

Never (1928) by H.E. Bates

It was afternoon: great clouds stumbled across the sky, In the drowsy, half-dark room the young girl sat in a heap near the window, scarcely moving herself, as if she expected a certain timed happening, such as a visit, sunset, a command... Slowly she would draw the fingers of one hand across the back of the other, in the little hollows between the guides, and move her lips in the same sad, vexed way in which her brows came together, and like this too, her eyes would shift about, from the near, shadowed fields, to the west hills, where the sun had dropped a strip of light, and to the woods between, looking like black scars one minute, and like friendly sanctuaries the next, It was all confused... There was the room, too... The white keys of the piano would now and then exercise a fascination over her which would keep her whole body perfectly still for perhaps a minute. But when this passed, full of hesitation, her fingers would recommence the slow exploration of her hands, and the restlessness took her again.

Yes: It was all confused. She was going away: already she had said a hundred times during the afternoon- "I am going away... I am going away. I can't stand it any longer." But she had made no attempt to go, In this same position, hour after hour had passed her and all she could think was: "Today I'm going away, I'm tired here, I never do anything, It's dead, rotten,"

She said, or thought it all without the slightest trace of exultation and was sometimes even methodical when she began to consider: "What shall I take? The blue dress with the rosette? Yes. What else? what else?" And then it would all begin again: "Today I'm going away. I never do anything."

It was true: she never did anything. In the mornings she got up late, was slow over her breakfast, over everything-her reading, her mending, her eating, her playing the piano, cards in the evening, going to bed. It was all slow-purposely done, to fill up the day. And it was true, day succeeded day and she never did anything different.

But today something was about to happen: no more cards in the evening, every evening the same, with her father declaring: "I never have a decent hand, I thought the ace of trumps had gone! It's too bad!" and no more: "Nellie, it's ten o'clock- Bed!" and the slow unimaginative climb of the stairs. Today she was going away: no one knew, but it was so. She was catching the evening train to London.

"I'm going away. What shall I take? The blue dress with the rosette? What else?"

She crept upstairs with difficulty, her body stiff after sitting. The years she must have sat, figuratively speaking, and grown stiff! And as if in order to secure some violent reaction against it all she threw herself into the packing of her things with a nervous vigor, throwing in the blue dress first and after it a score of things she had just remembered. She fastened her bag: it was not heavy. She counted her money a dozen times. It was all right! It was all right. She was going away!

She descended into the now-dark room for the last time. In the dining room someone was rattling teacups, an unbearable, horribly domestic sound! She wasn't hungry:

she would be in London by eight-eating now meant making her sick. It was easy to wait. The train went at 6.18. She looked it up again: "Elden 6.13, Olde 6.18, London 7.53."



45 She began to play a waltz. It was a slow, dreamy tune, ta-tum, turn, ta-tum, turn, ta-tum, turn, of which the notes slipped out in mournful, sentimental succession. The room was quite dark, she could scarcely see the keys, and into the tune itself kept insinuating: "Elden, 6.13, Olde 6.18," impossible to mistake or forget.

50 As she played on she thought: "I'll never play this waltz again. It has the atmosphere of this room. It's the last time!" The waltz slid dreamily to an end: for a minute she sat in utter silence, the room dark and mysterious, the air of the waltz quite dead, then the teacups rattled again and the thought came back to her: "I'm going away!"

55 She rose and went out quietly. The grass on the roadside moved under the evening wind, sounding like many pairs of hands rubbed softly together. But there was no other sound, her feet were light, no one heard her, and as she went down the road she told herself: "It's going to happen! It's come at last!"

"Elden 6.13. Olde 6.18."

60 Should she go to Elden or Olde? At the crossroads she stood to consider, thinking that if she went to Elden no one would know her. But at Olde someone would doubtless notice her and prattle about it. To Elden, then, not that it mattered. Nothing mattered now. She was going, was as good as gone!

65 Her breast, tremulously warm, began to rise and fall as her excitement increased. She tried to run over the things in her bag and could remember only "the blue dress with the rosette," which she had thrown in first and had since covered over. But it didn't matter. Her money was safe, everything was safe, and with that thought she dropped into a strange quietness, deepening as she went on, in which she had a hundred emotions and convictions. She was never going to strum that waltz again, she had played cards for the last, horrible time, the loneliness, the slowness, the oppression were ended, all ended.

70 "I'm going away!"

75 She felt warm, her body tingled with a light delicious thrill that was like the caress of a soft night-wind. There were no fears now. A certain indignation, approaching fury even, sprang up instead, as she thought: "No one will believe I've gone. But it's true- I'm going at last."

80 Her bag grew heavy. Setting it down in the grass she sat on it for a brief while, in something like her attitude in the dark room during the afternoon, and indeed actually began to rub her gloved fingers over the backs of her hands. A phrase or two of the waltz came back to her... That silly piano! Its bottom G was flat, had always been flat! How ridiculous! She tried to conjure up some sort of vision of London, but it was difficult and in the end she gave way again to the old cry: "I'm going away." And she was pleased more than ever deeply.

85 On the station a single lamp burned, radiating a fitful yellowness that only increased the gloom. And worse, she saw no one and in the cold emptiness traced and retraced her footsteps without the friendly assurance of another sound. In the black distance all the signals showed hard circles of red, looking as if they could never change. But she nevertheless told herself over and over again: "I'm going away-I'm going away." And later: "I hate everyone. I've changed until I hardly know myself."

90 Impatiently she looked for the train. It was strange. For the first time it occurred to her to know the time and she pulled back the sleeve of her coat. Nearly six-thirty! She felt cold. Up the line every signal displayed its red ring, mocking her. "Six-thirty, of course, of course." She tried to be careless. "Of course, it's late, the train is late," but the coldness, in reality her fear, increased rapidly, until she could no longer believe those words.

95 Great clouds, lower and more than ever depressing, floated above her head as she walked back. The wind had a deep note that was sad too. These things had not troubled her before, now they, also, spoke failure and foretold misery and dejection. She had no spirit, it was cold, and she was too tired even to shudder.

100 In the absolutely dark, drowsy room she sat down, telling herself: "This isn't the only day. Some day I shall go. Some day."








She was silent. In the next room they were playing cards and her father suddenly moaned: "I thought the ace had gone." Somebody laughed. Her father's voice came again: "I never have a decent hand! I never have a decent hand! Never!"

105 It was too horrible! She couldn't stand it! She must do something to stop it! It was too much. She began to play the waltz again and the dreamy, sentimental arrangement made her cry.

"This isn't the only day," she reassured herself. "I shall go. Some day!"

110 And again and again as she played the waltz, bent her head and cried, she would tell herself that same thing:
"Some day! Some day!"

Never – Questions

1. Indicate the exposition. Explain why you think that this is the exposition. 
2. Indicate the inciting incident. Explain why you think that this is the inciting incident. 
3. Indicate the climax. Explain why you think that this is the climax. 
4. Indicate the denouement. Explain why you think that this is the denouement. 
5. What kind of setting do we have in the short story 'Never'? 
6. What is the theme? Explain why you think that this is the theme. 
7. Is the character a round or static character, explain. 

Extra question: What type of conflict?

