

Mr. Claro -- Modern Nonfiction

Reading Selection by Eudora Welty

The Little Store

EUDORA WELTY (b. 1909) published her Collected Stories in 1980, bringing together 576 pages of the short fiction for which she is celebrated. Her short stories first appeared in magazines, often the literary quarterlies, and became regular features of annual collections of the best fiction from periodicals. Two of her most enduring stories are "Why I Live at the P.O.," which shows her comic genius, and "The Worn Path," which recounts the courage and perseverance of an old black woman.

Among her novels are Delta Wedding (1946), Losing Battles (1970), and The Optimist's Daughter (1972), which won the Pulitzer Prize. "The Little Store" comes from The Eye of the Story (1978), which is a collection of her essays, most on the art of fiction. In 1983 she delivered the William E. Massey Lectures at Harvard and a year later brought them out as a volume of recollections, One Writer's Beginnings. She has won the Gold Medal of the National Institute of Arts and Letters, the National Medal for Literature, and the Presidential Medal of Freedom. In 1989 she departed from the word long enough to issue a collection of her photographs, called Photographs.

Born in Jackson, Mississippi, she still resides in Jackson, Mississippi. In this small town, her observation and imagination have found all the material they require. When she writes an essay out of memory, as she does in "The Little Store," she brings to reminiscence the storyteller's skills of narration and use of significant detail. Maybe more important, she also brings the stylist's ear for rhythms of word and sentence that compel attention. Her gifts for evoking intimacy and cherished detail lead in the end to hints of the darker vision that underlies her best work.

Two blocks away from the Mississippi State Capitol, and on the same street with it, where our house was when I was a child growing up in Jackson, it was possible to have a little pasture behind your backyard where you could keep a Jersey cow, which we did. My mother herself milked her. A thrifty homemaker, wife, mother of three, she also did all her own cooking. And as far as I can recall, she never set foot inside a grocery store. It wasn't necessary.

For her regular needs, she stood at the telephone in our front hall and consulted with Mr. Lemly, of Lemly's Market and Grocery downtown, who took her order and sent it out on his next delivery. And since Jackson at the heart of it was still within very near reach of the open country, the blackberry lady clanged on her bucket with a quart measure at your front door in June without fail, the watermelon man

rolled up to your house exactly on time for the Fourth of July, and down through the summer, the quiet of the early-morning streets was pierced by the calls of farmers driving in with their plenty. One brought his with a song, so plaintive we would sing it with him:

"Milk, milk,
Buttermilk,
Snap beans - butterbeans - Tender okra - fresh greens...
And buttermilk."

My mother considered herself pretty well prepared in her kitchen and pantry for any emergency that, in her words, might choose to present itself. But if she should, all of a sudden, need another lemon or find she was out of bread, all she had to do was call out, "Quick! Who'd like to run to the Little Store for me?"

I would.

She'd count out the change into my hand, and I was away. I'll bet the nickel that would be left over that all over the country, for those of my day, the neighborhood grocery played a similar part in our growing up.

Our store had its name - it was that of the grocer who owned it, whom I'll call Mr. Sessions - but "the Little Store" is what we called it at home. It was a block down our street toward the capitol and a half a block further, around the corner, toward the cemetery I knew even the sidewalk to it as well as I knew my own skin. I'd skipped my jumping-rope up and down it, hopped its length through mazes of hopscotch, played jacks in its islands of shade, serpented along it on my Princess bicycle, skated it backward and forward. In the twilight I had dragged my steamboat by its string (this was homemade out of every new shoebox, with candle in the bottom lighted and shining through colored tissue paper pasted over windows scissored out in the shapes of the sun, moon, and stars) across every crack of the walk without letting it bump or catch fire. I'd "played out" on that street after supper with my brothers and friends as long as "first-dark" lasted; I'd caught its lightning bugs. On the first Armistice Day (and this will set the time I'm speaking of) we made our own parade down that walk on a single velocipede - my brother pedaling, our little brother riding the handlebars, and myself standing on the back, all with arms wide, flying flags in each hand. (My father snapped that picture as we raced by. It came out blurred.)

the first Armistice Day November 11, 1918, marked the end of World War I. Now celebrated as Veterans Day.

As I set forth for the Little Store, a tune would float toward me from the house where there lived three sisters, girls in their teens, who ratted their hair over their ears, wore headbands like gladiators, and were considered to be very popular. They practiced for this in the daytime; they'd wind up the Victrola, leave

the same record on they'd played before, and you'd see them bobbing past their dining-room windows while they danced with each other. Being three, they could go all day, cutting in:

"Everybody ought to know-oh

How to do the Tickle-Toe(how to do the Tickle-Toe)" -they sang it and danced to it, and as I went by to the same song, I believed it.

A little further on, across the street, was the house where the principal of our grade school lived - lived on, even while we were having vacation. What if she would come out? She would halt me in my tracks - she had a very carrying and well-known voice in Jackson, where she'd taught almost everybody - saying "Eudora Alice Welty, spell oblige." Oblige was the word that she of course knew had kept me from making 100 on my spelling exam. She'd make me miss it again now, by boring her eyes through me from across the street. This was my vacation fantasy, one good way to scare myself on the way to the store.

Down near the corner waited the house of a little boy named Lindsey. The sidewalk here was old brick, which the roots of a giant chinaberry tree had humped up and tilted this way and that. On skates, you took it fast, in a series of skittering hops, trying not to touch ground anywhere. If the chinaberries had fallen and rolled in the cracks, it was like skating through a whole shooting match of marbles. I crossed my fingers that Lindsey wouldn't be looking.

During the big flu epidemic he and I, as it happened, were being nursed io through our sieges at the same time. I'd hear my father and mother murmuring to each other, at the end of a long day, "And I wonder how poor little Lindsey got along today?" Just as, down the street, he no doubt would have to hear his family saying, "And I wonder how is poor Eudora by now?" I got the idea that a choice was going to be made soon between poor little Lindsey and poor Eudora, and I came up with a funny poem. I wasn't prepared for it when my father told me it wasn't funny and my mother cried that if I couldn't be ashamed for myself, she'd have to be ashamed for me:

There was a little boy and his name was Lindsey.

He went to heaven with the influinzy.

He didn't, he survived it, poem and all, the same as I did. But his chinaberries could have brought me down in my skates in a flying act of contrition before his eyes, looking pretty funny myself, right in front of his house.

Setting out in this world, a child feels so indelible. He only comes to find out later that it's all the others along his way who are making themselves indelible to him.

Our Little Store rose right up from the sidewalk; standing in a street of family houses, it alone hadn't any

yard in front, any tree or flowerbed. It was a plain frame building covered over with brick. Above the door, a little railed porch ran across on an upstairs level and four windows with shades were looking out. But I didn't catch on to those.

Running in out of the sun, you met what seemed total obscurity inside. There were almost tangible smells - licorice recently sucked in a child's cheek, dill-pickle brine that had leaked through a paper sack in a fresh trail across the wooden floor, ammonia-loaded ice that had been hoisted from wet croker sacks and slammed into the icebox with its sweet butter at the door, and perhaps the smell of still-untrapped mice.

Then through the motes of cracker dust, cornmeal dust, the Gold Dust of the Gold Dust Twins that the floor had been swept out with, the realities emerged. Shelves climbed to high reach all the way around, set out with not too much of any one thing but a lot of things - lard, molasses, vinegar, starch, matches, kerosene, Octagon soap (about a year's worth of octagon-shaped coupons cut out and saved brought a signet ring addressed to you in the mail. Furthermore, when the postman arrived at your door, he blew a whistle). It was up to you to remember what you came for, while your eye traveled from cans of sardines to ice cream salt to harmonicas to flypaper (over your head, batting around on a thread beneath the blades of the ceiling fan, stuck with its testimonial catch).

Its confusion may have been in the eye of its beholder. Enchantment is cast upon you by all those things you weren't supposed to have need for, it lures you close to wooden tops you'd outgrown, boy's marbles and agates in little net pouches, small rubber balls that wouldn't bounce straight, frazzly kite-string, clay bubble-pipes that would snap off in your teeth, the stiffest scissors. You could contemplate those long narrow boxes of sparklers gathering dust while you waited for it to be the Fourth of July or Christmas, and noisemakers in the shape of tin frogs for somebody's birthday party you hadn't been invited to yet, and see that they were all marvelous.

You might not have even looked for Mr. Sessions when he came around his store cheese (as big as a doll's house) and in front of the counter looking for you. When you'd finally asked him for, and received from him in its paper bag, whatever single thing it was that you had been sent for, the nickel that was left over was yours to spend.

Down at a child's eye level, inside those glass jars with mouths in their sides through which the grocer could run his scoop or a child's hand might be invited to reach for a choice, were wineballs, all-day suckers, gumdrops, peppermints. Making a row under the glass of a counter were the Tootsie Rolls, Hershey Bars, Goo-Goo Clusters, Baby Ruths. And whatever was the name of those pastilles that came stacked in a cardboard cylinder with a cardboard lid? They were thin and dry, about the size of tiddlywinks, and in the shape of twisted rosettes. A kind of chocolate dust came out with them when you

shook them out in your hand. Were they chocolate? I'd say rather they were brown. They didn't taste of anything at all, unless it was wood. Their attraction was the number you got for a nickel.

Making up your mind, you circled the store around and around, around the pickle barrel, around the tower of Cracker Jack boxes; Mr. Sessions had built it for us himself on top of a packing case, like a house of cards.

If it seemed too hot for Cracker Jacks, I might get a cold drink. Mr. Sessions might have already stationed himself by the cold-drinks barrel, like a mind reader. Deep in ice water that looked black as ink, murky shapes that would come up as Coca-Colas, Orange Crushes, and various flavors of pop, were all swimming around together. When you gave the word, Mr. Sessions plunged his bare arm in to the elbow and fished out your choice, first try. I favored a locally bottled concoction called Lake's Celery. (What else could it be called? It was made by a Mr. Lake out of celery. It was a popular drink here for years but was not known universally, as I found out when I arrived in New York and ordered one in the Astor bar.) You drank on the premises, with feet set wide apart to miss the drip, and gave him back his bottle.

But he didn't hurry you off. A standing scales was by the door, with a 20 stack of iron weights and a brass slide on the balance arm, that would weigh you up to three hundred pounds. Mr. Sessions, whose hands were gentle and smelled of carbolic, would lift you up and set your feet on the platform, hold your loaf of bread for you, and taking his time while you stood still for him, he would make certain of what you weighed today. He could even remember what you weighed last time, so you could subtract and announce how much you'd gained. That was good-bye.

Is there always a hard way to go home? From the Little Store, you could go partway through the sewer. If your brothers had called you a scarecat, then across the next street beyond the Little Store, it was possible to enter this sewer by passing through a privet hedge, climbing down into the bed of a creek, and going into its mouth on your knees. The sewer - it might have been no more than a "storm sewer" - came out and emptied here, where Town Creek, a sandy, most often shallow little stream that ambled through Jackson on its way to the Pearl River, ran along the edge of the cemetery. You could go in darkness through this tunnel to where you next saw light (if you ever did) and climb out through the culvert at your own street corner.

I was a scarecat, all right, but I was a reader with my own refuge in storybooks. Making my way under the sidewalk, under the street and the street-car track, under the Little Store, down there in the wet dark by myself, I could be Persephone entering into my six-month sojourn underground - though I didn't suppose Persephone had to crawl, hanging onto a loaf of bread, and come out through the teeth of an iron grating. Mother Ceres would indeed be wondering where she could find me, and mad when she

knew. "Now am I going to have to start marching to the Little Store for myself?"

I couldn't picture it. Indeed I'm unable today to picture the Little Store with a grown person in it, except for Mr. Sessions and the lady who helped him, who belonged there. We children thought it was ours. The happiness of errands was in part that of running for the moment away from home, a free spirit. I believed the Little Store to be a center of the outside world, and hence of happiness - as I believed what I found in the Cracker Jack box to be a genuine prize, which was as simply as I believed in the Golden Fleece.

Persephone In Greek mythology, the daughter of Zeus and Demeter. She is abducted by Pluto to reign with him in the underworld for six months of every year.

Ceres The Roman name for Demeter, mother of Persephone.

Golden Fleece In Greek mythology, the fleece of the golden ram, stolen by Jason and the Argonauts.

But a day came when I ran to the store to discover, sitting on the front step, a grown person, after all - more than a grown person. It was the Monkey Man, together with his monkey. His grinding-organ was lowered to the step beside him. In my whole life so far, I must have laid eyes on the Monkey Man no more than five or six times. An itinerant of rare and wayward appearances, he was not punctual like the Gipsies, who every year with the first cool days of fall showed up in the aisles of Woolworth's. You never knew when the Monkey Man might decide to favor Jackson, or which way he'd go. Sometimes you heard him as close as the next street, and then he didn't come up yours.

But now I saw the Monkey Man at the Little Store, where I'd never seen him before. I'd never seen him sitting down. Low on that familiar doorstep, he was not the same any longer, and neither was his monkey. They looked just like an old man and an old friend of his that wore a fez, meeting quietly together, tired, and resting with their eyes fixed on some place far away, and not the same place. Yet their romance for me didn't have it in its power to waver. I wavered. I simply didn't know ~how to step around them, to proceed on into the Little Store for my mother's emergency as if nothing had happened. If I could have gone in there after it, whatever it was, I would have given it to them - putting it into the monkey's cool little fingers. I would have given them the Little Store itself.

In my memory they are still attached to the store - so are all the others. Everyone I saw on my way seemed to me then part of my errand, and in a way they were. As I myself, the free spirit, was part of it too.

All the years we lived in that house where we children were born, the same people lived in the other houses on our street too. People changed through the arithmetic of birth, marriage, and death, but not by going away. So families just accrued stories, which through the fullness of time, in those times, their

own lives made. And I grew up in those.

But I didn't know there'd ever been a story at the Little Store, one that was going on while I was there. Of course, all the time the Sessions family had been living right overhead there, in the upstairs rooms behind the little railed porch and the shaded windows; but I think we children never thought of that. Did I fail to see them as a family because they weren't living in an ordinary house? Because I so seldom saw them close together, or having anything to say to each other? She sat in the back of the store, her pencil over a ledger, while he stood and waited on children to make up their minds. They worked in twin black eyeshades, held on their gray heads by elastic bands. It may be harder to recognize kindness - or unkindness either - in a face whose eyes are in shadow. His face underneath his shade was as round as the little wooden wheels in the Tinker Toy box. So was her face. I didn't know, perhaps didn't even wonder: Were they husband and wife or brother and sister? Were they father and mother? There were a few other persons, of various ages, wandering singly in by the back door and out. But none of their relationships could I imagine, when I'd never seen them sitting down together around their own table.

The possibility that they had any other life at all, anything beyond what we could see within the four walls of the Little Store, occurred to me only when tragedy struck their family. There was some act of violence. The shock to the neighborhood traveled to the children, of course; but I couldn't find out from my parents what had happened. They held it back from me, as they'd already held back many things, "until the time comes for you to know."

You could find out some of these things by looking in the unabridged dictionary and the encyclopedia - kept to hand in our dining room - but you couldn't find out there what had happened to the family who for all the years of your life had lived upstairs over the Little Store, who had never been anything but patient and kind to you, who never once had sent you away. All I ever knew was its aftermath: They were the only people ever known to me who simply vanished. At the point where their life overlapped into ours, the story broke off.

We weren't being sent to the neighborhood grocery for facts of life, or death. But of course those are what we were on the track of, anyway. With the loaf of bread and the Cracker Jack prize, I was bringing home the intimations of pride and disgrace, and rumors and early news of people coming to hurt one another, while others practiced for joy - storing up a portion for myself of the human mystery.

AFTERWORD

Criticizing writers whom we read in silence, often without moving our lips, we speak in metaphor of the author's voice, meaning the collective idiosyncracies of a writer's style. In another metaphor, we sometimes call style the writer's signature. The latter compares diction and syntax to the individual

flourishes of handwriting; the former compares style to the characteristic noises of the human voicebox: accent, pitch, rhythm.

The more stylish the writer, the more do the words on the page control our hearing of them. And the best silent readers hear: When I read poetry silently for an hour or two my throat gets tired from all that squeezing. Some prose - Henry James, Ernest Hemingway, Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty - tires out the throat, or the tapping foot, as much as poetry does. Try out the pacing and pitch of Welty's long, idiomatic, characteristic first sentence: The first phrase so clearly waits for its attachment, you must pitch it high; the second phrase qualifies or tags the first, dangles from it attached by a thread; we drop the pitch of our voices to indicate that this phrase only specifies the one before it; the third phrase drops down even lower, maybe taxing the range of our pitch; here we learn further the identity of this place and receive important exposition in the guise of location.

Then comes the main clause - "it was possible" - and the sentence's conclusion, which gives us the reason the sentence started, "Two blocks away from the Mississippi State Capitol." Here in the main clause the voice finds its middle range:

Here we find a main verb and a qualifying clause on the same pitch level: What kind of little pasture? The kind where you would keep a Jersey cow. These eighteen words, just before the end, are the meat and potato of the sentence and make sense of the earlier anticipatory phrases that kept us waiting. The sweetest measure of voice comes last, the dessert: "which we did." After the eighteen-word main clause, here is a comic three-word, three-syllable afterthought, plunk plunk plunk - as Welty with good-humored mimetic skill works on us with the rhythms of childhood.

BOOKS AVAILABLE IN PAPERBACK

The Bride of the Innisfallen and Other Stories. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. Short stories.

The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. Short stories.

A Curtain of Green and Other Stories. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. Short stories.

Delta Wedding. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. Novel.

The Eye of the Story: Selected Essays and Reviews. New York: Random House- Vintage.

The Golden Apples. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. Short stories.

Losing Battles. New York: Random House-Vintage. Novel.

One Writer's Beginnings. New York: Warner Books. Nonfiction.

The Optimist's Daughter. New York: Random House-Vintage. Novel.

Photographs. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. Art.

The Ponder Heart. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. Novel.

The Robber Bridegroom. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. Novel.

Thirteen Stories. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. Short stories.

The Wide Net and Other Stories. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. Short stories.