

Hatching



Written by Jean Little

Jean Little has written award-winning novels, poetry, picture books, and an autobiography. She lives in Ontario with her sister. She is blind and writes with a talking computer.

Before

Think about the title of this short story, "Hatching." What do you already know about this word and its possible significance?

During

While reading this story, you may come across references to films, actors, or authors unfamiliar to you. Make a note of these for investigation after the story.

Tip

prepositional phrase: begins with a preposition (e.g., before, on, after), and modifies a noun or verb. The author uses prepositional phrases to vary the sentence structures throughout this selection.

When Grandma called to say she had unexpected company and could not have Harriet stay overnight, her granddaughter was delighted. All Grandma wanted to do was talk about the past. Every other sentence started out, "In MY day ..."

Mum looked at Dad and said, "I'm afraid there's no help for it. We'll have to take her along."

Dad shrugged. "Get your coat, Harriet," he said. "We're leaving."

Harriet scrambled into the car.

"Where are we going?" she demanded.

There was a short silence. Then Dad said, "We're going to a movie and having dinner in Toronto."

Harriet loved movies. Bouncing with bliss, she began listing the current shows she had not yet seen. When her parents did not respond, she leaned as far forward as she could and projected her powerful young voice. "How about ..." she began.

"Hush, dear. It's already decided," Mum said.

Two hours later, a disbelieving Harriet found herself inside a small, old-fashioned theatre staring at *Pride and Prejudice*. It was so old it was in black and white.

"That's Sir Laurence Olivier," her mother murmured.

"Dah!" Harriet grunted, snapping her bubble gum. She could tell there was not going to be any horror in the whole dumb story. Before it ended, she decided the character Darcy was cool, but she did not admit it.

"Did you notice that Aldous Huxley wrote the screenplay?" Mum asked Dad as they went up the aisle.

"I noticed plenty I missed the first time," he said, grinning down at her.

Harriet glowered at them. Why were they behaving like teenagers?

"I thought it was dumb," she lied.

"Dinnertime," her father said.

Harriet begged to go to McDonald's but they drove to a Japanese restaurant. They ordered sushi and tempura even though she told them she hated everything on the menu. She was so hungry she tried some tempura. It was delicious, and she sneaked another piece while making a disgusted face.

"Would you like some dessert, Harriet?" her father asked.

"Whatever," Harriet said, examining her fingernails.

They ordered ice cream. Harriet slurped her Coke while her parents sipped their green tea.

Then, while Dad was getting the keys from the parking lot attendant, Mum turned on her. "Now we have to drive for ages," Harriet was saying. "I hate sitting in the back ..."

"I don't want to hear one more word out of you," Mum said in a voice her daughter did not recognize. "This is our anniversary and we decided to relive our first real date. Ever since we started, you have done your level best to spoil it. Get into that car and keep quiet until we get home."

Huddled in the back seat, Harriet glimpsed herself reflected in the rearview mirror. Unable to face the stodgy, sullen girl glaring back at her, the one who had ruined her mother's day, she ducked her head. After a few minutes, her parents began to sing! Between the front seats, she saw they were holding hands.

Then it hit her.

Before she had been born, before they had been married, her mother and father must have gone to see *Pride and Prejudice*. "Reliving our first date," Mum had said.

She, Harriet, had not existed then. What's more, they had not given her, their future child, a thought. The two of them had not even known she was coming and they had been perfectly happy by themselves, holding hands probably and singing on the way home.

She struggled to picture them, young and in love. She had seen snapshots, after all. But she could not bring them to life. She did her best to imagine their world without herself being part of it. She glimpsed it and, for one moment, was shaken by an unfamiliar mixture of fear and excitement. Then it was gone.

She drew in a deep breath and turned away from her view of the car's interior to look out at the night. As she gazed up at the thousands of glimmering stars, she felt her snug little universe begin to break open and set her free. Silently, she stretched her arms out across the back seat as though she were about to fly.

Her father said something in a low voice and her mother laughed. Harriet bent forward and opened her lips to say she was sorry she had spoiled things earlier. Then, without a word, she leaned back. There was no hurry. They were busy. She could tell them tomorrow.

