College Guild
PO Box 6448 Brunswick, Maine 04011

Short Story Club II

Unit 6 of 6

A quick reminder -- your job for these Units is to:

1. Read the story and discuss it.

When discussing the story pay attention to how the author accomplished having believable characters, point of view, tense, author's motivation, transitions, favorite aspect of author's work, etc. Don't just sum up the plot!

2. Write a short story of your own.

When writing your own story, try to give some thought to perspective, point of view, tense, plot, show don't tell, and believability.

** Refer to your Short Story Guidelines for help, and remember -- We don't expect your story to be perfect! Becoming a great writer will take a lot of time, and a lot of practice. Just give it your best effort. **

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In this Unit, you'll be reading "The Overcoat" by Gina Berriault. Berriault is an American short story writer, novelist, and scriptwriter. She grew up in California during the Great Depression and began writing short stories during her elementary school years! Her childhood was not always stable, with her father moving from job to job and her mother going blind when Berriault was fourteen. These circumstances are said to have greatly influenced Berriault's writing, and her characters often have emotional problems and existential crises.

http://www.vol1brooklyn.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/akaky-akakiyevich.jpg

"THE OVERCOAT"
by Gina Berriault

The Overcoat was black and hung down to his ankles, the sleeves came down to his fingertips, and the weight of it was as much as two overcoats. It was given him by an old girlfriend who wasn't his lover anymore but stayed around just to be his friend. She had chosen it out of a line of Goodwill coats because, since it had already lasted almost a century, it was the most durable and so the right one for his trip to Seattle, a city she imagined as always flooded by cataclysmic rains and cold as an execution dawn.

On the Greyhound bus, the coat overlapped onto the next seat, and only when all the other seats were occupied did a passenger dare to lift it and sit down, women apologetically, men bristling at the coat's invasion of their territory. The coat was formidable. Inside it, he was frail. His friend had filled a paper bag with a delicatessen items, hoping to spare him the spectacle of himself at depot counters, hands shaking, coffee spilling, a sight for passengers hungrier for objects of ridicule than for their hamburgers and french fries. So he sat alone in the bus while it cooled under the low ceilings of concrete depots and out in lots under the winter sky, around it piles of wet lumber, cars without tires, shacks, a chained dog, and the café's neon sign trembling in the mist.

On the last night the bus plowed through roaring rain. Eli sat behind the driver. Panic might take hold of him any moment and he had to be near a door, even the door of this bus crawling along the ocean floor. No on sat beside him, and the voices of the passengers in the dark bus were like the faint chirps of birds about to be swept from their nest. In the glittering tumult of the water beyond the swift arc of the windshield wiper, he was on his way to see his mother and his father, and panic over the sight of them again, and over their sight of him, could wrench him out of his seat and lay him down in the aisle. He pressed his temple against the cold glass and imagined escaping from the bus and from his parents, revived out there in the icy deluge.

For three days he lay in a hotel room in Seattle, unable to face the two he had come so far to see and whom he had not seen in sixteen years, the age he'd been when he'd seen them last. They were already old when he was a kid, at least in his eyes, and now they seemed beyond age. The room was cold and clammy, but he could have sworn a steam radiator was on, hissing and sputtering. Then he figured an old man was sitting in a corner, watching over him, sniffling and sadly whistling - until he took the noise by surprise and caught it coming from his own nose and mouth. Lying under an army blanket and his overcoat, he wished he had waited until summer. But all waiting time was dangerous. The worst you could imagine always happened to you while you waited for better times. Winter was the best time for him anyway. The overcoat was an impenetrable cover for his wasted body, for his arms lacerated by needles, scar on scar, and decorated with prison tattoos. Even if it were summer he'd wear the coat. The sun would have to get even fiercer than in that story he'd read when he was a kid, about the sun and the wind betting each other which of them could take off the man's coat, and the sun won. Then he'd take off his coat, he'd even take off his shirt, and his parents would see who had been hiding inside. They'd see Eli under the sun.

With his face bundled up in a yellow plaid muffler he'd found on the floor of the bus, he went by ferry and by more buses way out to the edge of this watery state, avoiding his mother by first visiting his father. Clumping down to the fishing boats riding on the glacial gray sea, he was thrown off course by panic, by the presence of his father in one of those boats, and he zigzagged around the little town like an immense black beetle blown across the ocean from its own fantastic region.

On the deck of his father's boat he was instantly dizzied by the lift and fall and the jolting against the wharf, and he held to the rail of the steep steps down to the cabin, afraid he was going to be thrown onto his father, entangling them in another awful mishap.

"Eli, Eli here," he said.

"Eli?"

"That's me," he said.

Granite, his father had turned to granite. The man sitting on the bunk was gray, face gray, skimpy hair gray, the red net of broken capillaries become black flecks, and he didn't move. The years had chiseled him down to nowhere near the size he'd been.

"Got arthritis," his father said. The throat, could it catch arthritis too? His voice was the high-pitched whisper of a woman struggling with a man; it was Eli's mother's voice, changed places. "Got it from the damn wet, took too many falls."

The Indian woman beside him shook tobacco from a pouch, rolled the cigarette, licked it closed, and never looked up. She must be thinking Eli was a visitor who came by every day.

You want to sit? his father said.

Eli sat on the bunk opposite them and his father poured him a glass of port. The storm had roughed things up, his father said, and Eli told them about the bus battling the rain all night. The woman asked Eli if anything was stolen from his boat while he was away, and he humored her; he said a watch was stolen, and his shortwave radio.

"That's a big overcoat you got there," his father said. "You prosperous?"

"Oh, yes!" he said. "I'm so prosperous I got a lot of parasites living off me."

The Indian woman laughed. "They relatives of yours?"

"Anything living off you is a relative," he said.

The woman pushed herself up in stages, her weight giving her a hard time as if it were a massive object, like penalty. She wore two pairs of thick socks, the holes in the top pair showing that socks underneath. Her breasts hung to her waist though she had no waist, but when she lifted her arms to light a hanging kerosene lamp, he saw how gracefully she did it, her hands acting like a pretty girl's. He might fall for her himself if he were sixteen.

They did not offer him dinner. They must have eaten theirs already.

"I've got no place to sleep," he said.

They let him sleep on the bunk. They slept aft, far back in a dark space. He lay in his overcoat, drawing his legs up close against his stomach, and his feet in socks got warm. Then he thought he was a boy again, home again in the house in Seattle, under covers in his own bed while his parents drank the night away, unprotected from them but protected by them from the dreadful world they warned him about, out there.

At dawn he was waked by his shivering body. Out on the pier, the salt cold wind stiffened him, almost blinding him, so that he wound up a few times at the pier's edges. When you look back, he'd heard, you're turned to salt, and that's what was happening to him. If he fell into the sea he'd disappear faster than fate intended.

For two days he wandered around Seattle, avoiding his mother. Now that he was near to her, he wanted to go on by. He had betrayed her. *Tell me about your parents, Eli.* Strangers, creepy parole officers and boy-face psychiatrists in leather jackets and women social workers whose thighs he had hoped to open with the shining need for love in his eyes, each of them jiving with him like a cellmate and all of them urging him to tell about a woman they could never know. He had betrayed her, he had blamed her for Eli, and blamed the old man on the rocking boat. Those strangers had cut out his heart with their prying, and remorse had always rushed in to fill up the empty space where his heart had been.

They told him at the desk that his mother was ambulatory and could be anywhere. His father had called this a rest home, and he wondered why they were resting in here when all that rest was just ahead for them. The women in the rows of narrow beds he passed, and the women in their chairs between the beds, hadn't much left of womanness in them but their power over him was intact. He went along before their pale faces staring out at the last puzzling details of the world, himself a detail, a cowering man in a long black overcoat who might be old enough to be their dead father.

There she was, far down a corridor and out, and he followed her into a paved yard, walled in by brick and concrete. She put her hand to the wall to aid herself in open space, reached the bench, and sat down, and her profile assured him that he wasn't mistaken.

"Mother, it's Eli," he said. "Can I sit down?"

"Room enough for everybody."

He sat, and she paid him no attention. From a pocket of her sweater she took a scrap of comb and began to comb her hair. The comb went cautiously through the limp hair, still feisty red. She was twenty years younger than his father but keeping up with him on the way out, and their son, Eli, their only child, was keeping up with them both.

"We had ourselves an earthquake," she said. "Bricks fell down. We thought the whole damn place was coming down. Did you feel it?"

"I wasn't here," he said.

"Were you scared?"

"I wasn't here."

"I bet you were scared."

"I died in it," he said.

If she wanted his company in her earthquake it was no trouble to oblige. It made no difference, afterward when or where you died, and it was easier to tell her he was already dead than tell her he was going to be soon, even before he could get up from this bench.

"Poor boy," she said. But slowly, still combing her hair, she turned her head to take another look at him, this man who had sat down beside her to belittle her with his lies. "You never died," she said. "You're alive as me."

Off in a corner and facing the wall, he pulled up the overcoat to cover his head and in that dark tent wept over them, over them both an his father, all so baffled by what was to go on. Grief for the three of them filled up the overcoat's empty space, leaving no room to spare, not even him.

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Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes