

"Object Lessons" by Josephine Sloyan
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Finalist story in the 2018 ACM Nick Adams Short Story Contest
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Object Lessons

by Josephine Sloyan

She'd only smoked pot once in high school and been put right off it and for years after had defined herself as aggressively antidrug, remembering that awful embarrassing first time. For a little while, between the charged white space between school and employment, she'd even volunteered at the local faction of Concerned Midwesterners Battling Substance Dependency. All day she'd stand out in front of the Hy-Vee and mechanically smile, hand outstretched with clasped pastel flyer, her face starting to ache around noon, her outstretched hand feeling more and more like a plea. During these challenging hours she'd go back to the individual memories folded into the one horrible memory of the night she'd smoked pot, unfolding and smoothing each plane of the story's story to better appreciate where and what she was right then, at the Hy-Vee. The problem with Hy-Vee was that the building's roof's overhang was preternaturally short, giving the building's façade a naked and unfinished look, like a botched haircut. There was no way to stand in the overhang's maybe half-inch of shade except towards the later evening, when the building's shadow cast her way and gave her skin relief.

Before that summer, the year she'd graduated, she'd worked the desk at her aunt's beauty salon, which was a cushy job but she had to use fancy words like *gratuity* and *beverage*. Sometimes the ladies would remember her name and ask how she was liking school and she'd say: just fine. The only people she'd ever seen with blue hair were either her age or over sixty and cane-saddled. Another drawback was that she had to have on a full face of makeup at all times, even if she was on her break and just trying to eat her tuna sandwich or whatever. If she forgot, her manager would be bearing down on her in seconds, going "Full-face!", the manager's own face terrifying, over-rouged and scabby with foundation. Her aunt kept a bowl of old-school hard candies on the desk, butterscotch candies in yellow clear saran with the wrapper's ends quaintly twisted, and red oblong candies in wrappers designed to make each individual candy look like little red pineapples, which the candies were hollow and full of syrup that sometimes oozed when you bit them and sometimes just gummed your teeth right up. Also mints that crumbled on your tongue. Her aunt kept the desk's lower-right-hand drawer full of superior brand-name candy that she didn't think anybody else knew about, though the trash can beneath the desk was always full of their fun-sized wrappers. Some of the other girls raided the supposedly secret drawer on a regular basis.

Each shift she herself would take two or three superior brand-name candies and put them in a gallon plastic Ziploc she kept in her backpack. When the Ziploc was full she'd take it to the

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red-eyed kids who hung out behind the baseball field during class and played Hacky Sack and she'd sell the bag at a significant markup.

Maybe halfway through this final school year the rumor started going around that Ellie Watts was selling Ziploc'd candy at a marked-down rate to one particular group of kids. Her newfound benevolence could be traced back to a month earlier, trudging through the baseball field after business as usual with backpack luffing emptily around her shoulders while she mentally re-calculated how much she could make if she started charging per piece instead of selling in bulk, when she saw the most incredible-looking boy: his face the face of teen-angst movie heartbreak, cigarette hanging off it, his slouch not so much a slouch as some kind of muddled anti-authority statement, this boy the kind of bad-boy Object of Her Affection she'd been waiting in her heart of hearts for as long as she'd known people could be objects. The Object saw her standing there, with what look on her face she didn't even know, and waved. He was just far away enough that if she were to say something (an insane thought) she'd have to raise her voice. If she were to walk toward him (equally insane) she'd have to turn fully around, foolishly, like she'd changed courses just to engage in one particular conversation with somebody she didn't even know.

Then the Object was saying something, his voice a little raised, not foolishly at all, and she saw then how simple he made it seem, how simple it was, to walk across the weedy grass and say he thought he knew her, wasn't she the girl that was like selling candy to his friends? and how easy it was to say yes that was her and actually her name was Ellie and if he ever wanted candy or anything (although at this her sweat glands sprung open spontaneously so sweat began to roll in lazy full drops down her sides) just ask her and no it was fine it could be free even because they were cool and it was no big deal at all, it was nothing, it was entirely insignificant.

Desire activated her. Before the day was out she had approached Bernice Wayne, the way tall girl who sat in the back of Homeroom with her eyes faintly crossed and jumped every time the teacher went Ber-NEECE is there somebody in there today? and gnawed her braids when called on for an answer she never had. Ellie said she sat just one row up from Bernice and how come they didn't know each other anyway? Bernice looked at her with incomprehension. Her shirt was spotted from her braids' soaked ends.

What?

Well high school was short and you had to get to know who you went to school with, didn't you? I mean these were like the best years of our lives or whatever and it'd be a shame to have spent them without knowing what your peers—uh, what other people or whatever were like, don't you think? Or whatever?

Or whatever, Bernice agreed.

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Right. So I'm saying let's all hang out or something this weekend. Bring all your friends, I know them a little bit, they're the ones behind the baseball field all the time, right? There's that girl Cate and that Jackson and some tall guy, the one with the cigarettes?

Oh, I know you. You're that girl giving us that free candy.

She didn't even flinch. I'll see you this weekend, she said.

* * * * *

All through that warm dusty week she came to understand how desire was exacerbated by time. Later she would learn that the equation was more complex, that desire + time was in fact a bell curve whose curve was further agitated when you threw distance into the mix, but at that time she was seventeen and every hour was heavy with lust, days swollen nearly to the point of pain. She had never dated, never kissed anybody, never given sex a passing thought, and as if in retaliation, desire was steamrolling her flat. She would never again in her life have fantasies so rich and all-consuming, untainted by experience and the inevitable mediocrity of real-world intimacy. During class she would pull back from her face's smiling mask and retract into herself, finding in herself vast swathes of her own untouched skin, a body in her mind that seemed more real than the one whose hands were at five and seven on her laptop's keyboard. The Object came towards her. He came so close her mind's lips were hot with his breath. He smelled like nothing. His voice sounded like her own voice, which in her head was genderless and omnipotent, reading the world back to her. Touch me, he said in her own God's voice. His face was the same face she'd seen behind the baseball field in flawless 1080p. The word *swoon* sounds like somebody falling, but the actual interior feeling is of something lifting up through you, carrying you up so your knees buckle, the stuff that makes you rushing upwards on a draft of pleasure. Since she was like thirteen she'd been masturbating mechanically, the way you'd change a car's oil, maintenance through mindless routine. Not like this. She tried to write in her diary and realized there weren't words. Stared dumbly at blank paper. The only vocabulary she had was a boy's vocabulary. Cunt, dick, pussy: boy-words. She didn't like the way it made her feel to use the word cunt re: herself; scary, out-of-control, whorish. Anything she thought made her think of that word *whore* which to her was synonymous with slavery. She didn't know how to make sense of anything. Ellie, said Ms. Nugent, are you with us today? She nodded dumbly. Could you come up to the board? She imagined standing to show her skirt soaked through.

Bernice Wayne came up to her at lunch and said there was going to be some little thing at Ken Yardley's house on Saturday 'cause his parents were going out of town to renew their vows or some garbage. On that day her hair was pulled into painful-looking cornrows, her head

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segmented newly into dozens of tiny perfect squares. Just show up whenever, she said. I don't know.

Should I bring something?

Bernice squinted. What?

She'd never done this before. Never mind.

* * * * *

Through contemplation of the Object's face she felt she was coming to a better understanding of her own. She had gotten her period when she was twelve same as anybody but mentally, puberty-wise, she was what her mom called a *late bloomer*. She stood in her bathroom's buzzing white light and turned her head right and left. She looked over every square inch of her face very carefully, not moving that one space at all as her eyes passed over it, the same way, much later, that she'd stiffen when somebody's hand touched the same part of her body, not moving that part of her at all as if she was best when utterly still. Her cheekbones were not exactly symmetrical but if she clenched her teeth shadows appeared beneath them. She practiced in the mirror for nearly an hour, fascinated by the face emerging from her child's face, a face that was like punctuation at the end of a long and mystifying sentence. She stared into the very centers of her eyes and looked for what she thought she'd find there.

* * * * *

That night she was scheduled to smoke marijuana for the first time she packed a small lightweight bag with Visine, breath mints, a change of jacket in case the smell hung around, and a tuna sandwich in case she got hungry the way the kids behind the baseball field did. Bernice opened the door and gazed out fuzzily. Oh, she said. OK, yeah, come in. Somebody shouted who was it and someone else asked if it was cops.

It's just that girl, Bernice shouted back.

Ken Yardley lived on Oakley and Fourth, where the houses were one-story and flags jutted from where they'd been staked beside front doors and hollow wind ornaments spun softly on their plastic hooks, open-mouthed carp and angels in white dresses, and the wooden porch steps were soft and gave under Ellie's feet. Ken Yardley's house did not have any evidence of a hired cleaner's touch or of a particularly anal-retentive parental presence. The ceiling was baroque with mildew in various stages of life, which made everything look shadowed and spangly. Below, kids she dimly recognized were looking at her as she stood in the living room's doorway with either irony or apathy. In nightmares from that night on and through her adult life

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she'd dream this sequence, or one very like it: entering a room, she'd stop as soft thumbs of faces turned towards her, expectant for something she didn't know how to deliver, feeling like nothing so much as one protruding self facing down an opinionless, vague-minded collective. Ok so come in if you're gonna come in, said this Ken Yardley with the bleached tips and stolen leather jacket (the anti-theft tag had been badly bent and wangled, and she could make out the faintest indents of someone's teeth driven into the plastic), and she took a hesitant step into the room, which was muggy and dark and smelled about how she'd expected it to.

There was the Object. The Object was holding out to her what she immediately thought of as a nontraditional wind instrument and she tried to sharpen her jawline like she'd practiced in the mirror by clenching her teeth and hardening her mouth so hollows appeared below her cheekbones and lifted her face into a tighter version of itself. He was asking if she wanted this or what. The Object looked handsomely disheveled but his breath was a whole other kettle of fish.

Sobriety only seems like clarity when you're not sober. A lifetime of sobriety is, too, its own shape of not-knowing, just like any other way you'd experience the world. That's what she kept telling herself as she bravely swallowed mouthful after mouthful of fuggy smoke, convinced she wasn't doing it right, mortally afraid she'd turn out to be one of those cases that just Didn't Get High, which she wasn't even sure existed but if it did she'd be one no doubt. The nontraditional wind instrument's mouthpiece was iridescent with sweat and pubescent skin's oil. Someone across the circle remarked that the first time always hurts and two other people told him to shut up in overlapping near-unison. Bernice Wayne asked in sympathetic undertone if she was OK. Her stomach was so full she didn't think she was capable of speech. Vomiting went from a horrific abstraction to a matter-of-fact potential scenario. The Object was looking at her with an expression she didn't even know what. Someone else told her to inhale and *hold it in* and not just blow it out right away, and she burned with injustice and humiliation. What a complex knowledge they all seemed to have of the anatomy of breathing, like a conference of saxophonists. She would probably pick almost any kind of physical pain over nausea. Nausea felt like the body's self-betrayal. The more she thought the word the more it sounded like the name of a Greek goddess or some exotic country's princess. She felt a burp rising in her throat and was grateful for the relief but then saw the Object still watching and brutally suppressed it. She was a delinquent and a traitor to her own body. She had never wanted so bad to forget she had a body. She was swelling and buckling like a tarp she'd seen the student government trying to hoist up over the half-painted gazebo this past Parent Weekend, a great wily silver thing that snapped and boiled with wind as students ran around it, shouting, gathering armfuls of the stuff that blew away from them and then back in their faces, the tarp made violent by the wind that buoyed it, so they'd had to get hooks and hammers and stakes from Custodial and stake each corner until it was tight to the ground and the wind couldn't get in and its surface was smooth and without life

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again. She remembered that day was gray and without sun. The wind had come up out of nowhere, as will happen in Iowa, and had not let up as the sun set. The shape of the half-finished gazebo under the tarp had looked like something was growing out of the very grass itself. Some students had seen the wind and brought out a lopsided art-class box kite and were setting it up on the quad, one student holding the box and the other running backwards, letting the string run out between his fingers, and then he'd yelled to the other student who'd flung the kite into the air so the air caught and dragged it upwind where it bucked crazily against the updraft and she'd stopped to watch, her and a few others, watching the brown bulky thing twist and shiver midair like its own species of improbable bird, the nylon string a shadow's shadow against clouds lit arrestingly with storm's blue light, noticeable if you knew where to look, impossible to see it was hard as metal, its own entity, this liminal string that brought the hand up towards the kite as much as it kept the kite anchored to earth, the distance between point 1 and point 2 its own world expanding between finite things.