

for immortality. The beanstalk had grown into the tallest free-standing organism in the world, a great, tree-like thing, so strong and spread out at the top that, rather than growing back through the hole, it had lifted the entire cloud higher than anyone could climb, and certainly past the point where Ms. G. would have been able to step down.

At first she was angry. She thought, No beanstalk is going to get the better of me, I can still fall on them. But she remembered the principle that if you go so far to kill something you can never, ever, return the same. And there was no way Ms. G. was going to change anything she had or anything she was. She looked around her, seeing her cloud anew, and she noticed

the intricate carpet of beanstalk leaves making her cloudpath firmer, supporting her at higher and higher altitudes, in the slow walk of her contentment, in the heaviness of her age.

Now when she looked down from her great height she could barely see the couple. But there seemed to be more animals in their yard, more people, perhaps children. The whole yard had a golden aura — were there that many eggs now? Jack and his girlfriend, going about their daily business, seemed to walk in step now, now lively, now peaceful, and Ms. G. thought she could hear the echo of their rhythms in the faint music of the golden harp. And that was fine.

The beanstalk continued to lift the

cloud, and the higher Ms. G. gets the less she sees and the more she seems to understand. She is much less interested in Jack now, though pleased with what he has become. He has not increased much in stature, and he does not bear much resemblance to the giant, but he has grown into a new breed of man, the kind who cook and know their folktales well.

As for his girlfriend — Ms. G. waxes eloquent here. For Jack's girlfriend has grown into the image of Ms. G. in her youth, a real beauty, though of course much less impressive in size. How purely she sings, how gracefully she bends, as she goes about her woman's work! And look — there she is now, beginning to write a woman's story.

# The Last Class

*A Short Story by Cynthia Norris Graae*

**T**he final assignment for my creative writing class at the Fine Arts Center on the Randolph Estate was:

*Combine the techniques we have learned with your own natural spontaneity into an oral presentation, with a beginning, middle and end. Make notes to use in class, but plan to use them only to refresh your recollection.*

But I was late again, and — as usual — unprepared. I flung open the classroom door and dashed toward the only empty seat, across the table from Moonbottom (the teacher) and Peter Canary.

He beamed a flicker of recognition, so precisely aimed that only someone in his direct line of vision could detect it. That someone was me. His crisp white shirt, sleeves rolled up to his elbows, flattered his tan. He was the only one who wasn't sogged out by Washington's humidity.

Moonbottom frowned. "Could you shut the door?" he asked as I reached for the empty chair. His short-sleeved polyester shirt was shiny and graying. It was

almost transparent, revealing his torn undershirt. He looked as if he had body odor, the sweet-putrid kind. Oh, why did my imagination conjure up such intimate details?

"Could we leave it open?" I inquired.

"It's like a swamp in here," said one of the graduate students. At least I had one supporter. I sat down and shoved my backpack under my chair.

"The air conditioner is working tonight," said Moonbottom. "It'll cool down faster with the door shut."

"I'd really feel better with it open," I said.

A graduate student leaned toward Peter Canary. He didn't quite cover his mouth with his hand when he said to Peter Canary, "She's just nervous about having to tell a story. I hope the teacher doesn't let her get out of this one."

"You'll feel better after you've had your turn," reassured a woman with frizzy yellow hair.

"Why don't you go first?" Moonbottom asked me.

Peter Canary, having perfected the art

of silent communication, winked in my direction without moving even an eyelash. The air conditioner was not working. It was circulating hot air. I felt flushed. I asked about the door again.

The graduate student sitting next to Peter Canary said to me. "You're just procrastinating. Mr. Jenks, you should tell her to get with the program or let someone else have a turn." Apparently he lacked the authority to call his teachers — even Moonbottom — anything but "Mr."

I said, "The thing is, I haven't done the assignment. I mean I really thought it was terrific, but —"

I was in a hole.

Peter Canary caught my eye again. Elaborate a little, he was telling me, imperceptibly to anyone else, and I began talking.

"I put the instructions in my notebook during class last week. Driving home, when I approached the traffic light on Wisconsin Avenue, I reached into my backpack to have another look at the instructions. I wanted to think about my presentation while I drove. I discovered

that my notebook was missing.”

“At first I didn’t think anything about it, but by the time I reached the second light, I remembered that a very personal essay I wrote about my husband was in my notebook, in which I’d carefully printed my name, address, and telephone number.” I pulled my backpack from under my chair, unzipped it, and turned it inside out. Three ball point pens, a felt-tipped marker, two dimes, and a quarter rolled out, but no notebook.

Keep going, said Peter Canary’s eyes. You’re on the right track.

“Typical,” complained the graduate student sitting next to Peter Canary. The graduate student grabbed the quarter as it traveled toward the edge of the table, and put it in his pocket. I don’t think he thought anyone saw him. Peter Canary signalled to me again, Keep going.

“Anyway,” I said, “I didn’t want anyone to be able to trace me, so I made an illegal U-turn and drove back here as fast as I could. The parking lot was deserted. The floodlights were off. There was no moon. It was really dark. I began to realize, dimly, that trying to find my notebook was a stupid idea, but I was so disturbed at the possibility of someone finding it that I ran down the hill toward our classroom. The spires, turrets, and gargoyles on the main house looked spooky. I went past what I figured was the carriage house. You know, the place the actors practice voice projection. I finally reached our classroom. At least I think it was our classroom. It was very dark. Of course the door was locked. I don’t know why I imagined that it would be open. I tried pushing on the window.”

The graduate student whispered to Peter Canary, “Is she stalling? Why doesn’t she ever do her assignment?” Peter Canary seemed to suppress a smile. What a story! he beamed on the wavelength that only I was receiving.

I continued, “I heard a voice from the carriage house behind me, ‘Hellooo, hellooo, hellooo.’ At first I thought it was the actors, but after the third ‘hellooo’ I panicked. I ran behind the carriage house through an open door, up some steps, and onto what turned out to be a stage. Did you know there is a theater here at the Center?”

“I became aware of more voices, hushed, an audience waiting for a per-

formance perhaps. Suddenly, a spotlight focused on me. There was clapping, cheering, stomping, and then hissing from a crowd in seats in front of me. I turned and ran as fast as possible from the theater the way I came in. The audience followed me, up and over the stage, down the steps, and out the door.

“I am a jogger. I can run six miles in under 45 minutes, but the group behind me was fast, too. Some of them came so close that I could feel spray on my neck and arms from their hoarse breathing. They followed me past the gardener’s cottage, the guest house, the gazebo, and through a door in the stone wall at the edge of the orchard. The door leads to a tunnel that goes all the way to the C & O Canal. The tunnel ended in the woods near the 4-mile marker on the towpath. The group was still following me. I decided to head toward Washington. Even though I was tired, I thought maybe I could run that far. But within minutes it occurred to me that maybe the herd behind me could run that far, too.

“Then I remember the assertiveness training class I took last summer. I turned around and held up my hand like a traffic officer. For the first time I saw my followers. They were short, hairy, and wrinkled. Maybe self-confidence would work. ‘Stop,’ I ordered. ‘I am bothered by your behavior. I do not like being followed. Tell me what you want.’

“‘Sing, sing, sing,’ they chanted. ‘We want you to sing.’

“‘Sing? I am not musical. I do not know any lyrics. I cannot carry a tune. Instead, I tried to change the subject. ‘Where are you from,’ I asked.

“‘We live under the Randolph Estate,’ said an especially wrinkled fellow. ‘We paid for a concert there. We want you to sing or we will have to take you with us.’ They looked serious. One of them had chains, hammers, nails, and a welding torch. I thought I might be running out of time.”

I wondered if anyone in the class still thought I was stalling. No one was whispering. Peter Canary looked impressed.

I continued, “‘Stories?’ I asked the bizarre crowd that was following me. ‘Do you like stories?’”

“‘Do we like stories?’ they replied. Like obedient children, they sat down and crossed their legs in the middle of the

towpath.

“I almost panicked again. I hadn’t expected to tell stories right then. ‘Wait,’ I told them. ‘not just yet.’ I needed to delay their expectations but keep them reassured or I might never get home alive. ‘Next week,’ I told them, ‘I know where you can hear lots of stories. I’m taking a creative writing class at the Fine Arts Center on the Randolph Estate. It meets in the gardener’s cottage every Wednesday. The teacher assigned us to tell stories out loud next week. There are twelve of us. Some of the students have brilliant imaginations. I’m sure the stories will be good.’

“The smallest one spoke up. ‘The gardener’s cottage? That’s right over our bedroom. It would be wonderful.’ the rest of them looked at him, dubious. But clearly they were excited. They conferred among themselves.”

I hadn’t expected that I could keep my fiction going this long. I guess I figured that someone would unmask me and it would be over. I had no idea how to end this monologue. I looked at Peter Canary. Was he looking at the door? The door? Okay — I continued as fast as I could think, “The tallest one, probably a good 18 inches shorter than I, spoke. ‘How will we hear? We don’t want anyone to see us.’

“‘Easy, I said. ‘I’ll be the last one to come to class. I’ll leave the door open so you can hear.’ Twelve stories all at once. Probably more stories than they had heard in 50 years. I could see that the prospect thrilled them. They conferred again, for a long time. I was nervous. I had nothing more to offer. If twelve stories wouldn’t buy my freedom, nothing would. I waited. The spokesman came back to me. ‘All right,’ he said. ‘On one condition. Remember to leave the door open. Now don’t forget. If you do....’ “The whole group spoke together to finish his sentence, ‘...we’re going to get you after your class,’ and they scampered back up the towpath. The one with the gear turned and shook his chains at me. ‘Don’t forget,’ he warned repeatedly, ‘Don’t forget,’ until they were so far away that I couldn’t see them any more.”

The obnoxious graduate student opened the door. The others got up, too, and looked outside. Moonbottom kept saying, “Terrific action.” Peter Canary didn’t say a word, but by then I knew I’d see him after class.