

ANALYSIS

"The Healthiest Girl in Town" (1951)

Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"For nine-year-old Jessie, 'The Healthiest Girl in Town' (1951), Adams [Colorado] is a place of sickness. Her mother, a practical nurse, has brought Jessie there because she is sure to get enough work among the tuberculars to be able to feed and clothe herself and her daughter. Unlike her contemporaries, Jessie cannot take for granted 'all the sickness and dying' that they live among: 'I did not get used to these people who carried the badge of doom in their pink cheeks as a blind man carries his white stick in his hand.' Stafford re-creates in Jessie the same 'awful, embarrassed pity' she had felt herself when she met little groups of tuberculars walking in the foothills around Boulder and the same guilt she had felt because her own lungs were healthy.

Jessie was alone with her own father when he died of gangrene. She had stood silently, 'blissful with terror,' awaiting her mother's return to the hospital room. When Jessie is forced to be friends with the children of a tubercular family in order that her other's job with the family will remain secure, she is so taunted by the sickly Butler girls that she begins to be ashamed of her own good health. To impress the Butlers, one day she tells them her father died of leprosy. But when she realizes she has been found out, she exultantly shouts: 'He got shot out hunting.... My father was as tall as this room. The district nurse told Ma that I am the healthiest girl in town. Also I have the best teeth.' After thus defying them with her own vitality, she is no longer tortured by the Butlers' self-congratulatory attitude toward their own ailments. She must, nevertheless, remain their companion on command or risk the possibility of her mother's losing her job and Jessie's thereby losing the most important thing in the world to her--her Saturday afternoon dancing lessons.

The limitation on their freedom is a fact with which the young girls in the Adams stories must comply. The orphans' freedom is especially limited. Early in their lives they have experienced the deep emotional loss caused by the death of a parent and the resulting psychological and physical deprivation. Jessie is 'possessed with the facts of dying and of death.' Although she retains the consolation of a loving mother, the two of them must please people like the Butlers in order to live. The distortions in the lives of Emily Vanderpool's alter egos are at least partially explained by missing or disabled parents. Opal Gerlash's mother had died a year before Emily encounters her. Lottie Jump's father is slowly dying of tuberculosis."

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh

Jean Stafford

(Twayne 1985) 23

"In the 1950s Jean Stafford came into her own as a short-story writer. For eight years running she published an average of three stories a year, mostly in *The New Yorker*. A few of the tales venture into territory Stafford had not previously explored.... During these years Stafford's stories won seven O. Henry awards, including first prize in 1955 for 'In the Zoo'; four of them were also selected for inclusion in Martha Foley's annual anthology, *The Best American Short Stories*. The crowning achievement of this period--in fact the zenith of Stafford's career as a writer of short fiction--is a group of seven stories set in Adams [Colorado], Stafford's mythical equivalent of Boulder. They commence with 'The Healthiest Girl in Town,' published in 1951. Next come 'The Violet Rock,' 'In the Zoo,' 'Bad Characters,' 'A Reading Problem,' and 'The Scarlet Letter,' which appeared in 1959. The seventh story, 'Treasures of Use and Beauty,' was never published; it is, however, the equal of the others."

David Roberts

Jean Stafford: A Biography

(Little, Brown 1988) 311-12

"Stafford might have had Stratton Park [Colorado Springs] in mind when she later wrote 'The Healthiest Girl in Town.' The narrator of this story recalls that as an eight-year-old she was at once terrified and fascinated when she encountered pink-cheeked tuberculosis patients in the town, people whose 'death was an interior integument that seemed to lie just under their sun-tanned skin.... Whether she was writing about the stultifying dreariness of life in a small town in the West in 'The Healthiest Girl in Town,' or about the pains and joys of the holiday season in 'Home for Christmas,' or about jealousy and emotional deprivation in *The Catherine Wheel*, her work suggests that happiness is elusive or evanescent....

The oppressive environment of a small town is very much in evidence in Stafford's 'The Healthiest Girl in Town,' which appeared in the *New Yorker* in the spring of 1951. The narrator of this story recalls moving with her mother to the town in the West, whose 'winters were so long and cruel that the sick compared the region to Siberia and their residence there to exile.' When she had first arrived in this town at the age of eight, she could not get used to the sight of the numerous consumptives who had come to this magic mountain hoping to be cured and carrying 'the badge of their doom in their pale cheeks as a blind man carries his white stick in his hand.'

An ironic twist in the story is that the alienation of Jean Stafford's narrator is symbolically represented by the little girl's own blooming health: in a town where illness is the norm, to be healthy is to be set apart from the majority of the inhabitants. It is her own profound isolation that leads the narrator to tell a fib about her father's death to the two rich girls for whom her mother works as a nurse. But if the narrator manages momentarily to get their attention by telling a lie when she confides to them that her father has died of leprosy, fear of exposure soon forces her to confess that she has not told the truth. Although the story ends on a positive note, with the narrator exulting in her own good health, she is no less isolated at the end of the story than she was at the beginning.

Humorous, anecdotal, on the surface less profound perhaps than some of Stafford's other stories, 'The Healthiest Girl in Town' reveals how desperate a young girl is to make an impression on others, so desperate, in fact, that she lies about the circumstances of her own father's death. Focusing on a storyteller who lies, 'The Healthiest Girl in Town' may reflect Stafford's own apprehensions about retelling and perhaps even exaggerating painful events of her life in her fiction in order to write a story that would be of interest to her readers."

Charlotte Margolis Goodman
Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart
(U Texas 1990) 20, 215-16

"'The Healthiest Girl in Town' (1951), Stafford's first Adams story, signaled the shift in tone in an outspoken way. Its very title suggested that she had in mind an ironic commentary on herself and her neurasthenic reputation as well as on her fiction. (After all, Stafford was well known as one of the least healthy girls in town. Describing the literary crowd at a New York party in the late 1940s, the eclectic writer and artist Weldon Kees gave her a starring invalid role: among the guests were 'people you thought were permanently settled in sanatoria, like Jean Stafford, looking more ravaged and nervous than you had thought possible.') She hadn't yet introduced the protagonist who regularly appeared in subsequent stories, Emily Vanderpool. But young Jessie, who told the story in the first person--a rarity for Stafford--was Emily's forerunner, a tomboyish girl who stood out for her vigor in a town heavily populated by tuberculars.

In the story Stafford reversed the usual pose of alienation. This time it was the sturdy exiled from the weak. Arrived in Adams with her mother, a nurse, Jessie felt left out among 'the ailing citizenry.' And the drama took the opposite turn. Rather than retreating to resigned isolation, Jessie in the end triumphantly asserted her independence and affirmed the energetic pursuit of experience: she was healthy and happy to be that way. But she was not granted her zest without first suffering the familiar insecure desire to belong, which Stafford played for all its comic potential. She satirically portrayed illness as an elite social category and developed her character's class anxiety in clever episodes that also perfectly captured the cadences of childhood--and were very funny. Jessie made an incongruous aspiring invalid. She was ridiculed by the spindly, sickly Butler girls (from Boston), who vaunted their invalidism in a succession of well-paced scenes:

'I do not think that Laura and Ada [Butler] despised me more than they did anyone else, but I was the only one they could force to come home with them. "Who wants to be healthy if being healthy means being a cow?" said Ada one day, looking at me as I reached for a third insipid cooky. I withdrew my hand and blushed so hotly in my humiliation that Laura screamed with laughter and cried, "The friendly cow all red and white, we give her biscuits with all our might'."

There was obvious self-mockery involved in the story. After all, Stafford, unlike Jessie, did in a sense succumb to the romantic allure of illness to escape her hickness--and she ended up in a different kind of sanitarium. (Young Jessie, like Stafford from childhood on, pored over medical tomes, studying symptoms in hopes of developing them; but whereas Jessie got over the fixation, Stafford didn't.)"

Ann Hulbert

The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford
(Knopf 1992) 298-99

"The first of the Adams, Colorado, stories, 'The Healthiest Girl in Town' (1951), introduces a child narrator, Jessie, who foreshadows the Emily Vanderpool narrator of 'Bad Characters,' 'a Reading Problem,' and 'The Scarlet letter.' This series of western stories, all told in the first person, represents what Stafford biographer David Roberts calls 'the zenith of Stafford's career as a writer of short fiction.' During the same period when Stafford's stories of adult alienation, such as 'The Echo and the Nemesis' or 'A Country Love Story,' were appearing, she was also writing these stories of youthful loneliness and rebellion tempered by the comic voice of her childhood narrators.

Imaginatively returning to the Boulder of her early years, Jean Stafford vividly re-created it as a fitting backdrop for the escapades of her rebellious young heroines. Her eye for the telling detail and her ear for the rough colloquialisms of westerners combined to evoke a cross-section of humanity worthy of Huck Finn's ride down the river. As David Roberts notes, 'Never had Stafford realized and reinvented a town and its inmates more acutely than she now did Boulder: all of her childhood jaunts to the dump, to the top of the mesa, to the hobo shantytown of the 'Jungle' came back to her, allowing her to flesh out a Colorado town that is like nothing in the history books.'

One of Stafford's fatherless heroines, Jessie tells the story of her relationship to two ailing schoolmates from the East, the Butler girls, who act socially superior to her not only because they are from Massachusetts but also because they are afflicted with a variety of illnesses that, in this town of convalescing tuberculars, marks them for distinction. (The Boulder of Stafford's youth was in fact the site of a sanitarium for recovering tuberculosis patients from the East and the South, and Charlotte Goodman notes that Jean remembered hearing their coughs and muted voices as she and her siblings walked through their neighborhood streets.) Jessie's mother is a nurse for the Butler family, and this fact adds to her feelings of embarrassment and isolation. The Butler girls taunt Jessie for her rustic ways and good health until finally, in a fit of desperation to impress them, she tells the girls her father died of leprosy. Predictably, this story serves not to ingratiate her with the afflicted but to isolate her even more. Ultimately forced to tell the truth, Jessie sees the Butler girls for what they are--weak-eyed, pitiful snobs--and she exults in being the healthiest girl in town.

Thematically, this story is vintage Stafford. An atmosphere of disease and illness, a shadowy father figure, a lonely, socially self-conscious young girl, a rugged West pitted against an effete East--all combine to create the story of a young girl's temporary triumph over a constricting environment. What distinguishes 'The Healthiest Girl in Town' is its portrayal of a hierarchy of illness, a social stratification every bit as rigid as the one Jessie observes in the larger world. The wealthy tuberculars live in the Swiss chalet sanitarium resembling a resort, where they play bridge and mah-jongg and photograph the breathtaking mountain scenery. To Jessie, despite their affliction, they have a glamorous air, for as she reflects, they 'had the solaces of money and of education...and could hire cars to go driving in the mountains.' At the other extreme of the social spectrum are the 'indigent tuberculars,' who live in run-down cottages at the edge of town, 'sputum cups on the windowsills.'

These invalids inspire pity in Jessie, for in their patient, monotonous coughing she hears a profound weariness with life and a resignation to their fate. Between these two extremes are the solid middle-class patients, who live in houses much like those they left behind in Virginia or Connecticut and who are homesick for family and friends. Laura and Ada Butler and their parents belong to this group, and besides their illnesses, what adds to Jessie's feeling of isolation from them is the fact that the wages her mother earns as their nurse pay for Jessie's one luxury--dancing class. Thus, she is doubly alienated by health and by social class. Disease in this story thus becomes simply another class indicator.

Stafford further reinforces Jessie's plight by contrasting the Boston world of the transplanted Butlers to their rugged western surroundings. With the painful self-consciousness of the young, Jessie notes all the trappings of their transplanted eastern way of life, from the Oriental rugs and framed family portraits to the 'Boston accents and adult vocabularies' of these two miniature adults. Mrs. Butler too is clearly out of place in Adams, and as Jessie wryly notes, '[she] had an orthodox aversion to the West, and although almost no one was native to our town, she looked down her pointed nose at the entire population.' Throughout the passages contrasting East and West, Stafford cleverly mixes the levels of diction to emphasize the disparity between Jessie's ordinary childhood world out West and the Butlers' unnaturally adult one back East: rather than normal children's games, 'at the Butlers' house the only divertissements were Authors and I Spy, and it was only once in a blue moon that we played those'; rather than the spirited give and take of childhood talks, Jessie remembers that 'the Butler girls were dauntlessly opinionated and called the tune to me, who supinely took it up.' Inevitably, the Butlers' world temporarily seduces Jessie and causes her to internalize all of their criticisms of what she perceives as her shamelessly healthy, relentlessly ordinary lower-class life.

Finally rejecting the tyrannies of language and social class the Butlers inflict, Jessie admits to lying about her father's leprosy and, in doing so, realizes her power over these pale, sickly girls across whose 'small, old faces there flickered a ray of curiosity to know, perhaps, how the other half lived.' Her breezy goodbye--'so long, kids, see you in church'--represents a final triumph over the 'children' who do not talk but 'converse,' and who call their lunch a 'light collation.' Stafford's editor at the *New Yorker*, Katharine White, had in fact suggested such an ending for the story, believing that Jessie's confession and final acceptance of her good health would strengthen it. The final version of the story reflects these changes.

Jessie's exchanges with the Butler girls clearly reflect Stafford's own profound self-consciousness about her western origins. But the exuberant ending of 'The Healthiest Girl in Town' also reflects another attitude--one Stafford's friend Howard Moss notes in his remembrance of Jean after her death: 'She was a special mixture of the outlandish and the decorous. She paid great respect to the civilized, but something ingrained and Western in her mocked it at the same time. Think of Henry James being brought up in Colorado'."

Mary Ann Wilson
Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1996) 36-38

Michael Hollister (2020)

