Five Shorts Stories

by

Roald Dahl

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Introduction to “The Umbrella Man”:

The narrator of this story is a girl who has gone to London with her mother to visit the dentist. They go to a café, and when they leave, they discover that it's pouring rain and they have no umbrella. So they decide to get a taxi. While they're watching for a cab, an old gentleman sheltering under an umbrella approaches them. He asks for a favour. The girl's mother is very distrustful of strange men. The old man explains that he has forgotten his wallet and would like to sell them his umbrella in return for the taxi fare back to his home. He explains that it's a very nice silk umbrella worth twenty pounds, but his legs are weak and he simply must take a taxi home. The mother offers to simply give him the cab fare, but he insists that they take the umbrella. But they discover that the old man...

Dylan’s opinion:

I enjoyed reading this story, on the one hand because it is interesting, on the other hand because it makes us think of the real lesson of this story, the morale, mixing reflexion and simplicity, and open the eyes on the current society.

Myriam’s opinion:

I did not like the short story, because I found it boring and the end displeased me a lot because I did not expect it. I find that ridiculous. But I well appreciated the suspense and the writing of the short story and the girl who delivered us her feelings.

Philippine’s opinion:

I liked reading this story because it is an interesting story. It is easy to read and it is short. Everybody can read it because it is understandable. More precisely, I enjoyed this story because it holds a moral but also because this story is interesting. I liked when the little man offers his umbrella to the mother and her daughter to protect them from the rain but, I like the fact that the little man wants a pound note to come back home against his umbrella too. Especially, I liked the moment where the little man is scuttling along like a rabbit in front of them, and also the moment where the mother understands that he is a crook.
The Umbrella Man

I’M GOING TO TELL you about a funny thing that happened to my mother and me yesterday evening. I am twelve years old and I’m a girl. My mother is thirty-four but I am nearly as tall as her already.

Yesterday afternoon, my mother took me up to London to see the dentist. He found one hole. It was in a back tooth and he filled it without hurting me too much. After that, we went to a café. I had a banana split and my mother had a cup of coffee. By the time we got up to leave, it was about six o’clock.

When we came out of the café it had started to rain.

“We must get a taxi,” my mother said. We were wearing ordinary hats and coats, and it was raining quite hard. "Why don't we go back into the café and wait for it to stop?" I said. I wanted another of those banana splits. They were gorgeous. “It isn't going to stop,” my mother said. "We must go home." We stood on the pavement in the rain, looking for a taxi. Lots of them came by but they all had passengers inside them. "I wish we had a car with a chauffeur," my mother said.

Just then, a man came up to us. He was a small man and he was pretty old, probably seventy or more. He raised his hat politely and said to my mother "Excuse me. I do hope you will excuse me. . . ." He had a fine white moustache and bushy white eyebrows and a wrinkly pink face. He was sheltering under an umbrella which he held high over his head.

"Yes?" my mother said, very cool and distant. "I wonder if I could ask a small favour of you.” he said. "It is only a very small favour." I saw my mother looking at him suspiciously. She is a suspicious person, my mother. She is especially suspicious of two things - strange men and boiled eggs.

When she cuts the top off a boiled egg, she pokes around inside it with her spoon as though expecting to find a mouse or something. With strange men she has a golden rule which says, "The nicer the man seems to be, the more suspicious you must become." This little old man was particularly nice. He was polite. He was well-spoken. He was well-dressed. He was a real gentleman. The reason I knew he was a gentleman was because of his shoes. "You can always spot a gentleman by the shoes he wears," was another of my mother’s favourite sayings. This man had beautiful brown shoes.

"The truth of the matter is," the little man was saying, "I've got myself into a bit of a scrape. I need some help. Not much, I assure you. It’s almost nothing, in fact, but I do need it. You see, madam, old people like me often become terribly forgetful. . . ." My mother’s chin was up and she was staring down at him along the full length of her nose. It is a fearsome thing,
this frosty-nosed stare of my mother's. Most people go to pieces completely when she gives it to them.

I once saw my own headmistress begin to stammer and simper like an idiot when my mother gave her a really foul frosty-noser. But the little man on the pavement with the umbrella over his head didn't bat an eyelid.

He gave a gentle smile and said, "I beg you to believe, madam, that I am not in the habit of stopping ladies in the street and telling them my troubles." "I should hope not," my mother said.

I felt quite embarrassed by my mother's sharpness. I wanted to say to her, "Oh, mummy, for heaven's sake, he's a very very old man, and he's sweet and polite, and he's in some sort of trouble, so don't be so beastly to him." But I didn't say anything.

The little man shifted his umbrella from one hand to the other. "I've never forgotten it before," he said.

"You've never forgotten what?" my mother asked sternly.

"My wallet," he said. "I must have left it in my other jacket. Isn't that the silliest thing to do?" "Are you asking me to give you money?" my mother said.

"Oh, goodness gracious me, no!" he cried. "Heaven forbid I should ever do that!" "Then what are you asking?" my mother said. "Do hurry up. We're getting soaked to the skin standing here." "I know you are," he said. "And that is why I'm offering you this umbrella of mine to protect you, and to keep forever, if . . . if only . . ." "If only what?" my mother said.

"If only you would give me in return a pound for my taxi-fare just to get me home." My mother was still suspicious. "If you had no money in the first place," she said, "then how did you get here?" "I walked," he answered. "Every day I go for a lovely long walk and then I summon a taxi to take me home. I do it every day of the year." "Why don't you walk home now," my mother asked.

"Oh, I wish I could," he said. "I do wish I could. But I don't think I could manage it on these silly old legs of mine. I've gone too far already." My mother stood there chewing her lower lip. She was beginning to melt a bit, I could see that. And the idea of getting an umbrella to shelter under must have tempted her a good deal.

"It's a lovely umbrella," the little man said.

"So I've noticed," my mother said.

"It's silk," he said.
"I can see that." "Then why don't you take it, madam," he said. "It cost me over twenty pounds, I promise you. But that's of no importance so long as I can get home and rest these old legs of mine." I saw my mother's hand feeling for the clasp on her purse. She saw me watching her. I was giving her one of my own frosty-nosed looks this time and she knew exactly what I was telling her. Now listen, mummy, I was telling her, you simply mustn't take advantage of a tired old man in this way. It's a rotten thing to do. My mother paused and looked back at me. Then she said to the little man, "I don't think it's quite right that I should take a silk umbrella from you worth twenty pounds. I think I'd just better give you the taxi-fare and be done with it." "No, no, no!" he cried. "It's out of the question! I wouldn't dream of it! Not in a million years! I wouldn't accept money from you like that! Take the umbrella, dear lady, and keep the rain off your shoulders!" My mother gave me a triumphant sideways look.

There you are, she was telling me. You're wrong. He wants me to have it.

She fished into her purse and took out a pound note.

She held it out to the little man. He took it and handed her the umbrella. He pocketed the pound, raised his hat, gave a quick bow from the waist, and said, "Thank you, madam, thank you." Then he was gone.

"Come under here and keep dry, darling," my mother said. "Aren't we lucky. I've never had a silk umbrella before. I couldn't afford it." "Why were you so horrid to him in the beginning?" I asked.

"I wanted to satisfy myself he wasn't a trickster," she said. "And I did. He was a gentleman. I'm very pleased I was able to help him." "Yes, mummy," I said.

"A real gentleman," she went on. "Wealthy, too, otherwise he wouldn't have had a silk umbrella. I shouldn't be surprised if he isn't a titled person. Sir Harry Goldsworthy or something like that." "Yes, mummy." "This will be a good lesson to you," she went on.

"Never rush things. Always take your time when you are summing someone up. Then you'll never make mistakes." "There he goes," I said. "Look." "Where?" "Over there. He's crossing the street. Goodness, mummy, what a hurry he's in." We watched the little man as he dodged nimbly in and out of the traffic. When he reached the other side of the street, he turned left, walking very fast.

"He doesn't look very tired to me, does he to you, mummy?" My mother didn't answer.

"He doesn't look as though he's trying to get a taxi, either," I said.

My mother was standing very still and stiff, staring across the street at the little man. We could see him clearly. He was in a terrific hurry. He was bustling along the pavement, sidestepping the other pedestrians and swinging his arms like a soldier on the march.
"He's up to something," my mother said, stony-faced.

"But what?" "I don't know," my mother snapped. "But I'm going to find out. Come with me." She took my arm and we crossed the street together. Then we turned left.

"Can you see him?" my mother asked.

"Yes. There he is. He's turning right down the next street." We came to the corner and turned right. The little man was about twenty yards ahead of us. He was scuttling along like a rabbit and we had to walk fast to keep up with him. The rain was pelting down harder than ever now and I could see it dripping from the brim of his hat onto his shoulders. But we were snug and dry under our lovely big silk umbrella.

"What is he up to?" my mother said.

"What if he turns round and sees us?" I asked.

"I don't care if he does," my mother said. "He lied to us. He said he was too tired to walk any further and he's practically running us off our feet! He's a barefaced liar! He's a crook!" "you mean he's not a titled gentleman?" I asked.

"Be quiet," she said.

At the next crossing, the little man turned right again.

Then he turned left.

Then right.

"I'm not giving up now," my mother said.

"He's disappeared!" I cried. "Where's he gone?" "He went in that door!" my mother said. "I saw him!

Into that house! Great heavens, it's a pub!"

It was a pub. In big letters right across the front it said THE RED LION.

"You're not going in, are you, mummy?" "No," she said. "We'll watch from outside." There was a big plate-glass window along the front of the pub, and although it was a bit steamy on the inside, we could see through it very well if we went close.

We stood huddled together outside the pub window.

I was clutching my mother's arm. The big raindrops were making a loud noise on our umbrella. "There he is," I said. "Over there." The room we were looking into was full of people and cigarette smoke, and our little man was in the middle of it all. He was now without his hat or coat, and he was edging his way through the crowd toward the bar. When
he reached it, he placed both hands on the bar itself and spoke to the barman. I saw his lips moving as he gave his order. The barman turned away from him for a few seconds and came back with a smallish tumbler filled to the brim with light brown liquid.

The little man placed a pound note on the counter.

"That's my pound!" my mother hissed. "By golly he's got a nerve!" "What's in the glass?" I asked.

"Whiskey," my mother said. "Neat whiskey." The barman didn't give him any change from the pound.

"That must be a treble whiskey," my mother said.

"What's a treble?" I asked.

"Three times the normal measure," she answered.

The little man picked up the glass and put it to his lips. He tilted it gently. Then he tilted it higher. . . and higher. . . and higher. . . and very soon all the whiskey had disappeared down his throat in one long pour.

"That was a jolly expensive drink," I said.

"It's ridiculous!" my mother said. "Fancy paying a pound for something you swallow in one go!" "It cost him more than a pound," I said. "It cost him a twenty pound silk umbrella." "So it did," my mother said. "He must be mad." The little man was standing by the bar with the empty glass in his hand. He was smiling now, and a sort of golden glow of pleasure was spreading over his round pink face. I saw his tongue come out to lick the white moustache, as though searching for the last drop of that precious whiskey.

Slowly, he turned away from the bar and edged back through the crowd to where his hat and coat were hanging. He put on his hat. He put on his coat. Then, in a manner so superbly cool and casual that you hardly noticed anything at all, he lifted from the coat rack one of the many wet umbrellas hanging there, and off he went.

"Did you see that!" my mother shrieked. "Did you see what he did!" "Ssshh!" I whispered. "He's coming out!" We lowered the umbrella to hide our faces and peeped out from under it.

Out he came. But he never looked in our direction.

He opened his new umbrella over his head and scurried off down the road the way he had come.

"So that's his little game!" my mother said.
"Neat, " I said. "Super." We followed him back to the main street where we had first met him, and we watched him as he proceeded, with no trouble at all, to exchange his new umbrella for another pound note. This time it was with a tall thin fellow who didn't even have a coat or hat. And as soon as the transaction was completed, our little man trotted off down the street and was lost in the crowd. But this time he went in the opposite direction.

"You see how clever he is!" my mother said. "He never goes to the same pub twice!" "He could go on doing this all night," I said.

"Yes," my mother said. "Of course. But I'll bet he prays like mad for rainy days."
Introduction to “The Landlady”:

“The Landlady” is a short story written by Roald Dahl. The main character is Billy WEAVER. The story takes place in the city of Bath. A business man advised him to go to the “Bell And Dragon” pub. On his way to the hotel, he sees a bed and breakfast which seems more comfortable than the Bell And Dragon. He rings on the door’s bell and a woman opens the door and seems too nice to be true. She asks him to sign in the guestbook but Billy is astonished when he sees that the last signature had been signed three years ago. When he records himself in the book, he drinks a cup of tea brought by the woman who takes care of the bed and breakfast. Later, Billy by drinking the cup, finds out the tea tastes unusual...

Alexandre’s opinion:

It’s a short story that I enjoyed as for the story itself, as by the frequent use of black humour, all finally concentrated and told with an exceptional imagination.

Charlotte’s opinion:

The way Roald Dahl describes the events is very interesting because he highlights the mysterious dimension of the time, this allows us to ask different questions and solicit our imagination. I enjoyed reading this short story because from moment to moment our hypotheses can change.

Selena’s opinion:

When I read “The Landlady” I did not expect such an end; this story surprised me and we do not know where it leads us. I like to be surprised by the stories I read.
The Landlady

BILLY WEAVER HAD TRAVELLED down from London on the slow afternoon train, with a change at Swindon on the way, and by the time he got to Bath it was about nine o’clock in the evening and the moon was coming up out of a clear starry sky over the houses opposite the station entrance. But the air was deadly cold and the wind was like a flat blade of ice on his cheeks.

"Excuse me" he said "but is there a fairly cheap hotel not too far away from here?"

"Try The Bell and Dragon" the porter answered pointing down the road. "They might take you in. It’s about a quarter of a mile along on the other side."

Billy thanked him and picked up his suitcase and set out to walk the quarter-mile to The Bell and Dragon. He had never been to Bath before. He didn’t know anyone who lived there. But Mr Greenslade at the Head Office in London had told him it was a splendid city.

"Find your own lodgings," he had said "and then go along and report to the Branch Manager as soon as you’ve got yourself settled".

Billy was seventeen years old. He was wearing a new navy-blue overcoat, a new brown trilby hat, and a new brown suit, and he was feeling fine. He walked briskly down the street. He was trying to do everything briskly these days. Briskness, he had decided was the one common characteristic of all successful businessmen. The big shots up at Head Office were absolutely fantastically brisk all the time. They were amazing.

There were no shops on this wide street that he was walking along, only a line of tall houses on each side, all of them identical. They had porches and pillars and four or five steps going up to their front doors, and it was obvious that once upon a time they had been very swanky residence. But now, even in the darkness, he could see that the paint was peeling from the woodwork on their doors and windows, and that the handsome white facades were cracked and blotchy from neglect.

Suddenly, in a downstairs window that was brilliantly illuminated by a street-lamp not six yards away, Billy caught sight of a printed notice propped up against the glass in one of the upper panes. It said BED AND BREAKFAST. There was a vase of pussywillows, tall and beautiful, standing just underneath the notice. He stopped walking. He moved a bit closer. Green curtains (some sort of velvety material) were hanging down on either
side of the window. The pussywillows looked wonderful beside them. He went right up and peered through the glass into the room, and the first thing he saw was a bright fire burning in the hearth. On the carpet in front of the fire, a pretty little dachshund was curled up asleep with its nose tucked into its belly. The room itself, so far as he could see in the half-darkness, was filled with pleasant furniture. There was a baby-grand piano and a big sofa and several plump armchairs and in one corner he spotted a large parrot in a cage. Animals were usually a good sign in a place like this, Billy told himself; and all in all, it looked to him as though it would be a pretty decent house to stay in. Certainly it would be more comfortable than The Bell and Dragon. On the other hand, a pub would be more congenial than a boarding-house. There would be beer and darts in the evenings, and lots of people to talk to, and it would probably be a good bit cheaper, too. He had stayed a couple of nights in a pub once before and he had liked it. He had never stayed in any boarding houses, and, to be perfectly honest, he was a tiny bit frightened of them. The name itself conjured up images of watery cabbage, rapacious landladies, and a powerful smell of kippers in the living-room. After dithering about like this in the cold for two or three minutes, Billy decided that he would walk on and take a look at The Bell and Dragon before making up his mind. He turned to go. And now a queer thing happened to him. He was in the act of stepping back and turning away from the window when all at once his eye was caught and held in the most peculiar manner by the small notice that was there. BED AND BREAKFAST, it said. BED AND BREAKFAST, BED AND BREAKFAST, BED AND BREAKFAST. Each word was like a large black eye staring at him through the glass, holding him compelling him, forcing him to stay where he was and not to walk away from that house, and the next thing he knew, he was actually moving across from the window to the front door of the house, climbing the steps that led up to it, and reaching for the bell. He pressed the bell. Far away in a back room he heard it ringing, and then at once - it must have been at once because he hadn't even had time to take his finger from the bell-button - the door swung open and a woman was standing there. Normally you ring the bell and you have at least a half minute's wait before the door opens. But this dame was like a jack-in-the-box. He pressed the bell - and out she popped! It made him jump. She was about forty-five or fifty years old and the moment she saw him, she gave him a warm welcoming smile. "Please come in," she said pleasantly. She stepped aside, holding the door wide open and Billy found himself automatically starting forward into the house. The compulsion or, more accurately, the desire to follow after her into that house was extraordinarily strong. "I saw the notice in the window," he said holding himself back.

"Yes, I know."
"I was wondering about a room."

"It's all ready for you, my dear," she said. She had a round pink face and very gentle blue eyes.

"I was on my way to The Bell and Dragon" Billy told her. "But the notice in your window just happened to catch my eye."

"My dear boy," she said, "why don't you come in out of the cold?"

"How much do you charge?"

"Five and sixpence a night, including breakfast." It was fantastically cheap. It was less than half of what he had been willing to pay.

"If that is too much" she added "then perhaps I can reduce it just a tiny bit. Do you desire an egg for breakfast? Eggs are expensive at the moment. It would be sixpence less without the egg"

"Five and sixpence is fine," he answered. "I should like very much to stay here."

"I knew you would. Do come in." She seemed terribly nice. She looked exactly like the mother of one's best school-friend welcoming one into the house to stay for the Christmas holidays. Billy took off his hat, and stepped over the threshold.

"Just hang it there," she said, "and let me help you with your coat."

There were no other hats or coats in the hall. There were no umbrellas, no walking-sticks - nothing. "We have it all to ourselves," she said, smiling at him over her shoulder as she led the way upstairs. "You see, it isn't very often I have the pleasure of taking a visitor into my little nest."

The old girl is slightly dotty, Billy told himself. But at five and sixpence a night, who gives a damn about that?

"I should've thought you'd be simply swamped with applicants," he said politely.

"Oh, I am, my dear, I am, of course I am. But the trouble is that I'm inclined to be just a teeny weeny bit choosy and particular; if you see what I mean".

"Ah, yes."

"But I'm always ready. Everything is always ready day and night in this house just on the off-chance that an acceptable young gentleman will come along. And it is such a pleasure, my dear, such a very great pleasure when now and again I open the door and I see someone standing there who is just
“exactly right.” She was half-way up the stairs, and she paused with one hand on the stair-rail, turning her head and smiling down at him with pale lips. “Like you,” she added, and her blue eyes travelled slowly all the way down the length of Billy’s body, to his feet, and then up again. On the first-floor landing she said to him, “This floor is mine.” They climbed up a second flight. “And this one is all yours,” she said. “Here’s your room. I do hope you’ll like it.” She took him into a small but charming front bedroom switching on the light as she went in.

“The morning sun comes right in the window, Mr Perkins. It is Mr Perkins, isn’t it?”

“No,” he said. “It’s Weaver.”

“Mr Weaver. How nice. I’ve put a water-bottle between the sheets to air them out, Mr Weaver. It’s such a comfort to have a hot water-bottle in a strange bed with clean sheets, don’t you agree? And you may light the gas fire at any time if you feel chilly.”

“Thank you,” Billy said. “Thank you ever so much” He noticed that the bedspread had been taken off the bed, and that the bedclothes had been neatly turned back on one side, all ready for someone to get in.

“I’m so glad you appeared,” she said, looking earnestly into his face. “I was beginning to get worried.”

“That’s all right,” Billy answered brightly. “You mustn’t worry about me.” He put his suitcase on the chair and started to open it.

“And what about supper, my dear? Did you manage to get anything to eat before you came here?” “I’m not a bit hungry, thank you,” he said. “I think I’ll just go to bed as soon as possible because tomorrow I’ve got to get up rather early and report to the office.”

“Very well, then. I’ll leave you now so that you can unpack. But before you go to bed would you be kind enough to pop into the sitting-room on the ground floor and sign the book? Everyone has to do that because it’s the law of the land and we don’t want to go breaking any laws at this stage in the proceedings, do we?”

She gave him a little wave of the hand and went quickly out of the room and closed the door. Now, the fact that his landlady appeared to be slightly off her rocker didn’t worry Billy in the least. After all, she was not only harmless - there was no question about that - but she was also quite obviously a kind and generous soul. He guessed that she had probably lost a son in the war, or something like that, and had never got over it.
So a few minutes later, after unpacking his suitcase and washing his hands, he trotted downstairs to the ground floor and entered the living-room. His landlady wasn’t there, but the fire was glowing in the hearth and the little dachshund was still sleeping in front of it. The room was wonderfully warm and cozy. I’m a lucky fellow, he thought, rubbing his hands. This is a bit of all right. He found the guest-book lying open on the piano, so he took out his pen and wrote down his name and address. There were only two other entries above his on the page, and, as one always does with guest-books, he started to read them. One was a Christopher Mulholland from Cardiff. The other was Gregory W. Temple from Bristol. That’s funny, he thought suddenly. Christopher Mulholland. It rings a bell. Now where on earth had he heard that rather unusual name before? Was he a boy at school? No. Was it one of his sister’s numerous young men, perhaps, or a friend of his father’s No, no, it wasn’t any of those. He glanced down again at the book.

Christopher Mulholland
231 Cathedral Road,
Cardiff

Gregory W. Temple
27 Sycamore Drive,
Bristol

As a matter of fact, now he came to think of it, he wasn’t at all sure that the second name didn’t have almost as much of a familiar ring about it as the first. "Gregory Temple?" he said aloud searching his memory. "Christopher Mulholland? ..."

"Such charming boys," a voice behind him answered, and he turned and saw his landlady sailing into the room with a large silver tea-tray in her hands. She was holding it well out in front of her, and rather high up, as though the tray were a pair of reins on a frisky horse.

"They sound somehow familiar," he said.

"They do? How interesting."

"I’m almost positive I’ve heard those names before somewhere. Isn’t that queer? Maybe it was in the newspapers. They weren’t famous in any way, were they? I mean famous cricketers or footballers or something like that?"

"Famous," she said setting the tea-tray down on the low table in front of the sofa. "Oh no, I don’t think they were famous. But they were extraordinarily
handsome, both of them, I can promise you that. They were tall and young and handsome, my dear, just exactly like you." Once more Billy glanced down at the book. "Look here," he said, noticing the date. "This last entry is over two years old."

"It is?"

"Yes, indeed. And Christopher Mulholland's is nearly a year before that - more than three years ago."

"Dear me," she said, shaking her head and heaving a dainty little sigh. "I would never have thought it. How time does fly away from us all, doesn't it Mr Wilkins?" "It's Weaver," Billy said. "W-e-a-v-e-r."

"Oh, of course it is!" she cried, sitting down on the sofa. "How silly of me. I do apologize. In one ear and out the other, that's me, Mr Weaver."

"You know something?" Billy said "Something that's really quite extraordinary about all this?"

"No, dear, I don't."

"Well, you see - both of these names, Mulholland and Temple, I not only seem to remember each one of them separately, so to speak, but somehow or other, in some peculiar way, they both appear to be sort of connected together as well. As though they were both famous for the same sort of thing, if you see what I mean - like . . . well . . . like Dempsey and Tunney, for example, or Churchill and Roosevelt." "How amusing," she said. "But come over here now, dear, and sit down beside me on the sofa and I'll give you a nice cup of tea and a ginger biscuit before you go to bed."

"You really shouldn't bother," Billy said. "I didn't mean you to do anything like that." He stood by the piano, watching her as she fussed about with the cups and saucers. He noticed that she had small, white, quickly moving hands, and red finger-nails. "I'm almost positive it was in the newspapers I saw them," Billy said. "I'll think of it in a second. I'm sure I will." There is nothing more tantalizing than a thing like this which lingers just outside the borders of one's memory. He hated to give up. "Now wait a minute," he said. "Wait just a minute. Mulholland . . . Christopher Mulholland . . . wasn't that the name of the Eton schoolboy who was on a walking tour through the West Country, and then all of a sudden . . ."

"Milk?" she said. "And sugar?"

"Yes, please. And then all of a sudden . . ."
"Eton! schoolboy?" she said. "Oh no, my dear, that can't possibly be right because my Mr Mulholland was certainly not an Eton schoolboy when he came to me. He was a Cambridge undergraduate. Come over here now and sit next to me and warm yourself in front of this lovely fire. Come on. Your tea's all ready for you." She patted the empty place beside her on the sofa, and she sat there smiling at Billy and waiting for him to come over. He crossed the room slowly, and sat down on the edge of the sofa. She placed his teacup on the table in front of him. "come over here," she said. "How nice and cosy this is, isn't it?" Billy started sipping his tea. She did the same. For half a minute or so. neither of them spoke. But Billy knew that she was looking at him. Her body was half-turned towards him, and he could feel her eyes resting on his face, watching him over the rim of her teacup. Now and again, he caught a whiff of a peculiar smell that seemed to emanate directly from her person. It was not in the least unpleasant, and it reminded him - well, he wasn't quite sure what it reminded him of. Pickled walnuts? New leather? Or was it the corridors of a hospital?

"Mr Mulholland was a great one for his tea," she said at length. "Never in my life have I seen anyone drink as much tea as dear, sweet Mr Mulholland."

"I suppose he left fairly recently," Billy said. He was still puzzling his head about the two names. He was positive now that he had seen them in the newspapers - in the headlines.

"Left?" she said arching her brows.

"But my dear boy, he never left. He's still here. Mr Temple is also here. They're on the third floor, both of them together."

Billy set down his cup slowly on the table, and stared at his landlady. She stared back at him, and then she put out one of her white hands and patted him comfortably on the knee. "How old are you, my dear?" she asked. "Seventeen."

"Seventeen!" she cried. "Oh, it's the perfect age! Mr Mulholland was also seventeen. But I think he was a trifle shorter than you are, in fact I'm sure he was, and his teeth weren't quite so white. You have the most beautiful teeth Mr Weaver, did you know that?"

"They're not as good as they look" Billy said. "They've got simply masses of fillings in them at the back."

"Mr Temple, of course, was a little older," she said ignoring his remark. "He was actually twenty-eight. And yet I never would have guessed it if he hadn't told me, never in my whole life. There wasn't a blemish on his body."
"A what?" Billy said.

"His skin was just like a baby's."

There was a pause. Billy picked up his teacup and took another sip of his tea, then he set it down again gently in its saucer. He waited for her to say something else, but she seemed to have lapsed into another of her silences. He sat there staring straight ahead of him into the far corner of the room, biting his lower lip.

"That parrot," he said at last. "You know something? It had me completely fooled when I first saw it through the window from the street. I could have sworn it was alive."

"Alas, no longer."

"It’s most terribly clever the way it’s been done," he said "It doesn’t look in the least bit dead. Who did it?"

"I did."

"You did?" "Of course," she said "And have you met my little Basil as well? She nodded towards the dachshund curled up so comfortably in front of the fire. Billy looked at it. And suddenly, he realized that this animal had all the time been just as silent and motionless as the parrot. He put out a hand and touched it gently on the top of its back. The back was hard and cold, and when he pushed the hair to one side with his fingers, he could see the skin underneath it greyish-black and dry and perfectly preserved.

"Good gracious me," he said. "How absolutely fascinating. "He turned away from the dog and stared with deep admiration at the little woman beside him on the sofa. "It must be most awfully difficult to do a thing like that."

"Not in the least," she said. "I stuff all my little pets myself when they pass away. Will you have another cup of tea?" "No, thank you," Billy said. The tea tasted faintly of bitter almonds, and he didn’t much care for it. "You did sign the book, didn’t you?" "Oh, yes." "That’s good. Because later on, if I happen to forget what you were called then I can always come down here and look it up. I still do that almost every day with Mr Mulholland and Mr...Mr."

"Temple," Billy said. "Gregory Temple. Excuse my asking, but haven’t there been any other guests here accept them in the last two or three years?"

Holding her teacup high in one hand, inclining her head slightly to the left, she looked up at him out of the corners of her eyes and gave him another gentle little smile "No, my dear," she said. "Only you."
Introduction to “Lamb to the Slaughter”

Mary Maloney is six weeks pregnant, and she loves her husband Patrick, a cop who, one day, reveals to his wife that he’s going to leave her for another woman. So, she becomes very angry, and kills him by knocking him down with a frozen leg of lamb. Then, she calls Patrick’s policemen friends and tells them that her husband has been killed; so they go to her house to analyze the crime scene. She invites them to a particular dinner...

Oceane’s opinion:

This story was unusual but really good to read. It is strange and a little bit sadistic. It is between horror and black comedy. Therefore I liked this story because it is an some way a fun and original story that we are not used to reading.

Myriam’s opinion:

I was a very enjoyable short story; I liked it. The author uses tension, suspense… the writing is fresh and active. There are lots of contrasts to great effects to create humorous short story with the serious subject of death.
THE ROOM WAS WARM and clean, the curtains drawn, the two table lamps alight - hers and the one by the empty chair opposite. On the sideboard behind her, two tall glasses, soda water, whisky. Fresh ice cubes in the Thermos bucket. Mary Maloney was waiting for her husband to come home from work. Now and again she would glance up at the clock, but without anxiety, merely to please herself with the thought that each minute gone by made it nearer the time when he would come. There was a slow smiling air about her, and about everything she did. The drop of the head as she bent over her sewing was curiously tranquil. Her skin - for this was her sixth month with child - had acquired a wonderful translucent quality, the mouth was soft, and the eyes, with their new placid look, seemed larger, darker than before.

When the clock said ten minutes to five, she began to listen, and a few moments later, punctually as always, she heard the tyres on the gravel outside, and the car door slamming, the footsteps passing the window, the key turning in the lock. She laid aside her sewing, stood up, and went forward to kiss him as he came in.

'Hullo, darling,' she said, 'Hullo,' he answered.

She took his coat and hung it in the closet. Then she walked over and made the drinks, a strongish one for him, a weak one for herself; and soon she was back again in her chair with the sewing, and he in the other, opposite, holding the tall glass with both his hands, rocking it so the ice cubes tinkled against the side.

For her, this was always a blissful time of day. She knew he didn't want to speak much until the first drink was finished, and she, on her side, was content to sit quietly, enjoying his company after the long hours alone in the house. She loved to luxuriate in the presence of this man, and to feel - almost as a sunbather feels the sun - that warm male glow that came out of him to her when they were alone together. She loved him for the way he sat loosely in a chair, for the way he came in a door, or moved slowly across the room with long strides. She loved the intent, far look in his eyes when they rested on her, the funny shape of the mouth, and especially the way he remained silent about his tiredness, sitting still with himself until the whisky had taken some of it away.

'Tired, darling?'. 'Yes,' he said. 'I'm tired.' And as he spoke, he did an unusual thing. He lifted his glass and drained it in one swallow although there was still half of it, at least half of it left. She wasn't really watching him...
but she knew what he had done because she heard the ice cubes falling back against the bottom of the empty glass when he lowered his arm. He paused a moment, leaning forward in the chair, then he got up and went slowly over to fetch himself another.

'I'll get it!' she cried, jumping up, 'Sit down,' he said.

When he came back, she noticed that the new drink was dark amber with the quantity of whisky in it.

'Darling, shall I get your slippers?, 'No.' She watched him as he began to sip the dark yellow drink, and she could see little oily swirls in the liquid because it was so strong.

'I think it's a shame,' she said, 'that when a policeman gets to be as senior as you, they keep him walking about on his feet all day long.' He didn't answer, so she bent her head again and went on with her sewing; but each time he lifted the drink to his lips, she heard the ice cubes clinking against the side of the glass.

'Darling,' she said. 'Would you like me to get you some cheese? I haven't made any supper because it's Thursday.'

'No,' he said.

'If you're too tired to eat out,' she went on, it's still not too late. There's plenty of meat and stuff in the freezer, and you can have it right here and not even move out of the chair.' Her eyes waited on him for an answer, a smile, a little nod, but he made no sign.

'Anyway' she went on, 'I'll get you some cheese and crackers first.' 'I don't want it,' he said.

She moved uneasily in her chair, the large eyes still watching his face. 'But you must have supper. I can easily do it here. I'd like to do it. We can have lamb chops. Or pork. Anything you want. Everything's in the freezer.' 'Forget it,' he said.

'But, darling, you must eat! I'll fix it anyway, and then you can have it or not, as you like.' She stood up and placed her sewing on the table by the lamp.

'Sit down,' he said. 'Just for a minute, sit down.' It wasn't till then that she began to get frightened.
'Go on,' he said. 'Sit down.' She lowered herself back slowly into the chair, watching him all the time with those large, bewildered eyes. He had finished the second drink and was staring down into the glass, frowning.

'Listen,' he said, 'I've got something to tell you.' 'What is it, darling? What's the matter?'. He had become absolutely motionless, and he kept his head down so that the light from the lamp beside him fell across the upper part of his face, leaving the chin and mouth in shadow. She noticed there was a little muscle moving near the corner of his left eye.

'This is going to be a bit of a shock to you, I'm afraid', he said. 'But I've thought about it a good deal and I've decided the only thing to do is tell you right away. I hope you won't blame me too much.' And he told her. It didn't take long, four or five minutes at most, and she sat very still through it all, watching him with a kind of dazed horror as he went further and further away from her with each word.

'So there it is,' he added. 'And I know it's kind of a bad time to be telling you, but there simply wasn't any other way. Of course I'll give you money and see you're looked after. But there needn't really be any fuss. I hope not anyway. It wouldn't be very good for my job.' Her first instinct was not to believe any of it, to reject it all. It occurred to her that perhaps he hadn't even spoken, that she herself had imagined the whole thing. Maybe, if she went about her business and acted as though she hadn't been listening, then later, when she sort of woke up again, she might find none of it had ever happened.

'I'll get the supper,' she managed to whisper, and this time he didn't stop her.

When she walked across the room she couldn't feel her feet touching the floor. She couldn't feel anything at all - except a slight nausea and a desire to vomit. Everything was automatic now - down the stairs to the cellar, the light switch, the deep freeze, the hand inside the cabinet taking hold of the first object it met. She lifted it out, and looked at it. It was wrapped in paper, so she took off the paper and looked at it again, A leg of lamb.

All right then, they would have lamb for supper. She carried it upstairs, holding the thin bone-end of it with both her hands, and as she went through the living-room, she saw him standing over by the window with his back to her, and she stopped.

'For God's sake,' he said, hearing her, but not turning round;
'Don't make supper for me. I'm going out.' At that point, Mary Maloney simply walked up behind him and without any pause she swung the big frozen leg of lamb high in the air and brought it down as hard as she could on the back of his head.

She might just as well have hit him with a steel club.

She stepped back a pace, waiting, and the funny thing was that he remained standing there for at least four or five seconds, gently swaying. Then he crashed to the carpet.

The violence of the crash, the noise, the small table overturning, helped bring her out of the shock. She came out slowly, feeling cold and surprised, and she stood for a while blinking at the body, still holding the ridiculous piece of meat tight with both hands.

All right, she told herself. So I've killed him.

It was extraordinary, now, how clear her mind became all of a sudden. She began thinking very fast. As the wife of a detective, she knew quite well what the penalty would be.

That was fine. It made no difference to her. In fact, it would be a relief. On the other hand, what about the child? What were the laws about murderers with unborn children? Did they kill them both - mother and child? Or did they wait until the tenth month? What did they do?

Mary Maloney didn't know. And she certainly wasn't prepared to take a chance.

She carried the meat into the kitchen, placed it in a pan, turned the oven on high, and shoved it inside. Then she washed her hands and ran upstairs to the bedroom. She sat down before the mirror, tidied her face, touched up her lips and face. She tried a smile. It came out rather peculiar, She tried again.

'Hullo Sam: she said brightly, aloud.

The voice sounded peculiar too.

'I want some potatoes please, Sam. Yes, and I think a can of peas.' That was better. Both the smile and the voice were coming out better now. She rehearsed it several times more. Then she ran downstairs, took her coat, went out the back door, down the garden, into the street. It wasn't six o'clock yet and the lights were still on in the grocery shop.

Hullo Sam: she said brightly, smiling at the man behind the counter.
'Why, good evening, Mrs Maloney. How're you?, 'I want some potatoes please, Sam. Yes, and I think a can of peas.' The man turned and reached up behind him on the shelf for the peas.

'Patrick's decided he's tired and doesn't want to eat out tonight,' she told him. 'We usually go out Thursdays, you know, and now he's caught me without any vegetables in the house.' 'Then how about meat, Mrs Maloney?' 'No, I've got meat, thanks. I got a nice leg of lamb, from the freezer.' 'Oh.' I don't much like cooking it frozen, Sam, but I'm taking a chance on it this time. You think it'll be all right?, 'Personally,' the grocer said, 'I don't believe it makes any difference. You want these Idaho potatoes?' 'Oh yes, that'll be fine. Two of those.' Anything else? ' The grocer cocked his head on one side, looking at her pleasantly. 'How about afterwards? What you going to give him for afterwards?' 'Well, what would you suggest, Sam?' The man glanced around his shop. 'How about a nice big slice of cheesecake? I know he likes that.' 'Perfect,' she said. 'He loves it.' And when it was all wrapped and she had paid, she put on her brightest smile and said, 'Thank you, Sam. Good night.' 'Good night, Mrs Maloney. And thank you.' And now, she told herself as she hurried back, all she was doing now, she was returning home to her husband and he was waiting for his supper; and she must cook it good, and make it as tasty as possible because the poor man was tired and if, when she entered the house, she happened to find anything unusual, or tragic, or terrible, then naturally it would be a shock and she'd become frantic with grief and horror.

Mind you, she wasn't expecting to find anything. She was just going home with the vegetables. Mrs Patrick Maloney going home with the vegetables on Thursday evening to cook supper for her husband.

That's the way, she told herself. Do everything right and natural. Keep things absolutely natural and there'll be no need for any acting at all. Therefore, when she entered the kitchen by the back door, she was humming a little tune to herself and smiling.

'Patrick!' she called. 'How are you, darling?' She put the parcel down on the table and went through into the living-room; and when she saw him lying there on the floor with his legs doubled up and one arm twisted back underneath his body, it really was rather a shock. All the old love and longing for him welled up inside her, and she ran over to him, knelt down beside him, and began to cry her heart out. It was easy. No acting was necessary.

A few minutes later she got up and went to the phone. She knew the number of the police station, and when the man at the other end answered, she cried to him, 'Quick! Come quick!'
Patrick’s dead!’ ‘Who’s speaking?’ ‘Mrs Maloney. Mrs Patrick Maloney.’ ‘You mean Patrick Maloney’s dead?’ I think so,’ she sobbed. ‘He’s lying on the floor and I think he’s dead.’ ‘Be right over,’ the man said.

The car came very quickly, and when she opened the front door, two policemen walked in. She knew them both - she knew nearly all the men at that precinct - and she fell right into Jack Noonan’s arms, weeping hysterically. He put her gently into a chair, then went over to join the other one, who was called O’Malley, kneeling by the body, 'Is he dead?' she cried.

'I'm afraid he is. What happened?' Briefly, she told her story about going out to the grocer and coming back to find him on the floor. While she was talking, crying and talking, Noonan discovered a small patch of congealed blood on the dead man’s head. He showed it to O’Malley who got up at once and hurried to the phone. Soon, other men began to come into the house. First a doctor, then two detectives, one of whom she knew by name. Later, a police photographer arrived and took pictures, and a man who knew about fingerprints. There was a great deal of whispering and muttering beside the corpse, and the detectives kept asking her a lot of questions. But they always treated her kindly. She told her story again, this time right from the beginning, when Patrick had come in, and she was sewing, and he was tired, so tired he hadn’t wanted to go out for supper. She told how she’d put the meat in the oven - 'it’s there now, cooking' - and how she’d slipped out to the grocer for vegetables, and come back to find him lying on the floor.

'Which grocer?' one of the detectives asked.

She told him, and he turned and whispered something to the other detective who immediately went outside into the street.

In fifteen minutes he was back with a page of notes, and there was more whispering, and through her sobbing she heard a few of the whispered phrases.‘... acted quite normal... very cheerful... wanted to give him a good supper... peas... cheesecake... impossible that she...’ After a while, the photographer and the doctor departed and two other men came in and took the corpse away on a stretcher. Then the fingerprint man went away. The two detectives remained, and so did the two policemen. They were exceptionally nice to her, and Jack Noonan asked if she wouldn’t rather go somewhere else, to her sister’s house perhaps, or to his own wife who would take care of her and put her up for the night. No, she said. She didn’t feel she could move even a yard at the moment. Would they mind awfully if she stayed just where she was until she felt better? She didn’t feel too good at the moment, she really didn’t.
Then hadn’t she better lie down on the bed? Jack Noonan asked.

No, she said, she’d like to stay right where she was, in this chair. A little later perhaps, when she felt better, she would move.

So they left her there while they went about their business, searching the house. Occasionally one of the detectives asked her another question. Sometimes Jack Noonan spoke to her gently as he passed by. Her husband, he told her, had been killed by a blow on the back of the head administered with a heavy blunt instrument, almost certainly a large piece of metal. They were looking for the weapon. The murderer may have taken it with him, but on the other hand he may’ve thrown it away or hidden it somewhere on the premises.

‘It’s the old story,’ he said, ‘Get the weapon, and you’ve got the man.’ Later, one of the detectives came up and sat beside her. Did she know, he asked, of anything in the house that could’ve been used as the weapon? Would she mind having a look around to see if anything was missing - a very big spanner, for example, or a heavy metal vase.

They didn’t have any heavy metal vases, she said.

‘Or a big spanner?’ She didn’t think they had a big spanner, but there might be some things like that in the garage.

The search went on. She knew that there were other policemen in the garden all around the house. She could hear their footsteps on the gravel outside, and sometimes she saw the flash of a torch through a chink in the curtains. It began to get late, nearly nine she noticed by the clock on the mantel. The four men searching the rooms seemed to be growing weary, a trifle exasperated.

‘Jack,’ she said, the next time Sergeant Noonan went by ‘Would you mind giving me a drink?’ ‘Sure I’ll give you a drink. You mean this whisky?, ‘Yes, please. But just a small one. It might make me feel better.’ He handed her the glass.

‘Why don’t you have one yourself,’ she said. ‘You must be awfully tired. Please do. You’ve been very good to me,’ ‘Well,’ he answered. ‘It’s not strictly allowed, but I might take just a drop to keep me going.’ One by one the others came in and were persuaded to take a little sip of whisky. They stood around rather awkwardly with the drinks in their hands, uncomfortable in her presence, trying to say consoling things to her. Sergeant Noonan wandered into the kitchen, came out quickly and said, ‘Look, Mrs Maloney, you know that oven of yours is still on, and the meat still inside.’ ‘Oh dear me!’ she cried. ‘So it is!’ ‘I better turn it off for you, hadn’t I?’ ‘Will you do
that, Jack. Thank you so much.' When the sergeant returned the second time, she looked at him with her large, dark, tearful eyes. 'Jack Noonan,' she said.

'Yes?' 'Would you do me a small favour - you and these others?' 'We can try, Mrs Maloney.' 'Well,' she said. 'Here you all are, and good friends of dear Patrick's too, and helping to catch the man who killed him.

You must be terribly hungry by now because it's long past your supper time, and I know Patrick would never forgive me, God bless his soul, if I allowed you to remain in his house without offering you decent hospitality. Why don't you eat up that lamb that's in the oven? It'll be cooked just right by now.' 'Wouldn't dream of it,' Sergeant Noonan said.

'Please,' she begged. 'Please eat it. Personally I couldn't touch a thing, certainly not what's been in the house when he was here. But it's all right for you. It'd be a favour to me if you'd eat it up. Then you can go on with your work again afterwards.' There was a good deal of hesitating among the four policemen, but they were clearly hungry, and in the end they were persuaded to go into the kitchen and help themselves. The woman stayed where she was, listening to them through the open door, and she could hear them speaking among themselves, their voices thick and sloppy because their mouths were full of meat.

'Have some more, Charlie?' 'No. Better not finish it.' 'She wants us to finish it. She said so. Be doing her a favour.' 'Okay then. Give me some more.' 'That's the hell of a big club the guy must've used to hit poor Patrick,' one of them was saying. 'The doc says his skull was smashed all to pieces just like from a sledge-hammer,'

'That's why it ought to be easy to find.

'Exactly what I say.' 'Whoever done it, they're not going to be carrying a thing like that around with them longer than they need.' One of them belched.

'Personally, I think it's right here on the premises.' 'Probably right under our very noses. What you think, Jack?' And in the other room, Mary Maloney began to giggle.
Introduction to “The Hitchhiker”

This is the story about a driver who has picked up a hitchhiker. The scene takes place in the car of the driver. The hitchhiker tells the narrator he’s going to a horse race at Epsom. We know that the Hitchhiker likes his profession but he doesn’t want to say anything about it. He is very mysterious. He seems to hide something. The driver drives quickly because the hitchhiker wants to know how fast the car can go. So, they are arrested by a policeman ... And we discover the secret of the hitchhiker.

Sophie’s opinion:

This story is very pleasant to read because all the story takes place in a car and both the personalities of the characters are different, complex and interesting. I like the fact that someone’s knack can save another person. It is a very good story that I recommend.

Dylan’s opinion:

This short story shows us that a friendship can appear in a bit of time and it can be really useful. You must not be fooled by appearances; this hitch-hiker looked like a normal person and we discover as the story runs that he is not at all what we thought about him. I appreciate this story.
I had a new car. It was an exciting toy, a big BMW 3.3 Li, which means 3.3 litre, long wheelbase, fuel injection. It had a top speed of 129 mph and terrific acceleration. The body was pale blue. The seats inside were darker blue and they were made of leather, genuine soft leather of the finest quality. The windows were electrically operated and so was the sunroof. The radio aerial popped up when I switched on the radio, and disappeared when I switched it off. The powerful engine growled and grunted impatiently at slow speeds, but at sixty miles an hour the growling stopped and the motor began to purr with pleasure.

I was driving up to London by myself. It was a lovely June day. They were haymaking in the fields and there were buttercups along both sides of the road. I was whispering along at 70 mph, leaning back comfortably in my seat, with no more than a couple of fingers resting lightly on the wheel to keep her steady. Ahead of me I saw a man thumbing a lift. I touched the brake and brought the car to a stop beside him. I always stopped for hitchhikers. I knew just how it used to feel to be standing on the side of a country road watching the cars go by, I hated the drivers for pretending they didn't see me, especially the ones in big cars with three empty seats. The large expensive cars seldom stopped.

It was always the smaller ones that offered you a lift, or the old rusty ones or the ones that were already crammed full of children and the driver would say, "I think we can squeeze in one more." The hitchhiker poked his head through the open window and said, "Going to London, guv'nor?" "Yes," I said. "Jump in." He got in and I drove on.

He was a small ratty-faced man with grey teeth. His eyes were dark and quick and clever, like rat's eyes, and his ears were slightly pointed at the top. He had a cloth cap on his head and he was wearing a greyish-coloured jacket with enormous pockets. The grey jacket, together with the quick eyes and the pointed ears, made him look more than anything like some sort of a huge human rat.

"What part of London are you headed for?" I asked him.

"I'm goin' right through London and out the other side" he said. "I'm goin' to Epsom, for the races. It's Derby Day today." "So it is," I said. "I wish I were going with you. I love betting on horses." "I never bet on horses," he said. "I don't even watch 'em run. That's a stupid silly business." "Then why do you go?" I asked.

He didn't seem to like that question. His little ratty face went absolutely blank and he sat there staring straight ahead at the road, saying nothing.

"I expect you help to work the betting machines or something like that," I said.
"That's even sillier," he answered. "There's no fun working them lousy machines and selling tickets to mugs. Any fool could do that."

There was a long silence. I decided not to question him any more. I remembered how irritated I used to get in my hitchhiking years when drivers kept asking me questions. Where are you going? Why are you going there? What's your job? Are you married? Do you have a girl friend? What's her name? How old are you? And so forth and so forth. I used to hate it...

"I'm sorry," I said "It's none of my business what you do. The trouble is I'm a writer, and most writers are terribly nosy." "You write books?" he asked "Yes." "Writing books is okay," he said. "It's what I call a skilled trade. I'm in a skilled trade too. The folks I despise is them that spend all their lives doin' crummy old routine jobs with no skill in 'em at all. You see what I mean?" "Yes." "The secret of life," he said "is to become very very good at somethin' that's very very 'ard to do." "Like you," I said "Exactly. You and me both".

"What makes you think that I'm any good at my job?" I asked. "There's an awful lot of bad writers around" "You wouldn't be drivin' about in a car like this if you weren't no good at it," he answered "It must've cost a tidy packet, this little job." "It wasn't cheap." "What can she do flat out?" he asked "One hundred and twenty-nine miles an hour," I told him.

"I'll bet she won't do it." "I'll bet she will."

"All car-makers is liars," he said. "You can buy any car you like and it'll never do what the makers say it will in the ads." "This one will." "Open 'er up then and prove it," he said. "Go on, guv'nor, open 'er right up and let's see what she'll do." There is a traffic circle at Chalfont St. Peter and immediately beyond it there's a long straight section of divided highway. We came out of the circle onto the highway and I pressed my foot hard down on the accelerator. The big car leaped forward as though she'd been stung. In ten seconds or so, we were doing ninety.

"Lovely!" he cried. "Beautiful! Keep goin'!" I had the accelerator jammed right down against the floor and I held it there.

"One hundred!" he shouted. "A hundred and five! A hundred and ten! A hundred and fifteen! Go on! Don't slack off!" I was in the outside lane and we flashed past several cars as though they were standing still - a green Mini, a big cream-coloured Citroen, a white Land Rover, a huge truck with a container on the back, an orange-coloured Volkswagen Minibus. . . .

"A hundred and twenty!" my passenger shouted, jumping up and down. "Go on! Go on! Get 'er up to one-two-nine!" At that moment, I heard the scream of a police siren. It was so loud it seemed to be right inside the car, and then a cop on a motorcycle loomed up alongside us on the inside lane and went past us and raised a hand for us to stop.
"Oh, my sainted aunt!" I said. "That's torn it!" The cop must have been doing about a hundred and thirty when he passed us, and he took plenty of time slowing down. Finally, he pulled to the side of the road and I pulled in behind him. "I didn't know police motorcycles could go as fast as that," I said rather lamely.

"That one can," my passenger said. "It's the same make as yours. It's a BMW R90S. Fastest bike on the road. That's what they're usin' nowadays." The cop got off his motorcycle and leaned the machine sideways onto its prop stand. Then he took off his gloves and placed them carefully on the seat. He was in no hurry now. He had us where he wanted us and he knew it.

"This is real trouble," I said. "I don't like it one little bit." "Don't talk to 'im more than is necessary, you understand," my companion said. "Just sit tight and keep mum." Like an executioner approaching his victim, the cop came strolling slowly toward us. He was a big meaty man with a belly, and his blue breeches were skin-tight around his enormous thighs. His goggles were pulled up onto the helmet showing a smouldering red face with wide cheeks.

We sat there like guilty schoolboys, waiting for him to arrive, "Watch out for this man," my passenger whispered, 'e looks mean as the devil." The cop came around to my open window and placed one meaty hand on the sill. "What's the hurry?" he said.

"No hurry, officer," I answered.

"Perhaps there's a woman in the back having a baby and you're rushing her to hospital? Is that it?" "No, officer." "Or perhaps your house is on fire and you're dashing home to rescue the family from upstairs?" His voice was dangerously soft and mocking.

"My house isn't on fire, officer." "In that case," he said, "you've got yourself into a nasty mess, haven't you? Do you know what the speed limit is in this country?" "Seventy," I said.

"And do you mind telling me exactly what speed you were doing just now?" I shrugged and didn't say anything.

When he spoke next, he raised his voice so loud that I jumped. "One hundred and twenty miles per hour!" he barked. "That's fifty miles an hour over the limit!" He turned his head and spat out a big gob of spit. It landed on the wing of my car and started sliding down over my beautiful blue paint. Then he turned back again and stared hard at my passenger. "And who are you?" he asked sharply.

"He's a hitchhiker," I said. "I'm giving him a lift." "I didn't ask you," he said. "I asked him." "'Ave I done somethin' wrong?" my passenger asked. His voice was soft and oily as haircream.

"That's more than likely," the cop answered. "Anyway, you're a witness. I'll deal with you in a minute. Driver's license," he snapped, holding out his hand.
I gave him my driver’s license.

He unbuttoned the left-hand breast pocket of his tunic and brought out the dreaded book of tickets.

Carefully, he copied the name and address from my license. Then he gave it back to me. He strolled around to the front of the car and read the number from the license plate and wrote that down as well. He filled in the date, the time and the details of my offence. Then he tore out the top copy of the ticket. But before handing it to me, he checked that all the information had come through clearly on his own carbon copy. Finally, he replaced the book in his breast pocket and fastened the button.

"Now you," he said to my passenger, and he walked around to the other side of the car. From the other breast pocket he produced a small black notebook.

"Name?" he snapped.

"Michael Fish," my passenger said.

"Address?" "Fourteen, Windsor Lane, Luton." "Show me something to prove this is your real name and address," the policeman said.

My passenger fished in his pockets and came out with a driver’s license of his own. The policeman checked the name and address and handed it back to him.

"What's your job?" he asked sharply.

"I'm an 'od carrier."

"A what?"

"An 'odcarrier."

"Spell it." "H-o-d c-a-"

"That'll do. And what's a hod carrier, may I ask?" "An 'od carrier, officer, is a person who carries the cement up the ladder to the bricklayer. And the 'od is what 'ee carries it in. It's got a long handle, and on the top you've got bits of wood set at an angle . . ." "All right, all right. Who's your employer?" "Don't 'ave one. I'm unemployed."

The cop wrote all this down in the black notebook. Then he returned the book to its pocket and did up the button.

"When I get back to the station I'm going to do a little checking up on you," he said to my passenger.

"Me? What’ve I done wrong?" the rat-faced man asked.
"I don't like your face. that's all," the cop said. "And we just might have a picture of it somewhere in our files." He strolled round the car and returned to my window.

"I suppose you know you’re in serious trouble." he said to me.

"Yes, officer."

"You won't be driving this fancy car of yours again for a very long time, not after we've finished with you.

You won’t be driving any car again, come to that, for several years. And a good thing, too. I hope they lock you up for a spell into the bargain." "You mean prison?" I asked alarmed.

"Absolutely," he said, smacking his lips. "In the clink. Behind the bars. Along with all the other criminals who break the law. And a hefty fine into the bargain. Nobody will be more pleased about that than me. I'll see you in court, both of you. You'll be getting a summons to appear." He turned away and walked over to his motorcycle.

He flipped the prop stand back into position with his boot and swung his leg over the saddle. Then he kicked the starter and roared off up the road out of sight.

"Phew!" I gasped. "That's done it...

"We was caught," my passenger said. "We was caught good and proper...

"I was caught you mean..."

"That's right," he said. "What you goin' to do now, guv'nor?" "I'm going straight up to London to talk to my solicitor," I said. I started the car and drove on.

"You mustn't believe what 'ee said to you about goin' to prison," my passenger said. "They don't put nobody in the clink just for speedin'.."

"Are you sure of that?" I asked.

"I'm positive," he answered. "They can take your license away and they can give you a whoppin' big fine, but that'll be the end of it." I felt tremendously relieved.

"By the way," I said, "why did you lie to him?" "Who, me?" he said. "What makes you think I lied?" "You told him you were an unemployed hod carrier. But you told me you were in a highly skilled trade." "So I am," he said. "But it don't pay to tell everythin' to a copper." "So what do you do?" I asked him.

"Ah," he said slyly. "That'll be tellin', wouldn't it?" "Is it something you're ashamed of?" "Ashamed?" he cried. "Me, ashamed of my job? I'm about as proud of it as anybody could be in the entire world!" "Then why won't you tell me?" "You writers really is nosy parkers,
aren't you?" he said. "And you ain't goin' to be 'appy, I don't think, until you've found out exactly what the answer is?" "I don't really care one way or the other," I told him, lying.

He gave me a crafty little ratty look out of the sides of his eyes. "I think you do care," he said. "I can see it on your face that you think I'm in some kind of a very peculiar trade and you're just achin' to know what it is."

I didn't like the way he read my thoughts. I kept quiet and stared at the road ahead.

"You'd be right, too," he went on. "I am in a very peculiar trade. I'm in the queerest peculiar trade of 'em all."

I waited for him to go on.

"That's why I 'as to be extra careful oo' I'm talkin' to, you see. 'Ow am I to know, for instance, you're not another copper in plain clothes?" "Do I look like a copper?" "No," he said. "you don't. And you ain't. Any fool could tell that."

He took from his pocket a tin of tobacco and a packet of cigarette papers and started to roll a cigarette. I was watching him out of the corner of one eye, and the speed with which he performed this rather difficult operation was incredible. The cigarette was rolled and ready in about five seconds. He ran his tongue along the edge of the paper, stuck it down and popped the cigarette between his lips. Then, as if from nowhere, a lighter appeared in his hand. The lighter flamed. The cigarette was lit. The lighter disappeared. It was altogether a remarkable performance.

"I've never seen anyone roll a cigarette as fast as that," I said.

"Ah," he said, taking a deep suck of smoke. "So you noticed." "Of course I noticed. It was quite fantastic." He sat back and smiled. It pleased him very much that I had noticed how quickly he could roll a cigarette.

"You want to know what makes me able to do it?" he asked, "Go on then." "It's because I've got fantastic fingers. These fingers of mine," he said, holding up both hands high in front of him, "are quicker and cleverer than the fingers of the best piano player in the world!" "Are you a piano player?" "Don't be daft. " he said. "Do I look like a piano player?" I glanced at his fingers. They were so beautifully shaped, so slim and long and elegant, they didn't seem to belong to the rest of him at all. They looked more like the fingers of a brain surgeon or a watchmaker.

"My job," he went on, "is a hundred times more difficult than playin' the piano. Any twerp can learn to do that. There's titchy little kids learnin' to play the piano in almost any 'ouse you go into these days. That's right, ain't it?" "More or less," I said.

"Of course it's right. But there's not one person in ten million can learn to do what I do. Not one in ten million! 'Ow about that?"
“Amazing,” I said.

“You’re dam right it’s amazin’,” he said.

“I think I know what you do;” I said. "You do conjuring tricks. You’re a conjuror." "Me?" he snorted. "A conjuror? Can you picture me goin' round crummy kids' parties makin' rabbits come out of top 'ats?" "Then you're a card player. You get people into card games and you deal yourself marvellous hands." "Me! A rotten cardsharper!" he cried. "That's a miserable racket if ever there was one." "All right. I give up."

I was taking the car along slowly now, at no more than forty miles an hour, to make quite sure I wasn't stopped again. We had come onto the main London-Oxford road and were running down the hill toward Denham.

Suddenly, my passenger was holding up a black leather belt in his hand. "Ever seen this before?" he asked. The belt had a brass buckle of unusual design.

"Hey!" I said. "That's mine, isn't it? It is mine! Where did you get it?" He grinned and waved the belt gently from side to side. "Where d'you think I got it?" he said. "Off the top of your trousers, of course." I reached down and felt for my belt. It was gone.

"You mean you took it off me while we've been driving along?" I asked flabbergasted.

He nodded, watching me all the time with those little black ratty eyes.

"That's impossible," I said. "You'd have had to undo the buckle and slide the whole thing out through the loops all the way round. I'd have seen you doing it."

And even if I hadn't seen you, I'd have felt it." "Ah, but you didn't, did you?" he said, triumphant.

He dropped the belt on his lap, and now all at once there was a brown shoelace dangling from his fingers.

"And what about this, then?" he exclaimed, waving the shoelace.

"What about it?" I said.

"Anyone around 'ere missin' a shoelace?" he asked, grinning.

I glanced down at my shoes. The lace of one of them was missing. "Good grief!" I said. "How did you do that? I never saw you bending down." "You never saw nothin'," he said proudly. "You never even saw me move an inch. And you know why?" "Yes," I said. "Because you've got fantastic fingers." "Exactly right!" he cried. "You catch on pretty quick, don't you?" He sat back and sucked away at his home-made cigarette, blowing the smoke out in a thin stream against the windshield. He knew he had impressed me greatly with those two tricks, and this made him very happy. "I don't want to be late," he said.
"What time is it?" "There's a clock in front of you," I told him.

"I don't trust car clocks," he said. "What does your watch say?"

I hitched up my sleeve to look at the watch on my wrist. It wasn't there. I looked at the man. He looked back at me, grinning.

"You've taken that, too," I said.

He held out his hand and there was my watch lying in his palm. "Nice bit of stuff, this," he said. "Superior quality. Eighteen-carat gold. Easy to sell, too. It's never any trouble gettin' rid of quality goods." "I'd like it back, if you don't mind," I said rather huffily.

He placed the watch carefully on the leather tray in front of him. "I wouldn't nick anything from you, guv'nor," he said. "You're my pal. You're givin' me a lift." "I'm glad to hear it," I said.

"All I'm doin' is answerin' your question," he went on. "You asked me what I did for a livin' and I'm showin' you." "What else have you got of mine?" He smiled again, and now he started to take from the pocket of his jacket one thing after another that belonged to me, my driver's license, a key ring with four keys on it, some pound notes, a few coins, a letter from my publishers, my diary, a stubby old pencil, a cigarette lighter, and last of all, a beautiful old sapphire ring with pearls around it belonging to my wife. I was taking the ring up to a jeweller in London because one of the pearls was missing.

"Now there's another lovely piece of goods," he said, turning the ring over in his fingers. "That's eighteenth century, if I'm not mistaken, from the reign of King George the Third." "You're right," I said, impressed. "You're absolutely right." He put the ring on the leather tray with the other items.

"So you're a pickpocket," I said.

"I don't like that word," he answered. "It's a coarse, and vulgar word. Pickpockets is coarse and vulgar people who only do easy little amateur jobs. They lift money from blind old ladies." "What do you call yourself, then?" "Me? I'm a fingersmith. I'm a professional fingersmith." He spoke the words solemnly and proudly, as though he were telling me he was the President of the Royal College of Surgeons or the Archbishop of Canterbury.

"I've never heard that word before," I said. "Did you invent it?" "Of course I didn't invent it," he replied. "It's the name given to them who's risen to the very top of the profession. You've 'eard of a goldsmith and a silversmith, for instance. They're experts with gold and silver. I'm an expert with my fingers, so I'm a fingersmith." "It must be an interesting job." "It's a marvellous job," he answered. "It's lovely." "And that's why you go to the races?" "Race meetings is easy meat," he said. "You just stand around after the race, watchin' for the lucky ones to queue up and draw their money. And when you see someone collectin' a big bundle
of notes, you simply follows after 'im and 'elps yourself. But don't get me wrong, guv'nor. I never takes nothin' from a loser. Nor from poor people neither. I only go after them as can afford it, the winners and the rich." "That's very thoughtful of you," I said. "How often do you get caught?" "Caught?" he cried, disgusted. "Me get caught! It's only pickpockets get caught. Fingersmiths never. Listen, I could take the false teeth out of your mouth if I wanted to and you wouldn't even catch me!"

"I don't have false teeth," I said.

"I know you don't," he answered. "Otherwise I'd 'ave 'ad 'em out long ago!" I believed him. Those long slim fingers of his seemed able to do anything.

We drove on for a while without talking.

"That policeman's going to check up on you pretty thoroughly," I said. "Doesn't that worry you a bit?" "Nobody's checkin' up on me," he said.

"Of course they are. He's got your name and address written down most carefully in his black book." The man gave me another of his sly ratty little smiles.

"Ah," he said. "So 'ee 'as. But I'll bet 'ee ain't got it all written down in 'is memory as well. I've never known a copper yet with a decent memory. Some of 'em can't even remember their own names." "What's memory got to do with it?" I asked. "It's written down in his book, isn't it?" "Yes, guv'nor, it is. But the trouble is, 'ee's lost the book. 'He's lost both books, the one with my name in it and the one with yours." In the long delicate fingers of his right hand, the man was holding up in triumph the two books he had taken from the policeman's pockets. "Easiest job I ever done," he announced proudly.

I nearly swerved the car into a milk truck, I was so excited.

"That copper's got nothin' on either of us now," he said.

"You're a genius!" I cried.

"'Ee's got no names, no addresses, no car number, no nothin'," he said.

"You're brilliant!" "I think you'd better pull off this main road as soon as possible," he said. "Then we'd better build a little bonfire and burn these books." "You're a fantastic fellow!" I exclaimed.

"Thank you, guv'nor," he said. "It's always nice to be appreciated."
Introduction to “The Way Up to Heaven”

“The Way Up To Heaven” recounts the story of the Foster couple, who lives in New York City. Mrs. Foster has a twitch: when she is afraid of being late she has a trouble with her eyes. Her husband likes to torment her, playing with her fear, and decides to take his time. One day while they have to take a plane, she nearly arrives too late, but the flight had been cancelled. The next day, the man starts again, she first tries to go into the house after him, but suddenly decides to leave without him, and she goes to France alone for six weeks, to visit her daughter, but before that, she had heard some noises from her home’s elevator. When she comes back to New-York city, she’s not worried when nobody comes to meet her at the airport...

Amélie’s opinion:

On the whole, I took pleasure in reading this short story. There are many events, an unexpected twist, some suspense, some mystery, all the elements to make an interesting short story. I like the Machiavellianism and the sadism of Mr Foster, and I was amazed by the cold bold of his wife who seemed so affectionate.

Julie’s opinion:

There is suspense present all along that story. We thinks we know what happened but we are not sure, we understand what Mrs. Foster did but this is not explained. I really appreciated that.
All her life, Mrs Foster had had an almost pathological fear of missing a train, a plane, a boat, or even a theatre curtain. In other respects, she was not a particularly nervous woman, but the mere thought of being late on occasions like these would throw her into such a state of nerves that she would begin to twitch. It was nothing much - just a tiny vellicating muscle in the corner of the left eye, like a secret wink - but the annoying thing was that it refused to disappear until an hour or so after the train or plane or whatever it was had been safely caught.

It was really extraordinary how in certain people a simple apprehension about a thing like catching a train can grow into a serious obsession. At least half an hour before it was time to leave the house for the station, Mrs Foster would step out of the elevator all ready to go, with hat and coat and gloves, and then, being quite unable to sit down, she would flutter and fidget about from room to room until her husband, who must have been well aware of her state, finally emerged from his privacy and suggested in a cool dry voice that perhaps they had better be going now, had they not?

Mr Foster may possibly have had a right to be irritated by this foolishness of his wife’s, but he could have had no excuse for increasing her misery by keeping her waiting unnecessarily. Mind you, it is by no means certain that this is what he did, yet whenever they were to go somewhere, his timing was so accurate - just a minute or two late, you understand - and his manner so bland that it was hard to believe he wasn’t purposely inflicting a nasty private little torture of his own on the unhappy lady. And one thing he must have known - that she would never dare to call out and tell him to hurry. He had disciplined her too well for that. He must also have known that if he was prepared to wait even beyond the last moment of safety, he could drive her nearly into hysterics. On one or two special occasions in the later years of their married life, it seemed almost as though he had wanted to miss the train simply in order to intensify the poor woman’s suffering.

Assuming (though one cannot be sure) that the husband was guilty, what made his attitude doubly unreasonable was the fact that, with the exception of this one small irrepressible foible, Mrs Foster was and always had been a good and loving wife. For over thirty years, she had served him loyally and well. There was no doubt about this. Even she, a very modest woman, was aware of it, and although she had for years refused to let herself believe that Mr Foster would ever consciously torment her, there had been times recently when she had caught herself beginning to wonder.

Mr Eugene Foster, who was nearly seventy years old, lived with his wife in a large six storey house in New York City, on East Sixty-second Street, and they had four servants. It was a gloomy place, and few people carne to visit them. But on this particular morning in January, the house had come alive and there was a great deal of bustling about. One maid
was distributing bundles of dust sheets to every room, while another was draping them over the furniture. The butler was bringing down suitcases and putting them in the hall. The cook kept popping up from the kitchen to have a word with the butler, and Mrs Foster herself, in an old-fashioned fur coat and with a black hat on the top of her head, was flying from room to room and pretending to supervise these operations. Actually, she was thinking of nothing at all except that she was going to miss her plane if her husband didn't come out of his study soon and get ready.

`What time is it, Walker?' she said to the butler as she passed him. `It's ten minutes past nine, Madam.'

`And has the car come?'

`Yes, Madam, it's waiting. I'm just going to put the luggage in now.'

`It takes an hour to get to Idlewild,' she said. `My plane leaves at eleven. I have to be there half an hour beforehand for the formalities. I shall be late. I just know I'm going to be late.'

`I think you have plenty of time, Madam,' the butler said kindly. `I warned Mr Foster that you must leave at nine-fifteen. There's still another five minutes.'

`Yes, Walker, I know, I know. But get the luggage in quickly, will you?'

She began walking up and down the hall, and whenever the butler came by, she asked him the time. This, she kept telling herself, was the one plane she must not miss. It had taken months to persuade her husband to allow her to go. If she missed it, he might easily decide that she should cancel the whole thing. And the trouble was that he insisted on coming to the airport to see her off.

`Dear God,' she said aloud, `I'm going to miss it. I know, I know, I know I'm going to miss it.' The little muscle beside the left eye was twitching madly now. The eyes themselves were very close to tears.

`What time is it, Walker?'

`It's eighteen minutes past, Madam.'

`Now I really will miss it!' she cried. `Oh, I wish he would come!'

This was an important journey for Mrs Foster. She was going all alone to Paris to visit her daughter, her only child, who was married to a Frenchman. Mrs Foster didn't care much for the Frenchman, but she was fond of her daughter, and, more than that, she had developed a great yearning to set eyes on her three grandchildren. She knew them only from the many photographs that she had received and that she kept putting up all over the house. They were beautiful, these children. She doted on them, and each time a new picture arrived she
would carry it away and sit with it for a long time, staring at it lovingly and searching the small faces for signs of that old satisfying blood likeness that meant so much. And now, lately, she had come more and more to feel that she did not really wish to live out her days in a place where she could not be near these children, and have them visit her, and take them out for walks, and buy them presents, and watch them grow. She knew, of course, that it was wrong and in a way disloyal to have thoughts like these while her husband was still alive. She knew also that although he was no longer active in his many enterprises, he would never consent to leave New York and live in Paris. It was a miracle that he had ever agreed to let her fly over there alone for six weeks to visit them. But, oh, how she wished she could live there always, and be close to them!

`Walker, what time is it?'

`Twenty-two minutes past, Madam.'

As he spoke, a door opened and Mr Foster carne into the hall. He stood for a moment, looking intently at his wife, and she looked back at him - at this diminutive but still quite dapper old man with the huge bearded face that bore such an astonishing resemblance to those old photographs of Andrew Carnegie.

`Well,' he said, `I suppose perhaps we'd better get going fairly soon if you want to catch that plane.'

`Yes, dear -yes! Everything's ready. The car's waiting.'

`That's good,' he said. With his head over to one side, he was watching her closely.

He had a peculiar way of cocking the head and then moving it in a series of small, rapid jerks. Because of this and because he was clasping his hands up high in front of him, near the chest, he was somehow like a squirrel standing there - a quick clever old squirrel from the Park.

`Here's Walker with your coat, dear. Put it on.'

`I'll be with you in a moment,' he said. Tm just going to wash my hands.'

She waited for him, and the tall butler stood beside her, holding the coat and the hat.

`Walker, will I miss it?'

`No, Madam,' the butler said. `1 think you'll make it all right.'

Then Mr Foster appeared again, and the butler helped him on with his coat. Mrs Foster hurried outside and got into the hired Cadillac. Her husband carne after her, but he walked down the steps of the house slowly, pausing halfway to observe the sky and to sniff the cold morning air.
'It looks a bit foggy,' he said as he sat down beside her in the car. 'And it's always worse out there at the airport. I shouldn't be surprised if the flight's cancelled already.'

'Don't say that, dear - please.'

They didn't speak again until the car had crossed over the river to Long Island.

'I arranged everything with the servants,' Mr Foster said. 'They're all going off today. I gave them half-pay for six weeks and told Walker to send him a telegram when we wanted them back.'

'Yes,' she said. He told me.

'I'll move into the club tonight. It'll be a nice change staying at the club.'

'Yes, dear. I'll write to you.'

'I'll call in at the house occasionally to see that everything's all right and to pick up the mail.'

'But don't you really think Walker should stay there all the time to look after things?' she asked meekly.

'Nonsense. It's quite unnecessary. And anyway, I'd have to pay him full wages.'

'Oh yes,' she said. 'Of course.'

'What's more, you never know what people get up to when they're left alone in a house,' Mr Foster announced, and with that he took out a cigar and, after snipping off the end with a silver cutter, lit it with a gold lighter.

She sat still in the car with her hands clasped together tight under the rug.

'Will you write to me?' she asked.

'I'll see,' he said. 'But I doubt it. You know I don't hold with letter-writing unless there's something specific to say.'

'Yes, dear, I know. So don't you bother.'

They drove on, along Queen's Boulevard, and as they approached the flat marshland on which Idlewild is built, the fog began to thicken and the car had to slow down.

'Oh dear!' cried Mrs Foster. 'I'm sure I'm going to miss it now! What time is it?'

'Stop fussing,' the old man said. 'It doesn't matter anyway. It's bound to be cancelled now. They never fly in this sort of weather. I don't know why you bothered to come out.'
She couldn’t be sure, but it seemed to her that there was suddenly a new note in his voice, and she turned to look at him. It was difficult to observe any change in his expression under all that hair. The mouth was what counted. She wished, as she had so often before, that she could see the mouth clearly. The eyes never showed anything except when he was in a rage.

`Of course,' he went on, `if by any chance it does go, then I agree with you - you’ll be certain to miss it now. Why don’t you resign yourself to that?'

She turned away and peered through the window at the fog. It seemed to be getting thicker as they went along, and now she could only just make out the edge of the road and the margin of grassland beyond it. She knew that her husband was still looking at her. She glanced at him again, and this time she noticed with a kind of horror that he was staring intently at the little place in the corner of her left eye where she could feel the muscle twitching.

`Won't you?' he said.

`Won’t I what?’

`Be sure to miss it now if it goes. We can't drive fast in this muck.'

He didn’t speak to her any more after that. The car crawled on and on. The driver had a yellow lamp directed on to the edge of the road, and this helped him to keep going. Other lights, some white and some yellow, kept coming out of the fog towards them, and there was an especially bright one that followed close behind them all the time.

Suddenly, the driver stopped the car.

`There!' Mr Foster cried. `We're stuck. I knew it.'

`No, sir,' the driver said, turning round. `I've made it. This is the airport.'

Without a word, Mrs Foster jumped out and hurried through the main entrance into the building. There was a mass of people inside, mostly disconsolate passengers standing around the ticket counters. She pushed her way through and spoke to the clerk.

`Yes,' he said. `Your flight is temporarily postponed. But please don't go away. We're expecting the weather to clear any moment.'

She went back to her husband who was still sitting in the car and told him the news.

`But don’t you wait, dear,' she said. `There's no sense in that.'

`I won't,' he answered. `So long as the driver can get me back. Can you get me back, driver?’
`I think so,' the man said.

Is the luggage out?'

`Yes, sir.'

`Good-bye, dear,' Mrs Foster said, leaning into the car and giving her husband a small kiss on the coarse grey fur of his cheek.

`Good-bye,' he answered. `Have a good trip.'

The car drove off, and Mrs Foster was left alone.

The rest of the day was a sort of nightmare for her. She sat for hour after hour on a bench, as close to the airline counter as possible, and every thirty minutes or so she would get up and ask the clerk if the situation had changed. She always received the same reply - that she must continue to wait, because the fog might blow away at any moment. It wasn't until after six in the evening that the loudspeakers finally announced that the flight had been postponed until eleven o'clock the next morning.

Mrs Foster didn't quite know what to do when she heard this news. She stayed sitting on her bench for at least another half-hour, wondering, in a tired, hazy sort of way, where she might go to spend the night. She hated to leave the airport. She didn't wish to see her husband. She was terrified that in one way or another he would eventually manage to prevent her from getting to France. She would have liked to remain just where she was, sitting on the bench the whole night through. That would be the safest. But she was already exhausted, and it didn't take her long to realize that this was a ridiculous thing for an elderly lady to do. So in the end she went to a phone and called the house.

Her husband, who was on the point of leaving for the club, answered it himself. She told him the news, and asked whether the servants were still there.

`They've all gone,' he said.

In that case, dear, I'll just get myself a room somewhere for the night. And don't you bother yourself about it at all.'

`That would be foolish,' he said. `You've got a large house here at your disposal. Use it.”

`But, dear, it's empty.'

`Then I'll stay with you myself.'

`There's no food in the house. There's nothing.'

`Then eat before you come in. Don't be so stupid, woman. Everything you do, you seem to want to make a fuss about it.
'Yes,' she said. 'I'm sorry. I'll get myself a sandwich here, and then I'll come on in.'

Outside, the fog had cleared a little, but it was still a long, slow drive in the taxi, and she didn't arrive back at the house on Sixty-second Street until fairly late. Her husband emerged from his study when he heard her coming in. 'Well,' he said, standing by the study door, 'how was Paris?'

We leave at eleven in the morning,' she answered. 'It's definite.'

'You mean if the fog clears.'

'It's clearing now. There's a wind coming up.'

'You look tired,' he said. 'You must have had an anxious day.'

'It wasn't very comfortable. I think I'll go straight to bed.'

'I've ordered a car for the morning,' he said. 'Nine o'clock.'

'Oh, thank you, dear. And I certainly hope you're not going to bother to come all the way to see me off.'

'No,' he said slowly. 'I don't think I will. But there's no reason why you shouldn't drop me at the club on your way.'

She looked at him, and at that moment he seemed to be standing a long way off from her, beyond some borderline. He was suddenly so small and far away that she couldn't be sure what he was doing, or what he was thinking, or even what he was.

'The club is downtown,' she said. 'It isn't on the way to the airport.'

'But you'll have plenty of time, my dear. Don't you want to drop me at the club?'

'Oh, yes - of course.'

'That's good. Then I'll see you in the morning at nine.'

She went up to her bedroom on the second floor, and she was so exhausted from her day that she fell asleep soon after she lay down.

Next morning, Mrs Foster was up early, and by eight-thirty she was downstairs and ready to leave.

Shortly after nine, her husband appeared. 'Did you make any coffee?' he asked.

'No, dear. I thought you'd get a nice breakfast at the club. The car is here. It's been waiting. I'm all ready to go.'
They were standing in the hall - they always seemed to be meeting in the hall nowadays - she with her hat and coat and purse, he in a curiously cut Edwardian jacket with high lapels.

`Your luggage?'

`It's at the airport.'

`Ah yes,' he said. `Of course. And if you're going to take me to the club first, I suppose we'd better get going fairly soon, hadn't we?'

`Yes!' she cried. `Oh, yes - please!'

Tm just going to get a few cigars. I'll be right with you. You get in the car.'

She turned and went out to where the chauffeur was standing, and he opened the car door for her as she approached.

`What time is it?' she asked him.

`About nine-fifteen.'

Mr Foster came out five minutes later, and watching him as he walked slowly down the steps, she noticed that his legs were like goat's legs in those narrow stovepipe trousers that he wore. As on the day before, he paused half-way down to sniff the air and to examine the sky. The weather was still not quite clear, but there was a wisp of sun coming through the mist.

`Perhaps you'll be lucky this time,' he said as he settled himself beside her in the car.

`Hurry, please,' she said to the chauffeur. `Don't bother about the rug. I'll arrange the rug. Please get going. I'm late.'

The man went back to his seat behind the wheel and started the engine.

`Just a moment!' Mr Foster said suddenly. Hold it a moment, chauffeur, will you?'

`What is it, dear?' She saw him searching the pockets of his overcoat.

`I had a little present I wanted you to take to Ellen,' he said. `Now, where on earth is it? I'm sure I had it in my hand as I came down.'

`I never saw you carrying anything. What sort of present?'

`A little box wrapped up in white paper. I forgot to give it to you yesterday. I don't want to forget it today.'

`A little box!' Mrs Foster cried. `I never saw any little box!' She began hunting frantically in the back of the car.
Her husband continued searching through the pockets of his coat. Then he unbuttoned the coat and felt around in his jacket. ‘Confound it,’ he said, ‘I must’ve left it in my bedroom. I won’t be a moment.’

‘Oh, please!’ she cried. ‘We haven’t got time! Please leave it! You can mail it. It’s only one of those silly combs anyway. You’re always giving her combs.’

‘And what’s wrong with combs, may I ask?’ he said, furious that she should have forgotten herself for once.

‘Nothing, dear, I’m sure. But . . .

Stay here!’ he commanded. ‘I’m going to get it.’

‘Be quick, dear! Oh, please be quick!’

She sat still, waiting and waiting.

‘Chauffeur, what time is it?’

The man had a wristwatch, which he consulted. ‘I make it nearly nine-thirty.’

‘Can we get to the airport in an hour?’

‘Just about.’

At this point, Mrs Foster suddenly spotted a corner of something white wedged down in the crack of the seat on the side where her husband had been sitting. She reached over and pulled out a small paper-wrapped box, and at the same time she couldn’t help noticing that it was wedged down firm and deep, as though with the help of a pushing hand.

‘Here it is!’ she cried. ‘I’ve found it! Oh dear, and now he’ll be up there for ever searching for it! Chauffeur, quickly - run in and call him down, will you please?’

The chauffeur, a man with a small rebellious Irish mouth, didn’t care very much for any of this, but he climbed out of the car and went up the steps to the front door of the house. Then he turned and came back. ‘Door’s locked,’ he announced. ‘You got a key?’

‘Yes - wait a minute.’ She began hunting madly in her purse. The little face was screwed up tight with anxiety, the lips pushed outward like a spout.

‘Here it is! No - I’ll go myself. It’ll be quicker. I know where he’ll be.’

She hurried out of the car and up the steps to the front door, holding the key in one hand. She slid the key into the keyhole and was about to turn it - and then she stopped. Her head came up, and she stood there absolutely motionless, her whole body arrested right in the middle of all this hurry to turn the key and get into the house, and she waited - five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten seconds, she waited. The way she was standing there, with her head
in the air and the body so tense, it seemed as though she were listening for the repetition of some sound that she had heard a moment before from a place far away inside the house.

Yes - quite obviously she was listening. Her whole attitude was a listening one. She appeared actually to be moving one of her ears closer and closer to the door. Now it was right up against the door, and for still another few seconds she remained in that position, head up, ear to door, hand on key, about to enter but not entering, trying instead, or so it seemed, to hear and to analyse these sounds that were coming faintly from this place deep within the house.

Then, all at once, she sprang to life again. She withdrew the key from the door and carne running back down the steps.

`It's too late!' she cried to the chauffeur. `I can't wait for him, I simply can't. I'll miss the plane. Hurry now, driver, hurry! To the airport!'

The chauffeur, had he been watching her closely, might have noticed that her face had turned absolutely white and that the whole expression had suddenly altered. There was no longer that rather soft and silly look. A peculiar hardness had settled itself upon the features. The little mouth, usually so flabby, was now tight and thin, the eyes were bright, and the voice, when she spoke, carried a new note of authority.

`Hurry, driver, hurry!'

`Isn't your husband travelling with you?' the man asked, astonished.

`Certainly not! I was only going to drop him at the club. It won't matter. He'll understand. He'll get a cab. Don't sit there talking, man. Get going! I've got a plane to catch for Paris!' 

With Mrs Foster urging him from the back seat, the man drove fast all the way, and she caught her plane with a few minutes to spare. Soon she was high up over the Atlantic, reclining comfortably in her aeroplane chair, listening to the hum of the motors, heading for Paris at last. The new mood was still with her. She felt remarkably strong and, in a queer sort of way, wonderful. She was a trifle breathless with it all, but this was more from pure astonishment at what she had done than anything else, and as the plane flew farther and farther away from New York and East Sixty-second Street, a great sense of calmness began to settle upon her. By the time she reached Paris, she was just as strong and cool and calm as she could wish.

She met her grandchildren, and they were even more beautiful in the flesh than in their photographs. They were like angels, she told herself, so beautiful they were. And every day she took them for walks, and fed them cakes, and bought them presents, and told them charming stories.
Once a week, on Tuesdays, she wrote a letter to her husband a nice, chatty letter - full of news and gossip, which always ended with the words Now be sure to take your meals regularly, dear, although this is something I'm afraid you may not be doing when I'm not with you.'

When the six weeks were up, everybody was sad that she had to return to America, to her husband. Everybody, that is, except her. Surprisingly, she didn't seem to mind as much as one might have expected, and when she kissed them all good-bye, there was something in her manner and in the things she said that appeared to hint at the possibility of a return in the not too distant future.

However, like the faithful wife she was, she did not overstay her time. Exactly six weeks after she had arrived, she sent a cable to her husband and caught the plane back to New York.

Arriving at Idlewild, Mrs Foster was interested to observe that there was no car to meet her. It is possible that she might even have been a little amused. But she was extremely calm and did not overtip the porter who helped her into a taxi with her baggage.

New York was colder than Paris, and there were lumps of dirty snow lying in the gutters of the streets. The taxi drew up before the house on Sixty-second Street, and Mrs Foster persuaded the driver to carry her two large cases to the top of the steps. Then she paid him off and rang the bell. She waited, but there was no answer. Just to make sure, she rang again, and she could hear it tinkling shrilly far away in the pantry, at the back of the house. But still no one came.

So she took out her own key and opened the door herself.

The first thing she saw as she entered was a great pile of mail lying on the floor where it had fallen after being slipped through the letter box. The place was dark and cold. A dust sheet was still draped over the grandfather clock. In spite of the cold, the atmosphere was peculiarly oppressive, and there was a faint and curious odour in the air that she had never smelled before.

She walked quickly across the hall and disappeared for a moment around the corner to the left, at the back. There was something deliberate and purposeful about this action; she had the air of a woman who is off to investigate a rumour or to confirm a suspicion. And when she returned a few seconds later, there was a little glimmer of satisfaction on her face.

She paused in the centre of the hall, as though wondering what to do next. Then, suddenly, she turned and went across into her husband's study. On the desk she found his address book, and after hunting through it for a while she picked up the phone and dialled a number.
`Hello,' she said. `Listen - this is Nine East Sixty-second Street . . . . Yes, that's right. Could you send someone round as soon as possible, do you think? Yes, it seems to be stuck between the second and third floors. At least, that's where the indicator's pointing.

. . . Right away? Oh, that's very kind of you. You see, my legs aren't any too good for walking up a lot of stairs. Thank you so much. Good-bye.'

She replaced the receiver and sat there at her husband's desk, patiently waiting for the man who would be coming soon to repair the lift.
Credits

This collection was compiled and edited by the pupils of TLS2 (2012-2013)

Nadji  Alexandre  Mathilde
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under the supervision of their teacher Mr Cadilhac
Five Shorts Stories

by

Roald Dahl

The Umbrella Man (from More Tales of the Unexpected, 1980)
The Landlady (from Kiss Kiss, 1960)
Lamb to the Slaughter (from Someone Like You, 1953)
The Hitchhiker (from The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar and Six More, 1977)
The Way Up to Heaven (from Kiss Kiss, 1960)

These Roald Dahl short stories, although they do not have any direct link to each other, still have some common points. Above all, we notice a recurrent atmosphere, a very dreary and dismal mood. Many of them are about death, and it is not a natural ending, but a murder. Men are killed by their wives, or simply by women. Each short story contains characters who betray one or more persons in different ways; there can be a moral or physical treason. Many times, these stories resort to black humour and show the dark side of humanity, the double-sidedness of humans, like a woman who appears very nice but poisons people, another who appears very much in love and dangerous, an old man who takes advantage of the kindness of people to scam them.

The ironical tone and the black humour of the author make the final twists and the stories in general very funny. Although they have their own plot, they are equally interesting.

(Back cover text by Amélie, Anna, Lisa-Belle, Marion and Alexandre)