rose and walked around the room to dispel the dream. . . .

"Hi-yi!" said her father, appearing in the doorway with a drink tinkling in his hand. "Tay, tay —"

"The'll wid yer coffee!" Hannah chimed in. "Here, I forgot you said coke and mixed you a drink too, Julia."

"Tay, tay," began her father ecstatically, lifting his glass.

And Julia sat in silence, sipping her drink, looking out from under her eyebrows at Hannah and her father, gathering up and replacing the scattered bits of her self-possession. The other two reminisced happily through several drinks, but ran out of subject matter finally because there seemed to be a limit to how long one could dwell on events thirty years gone. They came, at last, to half-hearted questions about each other's spouses, business, and people who had died. The sky clouded over late in the afternoon and thunder rumbled far away.

"We'd better get home, Daddy," said Julia.

"Oh, in a minute!" he dismissed her.

"Honestly, Daddy, if we're going to beat that storm —"

He was persuaded to the door, weaving a little, jovial, expansive, bursting forth with increasing frequency and inanity with his, "Tay, tay —" There was a comradely look of relief and irritation that passed between Hannah and Julia when they said goodbye.

"You must come up to see us when the girls are here," Hannah said.

"I'd love to," said Julia.

"Goodbye, old girl," her father said sentimentally, and gave Hannah a wet kiss.

"Hadn't I better drive?" asked Julia.

"A-ah!" he dismissed her, with a wave of his hand. "Been driving since before you were a wicked gleam in my eye!"

At last they were in the car, they were off. The sky was growing darker, and the heat seemed even worse. Julia's father drove faster, passing through a red light at a cross road, humming to himself. He felt in the breast pocket of his rumpled white suit for a cigar, but there was none; he turned to Julia grinning. "Hi-yi!" he began. "Tay, tay —"

"Watch out!" she cried, but all in a second he had reached a railroad crossing just as the black-and-white striped gates were coming down; he had run the nose of the car right under one of the bars.

There was no harm done except for scratched paint on the hood, the angry crossing man, and the abrupt shock to her nerves, yet all at once Julia experienced the most violent sense of revulsion and fury; she could

have hit, she could have killed. . . .

"No harm done," he was saying. "Accidents happen in the best-regulated families."

"No!" she heard herself replying curtly, in her mother's voice, "No harm done, no thanks to you!"

"Now listen, Miss Know-it-all!" he began, his temper flaring too.

They were staring at each other, they were glaring into each other's eyes with the very look of himself and her mother. In Julia's soul, the barricades and truce flags of the summer had gone down, loosing all the threats and disappointments of this afternoon, all the fears and questions and evil possibilities of her life. I hate you! she thought to him, letting it show in her eyes. I hate you for your stupid jokes that nobody can understand, for your ineffectuality — yes, I hate you because you don't make enough money! I hate you because you would never listen to how it was with me, for your spinelessness and your unfulfilled promises! I hate you for making me mistrust the whole of your sex because you were the first of it I ever saw! I hate you for making me sorry for you, for being weaker than I am. . . . She began to cry, but at least she said none of it out loud.

"Oh, come now!" he said somewhat drily — the train had passed, the gates risen, and they were driving on. "Surely it's not that bad."

"Tay, tay, t'hell wid yer coffee!" she said bitterly, between sobs, and they did not speak to each other again for the rest of the drive.

REPORTING VS. THE ART OF FICTION

BY J. DONALD ADAMS

REPORTING is one of the greatest American skills. In that craft we are acknowledged leaders, as much so as we are in the technique of industrial production. It is a skill which we acquired early and have consistently developed. Reporting is the triumph of our journalism; for many years it has been, with rare exceptions, more dynamic than the writing of opinion on the things it describes. But what, I propose to ask in this article, of its bearing on our literature? For there is no doubt that its influence on the writing of American fiction, particularly during the past half-century, has been enormous. In some respects that influence has been salutary; in others, I believe it has been deeply harmful.

It has been salutary because it has fostered the observant eye and has encouraged the use of first-hand material. It was an effective force in widening the range of that material, and the men who broke the chains of the genteel tradition in our fiction had, in the majority, been newspaper reporters before they turned to the novel. It bred vitality because it maintained a direct relation to life as

the reporter saw it. It was further effective, I think, in reducing pomposities and artificialities of style, as well as in curbing the sentimental approach. And there, I submit, its contributions end.

Reporting is concerned with externals, and that is the chief reason its influence on the writing of fiction has so heavy a debit side. It has given a surface character to the representative American novel. It has impeded the growth of American fiction as a form of art, and impaired its value as a commentary on the life it observes.

I suppose that contemporary American fiction is richer in topical allusion (except for the continuing flood of novels which resurrect the ghosts of history) than any other. The British and the Continental writers have always found it easier to work in a timeless spirit than have we, especially since the closing years of the nineteenth century. For my own part, I find myself becoming increasingly annoyed by the incessant use of timely tags which characterizes every other novel whose period and setting are those of the approximate present.

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