

12
16
20
24
28
32
36
40
44
48
52

the one who drives a mercedes benz,
sitting down for shark's fin soup.

they talk about buying a house and
taking a two week vacation in beijing,
i suck on shrimp and squab,
dreaming of the cloudscape in your eyes.

my mother, her voice beaded with sarcasm;
you're twenty six and not getting younger.
it's about time you got a decent job.
she no longer asks when i'm getting married.

you're twenty six and not getting younger.
what are you doing with your life?
you've got to make a living.
why don't you study computer programming?

she no longer asks when i'm getting married.
one day, wanting desperately to
bridge the boundaries that separate us,
wanting desperately to touch her,

tell her: mother, i'm gay,
mother i'm gay and so happy with her.
but she will not listen,
she shakes her head.

she sits across from me,
emotions invading her face.
her eyes are wet but
she will not let tears fall.

mother, i say,
you love a man.
i love a woman.
it is not what she wants to hear.

aunts and uncles and cousins,
very much a family affair.
but you are not invited,
being neither my husband nor my wife.

aunts and uncles and cousins
eating longevity noodles
fragrant with ham inquire:
sold that old car of yours yet?

i want to tell them: my back is healing,
i dream of dragons and water.
my home is in her arms,
our bedroom ceiling the wide open sky.

Literature for Composition 6th [1983] ed.
New York: Longman 2003

Topic for Critical Thinking and Writing

An important element of the poem is the very conventional nature of the speaker's family, with its values and views so at odds with the speaker's. Do you think that the conflict between the speaker and her family might be too obvious, too predictable? If you do, how would you respond to the poet if she said, "But that's the way it really was"?

Drama

WENDY WASSERSTEIN



Wendy Wasserstein was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1950, the daughter of immigrants from central Europe. After graduating from Mt. Holyoke College, she took creative writing courses at the City College of New York and then completed a degree program at the Yale School of Drama. Wasserstein has had a highly successful career as a playwright (The Heidi Chronicles won a Pulitzer Prize in 1989), and she has also achieved recognition for her television screenplays and a book of essays.

The Man in a Case is based on a short story by Anton Chekhov, one of her favorite writers.

The Man in a Case

LIST OF CHARACTERS

BYELINKOV
VARINKA

THE SCENE: A small garden in the village of Mironitski. 1898.

[BYELINKOV is pacing. Enter VARINKA out of breath.]

BYELINKOV. You are ten minutes late.

VARINKA. The most amazing thing happened on my way over here. You know the woman who runs the grocery store down the road. She wears a black wig during the week, and a blond wig on Saturday nights. And she has the daughter who married an engineer in Moscow who is doing very well thank you and is living, God bless them, in a three-room apartment. But he really is the most boring man in the world. All he talks about is his future and his station in life. Well, she heard we were to be married and she gave me this basket of apricots to give to you.

BYELINKOV. That is a most amazing thing!

VARINKA. She said to me, Varinka, you are marrying the most honorable man in the entire village. In this village he is the only man fit to speak with my son-in-law.



The Man in a Case. The Acting Company, Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, 1985. (Photo by Diane Gorodnitzki. All rights reserved.)

BYELINKOV. I don't care for apricots. They give me hives.
 VARINKA. I can return them. I'm sure if I told her they give you hives she would give me a basket of raisins or a cake.
 BYELINKOV. I don't know this woman or her pompous son-in-law. Why would she give me her cakes?
 VARINKA. She adores you!
 BYELINKOV. She is emotionally loose.
 VARINKA. She adores you by reputation. Everyone adores you by reputation. I tell everyone I am to marry Byelinkov, the finest teacher in the country.
 BYELINKOV. You tell them this?
 VARINKA. If they don't tell me first.
 BYELINKOV. Pride can be an imperfect value.
 VARINKA. It isn't pride. It is the truth. You are a great man!
 BYELINKOV. I am the master of Greek and Latin at a local school at the end of the village of Mironitski.
 [VARINKA kisses him.]
 VARINKA. And I am to be the master of Greek and Latin's wife!
 BYELINKOV. Being married requires a great deal of responsibility. I hope I am able to provide you with all that a married man must properly provide a wife.
 VARINKA. We will be very happy.
 BYELINKOV. Happiness is for children. We are entering into a social contract, an amicable agreement to provide us with a secure and satisfying future.

VARINKA. You are so sweet! You are the sweetest man in the world!
 BYELINKOV. I'm a man set in his ways who saw a chance to provide himself with a small challenge.
 VARINKA. Look at you! Look at you! Your sweet round spectacles, your dear collar always starched, always raised, your perfectly pressed pants always creasing at right angles perpendicular to the floor, and my most favorite part, the sweet little galoshes, rain or shine, just in case. My Byelinkov, never taken by surprise. Except by me.
 BYELINKOV. You speak about me as if I were your pet.
 VARINKA. You are my pet! My little school mouse.
 BYELINKOV. A mouse?
 VARINKA. My sweetest dancing bear with galoshes, my little stale babka.¹
 BYELINKOV. A stale babka?
 VARINKA. I am not Pushkin.²
 BYELINKOV. [laughs]. That depends what you think of Pushkin.
 VARINKA. You're smiling. I knew I could make you smile today.
 BYELINKOV. I am a responsible man. Every day I have for breakfast black bread, fruit, hot tea, and every day I smile three times. I am halfway into my translation of the *Aeneid*³ from classical Greek hexameter into Russian alexandrines. In twenty years I have never been late to school. I am a responsible man, but no dancing bear.
 VARINKA. Dance with me.
 BYELINKOV. Now? It is nearly four weeks before the wedding!
 VARINKA. It's a beautiful afternoon. We are in your garden. The roses are in full bloom.
 BYELINKOV. The roses have beetles.
 VARINKA. Dance with me!
 BYELINKOV. You are a demanding woman.
 VARINKA. You chose me. And right. And left. And turn. And right. And left.
 BYELINKOV. And turn. Give me your hand. You dance like a school mouse. It's a beautiful afternoon! We are in my garden. The roses are in full bloom! And turn. And turn. [Twirls VARINKA around.]
 VARINKA. I am the luckiest woman!
 [BYELINKOV stops dancing.]
 Why are you stopping?
 BYELINKOV. To place a lilac in your hair. Every year on this day I will place a lilac in your hair.
 VARINKA. Will you remember?
 BYELINKOV. I will write it down. [Takes a notebook from his pocket.] Dear Byelinkov, don't forget the day a young lady, your bride, entered your garden, your peace, and danced on the roses. On that day every year you are to place a lilac in her hair.
 VARINKA. I love you.
 BYELINKOV. It is convenient we met.
 VARINKA. I love you.
 BYELINKOV. You are a girl.
 VARINKA. I am thirty.

¹babka cake with almonds and raisins. ²Pushkin Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837), Russian poet.
³*Aeneid* Latin epic poem by the Roman poet Virgil (70–19 B.C.).

BYELINKOV. But you think like a girl. That is an attractive attribute.

VARINKA. Do you love me?

BYELINKOV. We've never spoken about housekeeping.

VARINKA. I am an excellent housekeeper. I kept house for my family on the farm in Gadyatchsky. I can make a beetroot soup with tomatoes and aubergines which is so nice. Awfully awfully nice.

BYELINKOV. You are fond of expletives.

VARINKA. My beet soup, sir, is excellent!

BYELINKOV. Please don't be cross. I too am an excellent housekeeper. I have a place for everything in the house. A shelf for each pot, a cubby for every spoon, a folder for favorite recipes. I have cooked for myself for twenty years. Though my beet soup is not outstanding, it is sufficient.

VARINKA. I'm sure it's very good.

BYELINKOV. No. It is awfully, awfully not. What I am outstanding in, however, what gives me greatest pleasure, is preserving those things which are left over. I wrap each tomato slice I haven't used in a wet cloth and place it in the coolest corner of the house. I have had my shoes for seven years because I wrap them in the galoshes you are so fond of. And every night before I go to sleep I wrap my bed in quilts and curtains so I never catch a draft.

VARINKA. You sleep with curtains on your bed?

BYELINKOV. I like to keep warm.

VARINKA. I will make you a new quilt.

BYELINKOV. No. No new quilt. That would be hazardous.

VARINKA. It is hazardous to sleep under curtains.

BYELINKOV. Varinka, I don't like change very much. If one works out the arithmetic the final fraction of improvement is at best less than an eighth of value over the total damage caused by disruption. I never thought of marrying till I saw your eyes dancing among the familiar faces at the headmaster's tea. I assumed I would grow old preserved like those which are left over, wrapped suitably in my case of curtains and quilts.

VARINKA. Byelinkov, I want us to have dinners with friends and summer country visits. I want people to say, "Have you spent time with Varinka and Byelinkov? He is so happy now that they are married. She is just what he needed."

BYELINKOV. You have already brought me some happiness. But I never was a sad man. Don't ever think I thought I was a sad man.

VARINKA. My sweetest darling, you can be whatever you want! If you are sad, they'll say she talks all the time, and he is softspoken and kind.

BYELINKOV. And if I am difficult?

VARINKA. Oh, they'll say he is difficult because he is highly intelligent. All great men are difficult. Look at Lermontov, Tchaikovsky, Peter the Great.

BYELINKOV. Ivan the Terrible.⁴

VARINKA. Yes, him too.

BYELINKOV. Why are you marrying me? I am none of these things.

VARINKA. To me you are.

⁴Lermontov . . . Ivan the Terrible Mikhail Lermontov (1814-41), poet and novelist; Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky (1840-93), composer; Peter the Great (1672-1725), and Ivan the Terrible (1530-84), czars credited with making Russia a great European power.

BYELINKOV. You have imagined this. You have constructed an elaborate romance for yourself. Perhaps you are the great one. You are the one with the great imagination.

VARINKA. Byelinkov, I am a pretty girl of thirty. You're right. I am not a woman. I have not made myself into a woman because I do not deserve that honor. Until I came to this town to visit my brother I lived on my family's farm. As the years passed I became younger and younger in fear that I would never marry. And it wasn't that I wasn't pretty enough or sweet enough, it was just that no man ever looked at me and saw a wife. I was not the woman who would be there when he came home. Until I met you I thought I would lie all my life and say I never married because I never met a man I loved. I will love you, Byelinkov. And I will help you to love me. We deserve the life everyone else has. We deserve not to be different.

BYELINKOV. Yes. We are the same as everyone else.

VARINKA. Tell me you love me.

BYELINKOV. I love you.

VARINKA [*takes his hands*]. We will be very happy. I am very strong. [*Pauses.*] It is time for tea.

BYELINKOV. It is too early for tea. Tea is at half past the hour.

VARINKA. Do you have heavy cream? It will be awfully nice with apricots.

BYELINKOV. Heavy cream is too rich for teatime.

VARINKA. But today is special. Today you placed a lilac in my hair. Write in your note pad. Every year we will celebrate with apricots and heavy cream. I will go to my brother's house and get some.

BYELINKOV. But your brother's house is a mile from here.

VARINKA. Today it is much shorter. Today my brother gave me his bicycle to ride. I will be back very soon.

BYELINKOV. You rode to my house by bicycle! Did anyone see you!

VARINKA. Of course. I had such fun. I told you I saw the grocery store lady with the son-in-law who is doing very well thank you in Moscow, and the headmaster's wife.

BYELINKOV. You saw the headmaster's wife!

VARINKA. She smiled at me.

BYELINKOV. Did she laugh or smile?

VARINKA. She laughed a little. She said, "My dear, you are very progressive to ride a bicycle." She said you and your fiancé Byelinkov must ride together sometime. I wonder if he'll take off his galoshes when he rides a bicycle.

BYELINKOV. She said that?

VARINKA. She adores you. We had a good giggle.

BYELINKOV. A woman can be arrested for riding a bicycle. That is not progressive, it is a premeditated revolutionary act. Your brother must be awfully, awfully careful on behalf of your behavior. He has been careless—oh so careless—in giving you the bicycle.

VARINKA. Dearest Byelinkov, you are wrapping yourself under curtains and quilts! I made friends on the bicycle.

BYELINKOV. You saw more than the headmaster's wife and the idiot grocery woman.

VARINKA. She is not an idiot.

BYELINKOV. She is a potato-vending, sausage-armed fool!

VARINKA. Shhhh! My school mouse. Shhhh!

BYELINKOV. What other friends did you make on this bicycle?

VARINKA. I saw students from my brother's classes. They waved and shouted, "Anthropos in love! Anthropos in love!"

BYELINKOV. Where is that bicycle?

VARINKA. I left it outside the gate. Where are you going?

BYELINKOV [*muttering as he exits*]. Anthropos in love, anthropos in love.

VARINKA. They were cheering me on. Careful, you'll trample the roses.

BYELINKOV [*returning with the bicycle*]. Anthropos is the Greek singular for man. Anthropos in love translates as the Greek and Latin master in love. Of course they cheered you. Their instructor, who teaches them the discipline and contained beauty of the classics, is in love with a sprite on a bicycle. It is a good giggle, isn't it? A very good giggle! I am returning this bicycle to your brother.

VARINKA. But it is teatime.

BYELINKOV. Today we will not have tea.

VARINKA. But you will have to walk back a mile.

BYELINKOV. I have my galoshes on. [*Gets on the bicycle.*] Varinka, we deserve not to be different. [*Begins to pedal. The bicycle doesn't move.*]

VARINKA. Put the kickstand up.

BYELINKOV. I beg your pardon.

VARINKA [*giggling*]. Byelinkov, to make the bicycle move, you must put the kickstand up.

[BYELINKOV *puts it up and awkwardly falls off the bicycle as it moves.*]

[*Laughing.*] Ha ha ha. My little school mouse. You look so funny! You are the sweetest dearest man in the world. Ha ha ha!

[*Pause.*]

BYELINKOV. Please help me up. I'm afraid my galosh is caught.

VARINKA [*trying not to laugh*]. Your galosh is caught! [*Explodes in laughter again.*] Oh, you are so funny! I do love you so. [*Helps BYELINKOV up.*] You were right, my pet, as always. We don't need heavy cream for tea. The fraction of improvement isn't worth the damage caused by the disruption.

BYELINKOV. Varinka, it is still too early for tea. I must complete two stanzas of my translation before late afternoon. That is my regular schedule.

VARINKA. Then I will watch while you work.

BYELINKOV. No. You had a good giggle. That is enough.

VARINKA. Then while you work I will work too. I will make lists of guests for our wedding.

BYELINKOV. I can concentrate only when I am alone in my house. Please take your bicycle home to your brother.

VARINKA. But I don't want to leave you. You look so sad.

BYELINKOV. I never was a sad man. Don't ever think I was a sad man.

VARINKA. Byelinkov, it's a beautiful day, we are in your garden. The roses are in bloom.

BYELINKOV. Allow me to help you on to your bicycle. [*Takes VARINKA's hand as she gets on the bike.*]

VARINKA. You are such a gentleman. We will be very happy.

BYELINKOV. You are very strong. Good day, Varinka.

[VARINKA *pedals off*. BYELINKOV, *alone in the garden, takes out his pad and rips up the note about the lilac, strews it over the garden, then carefully picks up each piece of paper and places them all in a small envelope as lights fade to black.*]

[1986]

Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing

1. You will probably agree that the scene where Byelinkov gets on the bicycle and pedals but goes nowhere is funny. But *why* is it funny? Can you formulate some sort of theory of comedy based on this episode?
2. At the end of the play Byelinkov tears up the note but then collects the pieces. What do you interpret these actions to mean?