ANALYSIS

"Beatrice Trueblood's Story" (1955)

Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"Beatrice Trueblood's experience of marriage drives her into an isolation that, ironically, frees her from what she finally perceives to be the most unbearable and the most characteristic reality of marriage. 'Beatrice Trueblood's Story' (1955) begins starkly: 'When Beatrice Trueblood was in her middle thirties and on the very eye of her second marriage, to a rich and reliable man--when, that is, she was in the prime of life and on the threshold of a rosier phase of it than she had ever known before--she overnight was stricken with total deafness.' The 'story' that leads to her deafness is a history of being traumatized by marital discord.

As a child, she had nightly endured quarrels between her father and her alcoholic mother, who heaped 'atrocious abuse upon each other, using sarcasm, threats, lies--every imaginable expression of loathing and contempt. They swam in their own blood, but it was an ocean that seemed to foster and nourish them; their awful wound were their necessities.' Not convinced that marriage must be like this, she entered her own first marriage determined not to be a party to such scenes. Unfortunately, Tom Trueblood fed on 'rancor and contentiousness.' After seven years of having 'her dignity trampled to death, her honor mutilated,' her only escape was to run away, leaving behind a note.

Beatrice's engagement to the wealthy Marten ten Brink is celebrated in Newport. Her host, Jack Onslager, is the only one of her friends and acquaintances who realizes the tension between Beatrice and her lover, because it is revealed only on her face; it 'was so still it could have been a painting of a face that had been left behind when the woman who owned it had faded from view.' After the two have quarreled the night through, standing below Onslager's window, Onslager overhears the following exchange, which settles Beatrice's fate: to ten Brink's command, 'You mustn't think you can shut your mind to these things.... You can't shut your ears to them,' Beatrice replies, 'I will not hear another word.'

She does not. She escapes from what seem the inescapable quarrels of people who should love each other--and particularly ten Brink's outrageous jealousy of her first marriage--by willing herself deaf. She deliberately isolates herself from a cacophony that has literally become unbearable. She escaped from the psychological bloodbath of her parents' marriage, only to enter a mutilating marriage of her own. She does not receive the paradoxical sustenance her parents and her husband find in abuse. She flees into deafness to prevent a return to yet another degradation. Ironically, however, she is not finally able to break the cycle. Over a year later, after her hearing returns, she marries again. Once again it is Jack Onslager who finds the truth of Beatrice's new life when he overhears her husband say: 'I have told you a thousand times that my life has to be exactly as I want it. So stop these hints. Any dedicated scientist worth his salt is bad-tempered.' Beatrice Trueblood has reentered the only kind of relationship she has ever known."

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh
Jean Stafford
(Twayne 1985) 67-69

"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. These include 'Beatrice Trueblood's Story,' about a woman who becomes totally deaf on the eve of her marriage... 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*."

David Roberts
Jean Stafford: A Biography

(Little, Brown 1988) 311

"It is interesting to note that in Stafford's 'Beatrice Trueblood's Story' a young girl finds herself unable to swallow her food because there is so much friction at the family dinner table. 'Dinner, nightly, was a hideous experience for a child, since the parents were not inhibited by the children or the maid and went on heaping atrocious abuse on each other, using sarcasm, threats, lies--every imaginable expression of loathing and contempt,' Stafford writes of Beatrice Trueblood, observing that, as she listened to her parents' nightly quarrels, Beatrice 'miserably pushed her food about on her plate, never hungry....

'Beatrice Trueblood's Story" is set in Newport [and] it is evident that the groups of wealthy, sophisticated, but often tedious people she describes so wittily and venomously in these stories were types she observed firsthand at the parties she and Oliver [second husband] regularly frequently in Westport... Though she was often heard to make disparaging comments about the 'station wagon set' there, she formed close, enduring friendships with several people, especially with Peter De Vries and his wife Katinka....

Marital discord is...the subject of 'Beatrice Trueblood's Story.' Although Stafford herself never suffered from hysterical deafness, as does her eponymous protagonist, there are many autobiographical references in the story. During her first marriage, Beatrice Trueblood recalls her 'positively hideous childhood' of 'the most humiliating squalor' during which she was subjected to the temper of a father who 'could use his tongue like a bludgeon'....often she imagined herself alone on a desert, far away from any human voice. Soon after Tom Trueblood (the name is perhaps a snide reference to the Brahmin Lowells), she discovered that he was 'obscene,' he was 'raucous,' and he was also unfaithful. Now, about to marry the 'scrumptiously rich' though boring Marten ten Brink, Beatrice begins to quarrel with him as well. Then, suddenly, she loses her hearing, having discovered what a torment their incessant wrangles are to someone like herself who 'shuddered at raised voices and quailed before looks of hate.' When Beatrice decides that she 'cannot and...will not listen to another word,' she suddenly becomes deaf.

Though she ruefully acknowledges that her deafness isolates her from other people, it also frees her from a relationship she has found intolerable. To the biographer, the tale is a fascinating one, for it reflects Stafford's view that her parents' marriage affected her own marital relationships. But the story is also a first-rate work of fiction, as the judges of the O. Henry Prize stories recognized when they included it in their 1956 volume. Stafford's witty depiction of the manners of the upper class in 'Beatrice Trueblood's Story' reminds us once again of her affinities with both Henry James and Edith Wharton, and her use of deafness to symbolize her female protagonist's resistance to a badgering male also links her story to other fictional representations of female resistance to male oppression. In Barbara H. Solomon's anthology of short stories, *The Experience of American Women*, 'Beatrice Trueblood's Story' takes its place among stories by American women writers such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' Mary Wilkins Freeman's 'The Revolt of Mother,' and Tillie Olsen's 'Tell Me a Riddle,' which also dramatize the ways in which a female protagonist reacts to a male who tries to dominate her....

While Westport is not mentioned explicitly in any of these stories, both 'Beatrice Trueblood's Story' and 'Maggie Meriwether's Rich Experience' describe the kind of affluent people that Stafford encountered at elegant parties in Westport.... Although none of the works Stafford published during this period represents a radical departure from what she had written before, her fiction as well as her article in *Holiday* on Damariscotta are very accomplished works that reveal her versatility, her technical virtuosity, her wit, her irony, and the wonderful felicities of her prose style."

Charlotte Margolis Goodman
Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart
(U Texas 1990) 28, 211, 213-14, 244-45

"Her stories reflect an appreciation of the ways in which style can betray its supposed masters. Pretensions don't last long: appearances can be deceiving, but the way people sound tells more than they may want other to know--or than others may want to know. The frightening, rather than amusing, implications of that theme emerged in two roughly contemporaneous but radically different stories, 'Beatrice Trueblood's Story' (1955) and 'The End of a Career' (1956). The farcical tone that marked so many of Stafford's stories of the 1950s was gone here, and so was any trace of her own past experience.

Instead, Stafford seemed to be drawing on the conventions of fable in these stories, which both had a prophetic cast... 'Beatrice Trueblood's Story' can't help looking in retrospect like an uncanny foreshadowing of her personal fate.

Both were, once again, stories of retreat. 'When Beatrice Trueblood was in her middle thirties and on the very eve of her second marriage, to a rich and reliable man--when, that is, she was in the prime of life and on the threshold of a rosier phase of it than she had ever known before,' Stafford began, and then gave the conventional opening the twist of a dark fable, 'she overnight was stricken with total deafness.' Beatrice's affliction, it became clear, was psychosomatic: she desperately wanted to shut out the 'whole menagerie of passions--fire-breathing dragons and bone-crushing serpents and saber-toothed tigers' that seethed within marriages. Stafford once again called on the imagery of St. Teresa's besieged castle.

Beatrice, the ever-patient listener haunted by the 'humiliating, disrobing displays' that she witnessed between her parents and endured with her first husband, did what Pansy Vanneman in 'The Interior Castle' in the end denied herself --sought escape into that inner chamber by willing deafness. But then Beatrice found herself trapped. 'She had not bargained for banishment, she said; she had only wanted a holiday.... And now,' she explained, 'I'm sorry because I'm so lonely here, inside my skull. Not hearing makes one helplessly egocentric.'

Stafford was explicit here as nowhere else about the nature of psychosomatic travails, though the mind's struggle with matter and with other minds was the preoccupation of most of her stories. The whole point of the fable was to look behind fate to find psychological forces working with an incredible, fairy-tale-like potency. Wishes were granted, and the wisher was overwhelmed. Stafford expertly balanced psychological realism and a sense of the mind's fantastic powers. 'My God,' Beatrice exclaimed, incredulous that she had actually chosen deafness, 'the mind is diabolical!... Even in someone as simple as I'."

Ann Hulbert
The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford
(Knopf 1992) 304-05

"Stafford's story 'Beatrice Trueblood's Story' appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1955. The plot concerns Beatrice Trueblood, who, two months before her second marriage, suddenly becomes deaf. As the story unravels, we discover that her parents had been locked into a loveless, abusive marriage--her mother's alcoholism aggravated an already shaky union--and that Beatrice's first marriage had likewise been to an abusive alcoholic. The prospects for her second marriage had seemed ideal: Marten ten Brink was a rich, dependable, boring man who seemed a perfect haven for Beatrice.

But a family friend, Jack Onslager, during a long Newport weekend overhears a violent quarrel between Beatrice and Marten, after which the deafness strikes. Onslager too had often wished for such a temporary respite from the interminable round of social engagements his wealthy status required, and so he is instantly sympathetic toward and curious about Beatrice's affliction. Sent to urge Bea to see a psychoanalyst, Onslager finds out that, in order to flee her fiancé's jealous rantings, she has willed herself deaf--and has inexplicably been granted her wish.

Stafford's original version of this story bore the title 'Patterns,' an ominous and ironic choice, as Ann Hulbert notes, for, 20 years after the story was published, Jean Stafford would become a victim of a cruel aphasia that impaired her speech and effectively silenced this once so witty and garrulous raconteur. Though Stafford could scarcely have foreseen this fate, in retrospect it makes 'Beatrice Trueblood's Story' strangely resonant.

As a study of a psychosomatic retreat from lie amid a brittle East Coast social milieu, Stafford's narrative takes place in an appropriately Whartonian setting, alternating between the lawns of Newport and Bea's sterile New York apartment. As the story begins, Bea's friend Priscilla Onslager is telling the story of Bea's deafness to an assemblage of weekend guests at her Newport home. Ascribing her friend's situation to an untoward 'fate,' Priscilla proceeds to tell the sad story of Bea's 'hideous' childhood, her poverty, her marriage to Tom Trueblood, and the final cruel irony that broke her engagement to the 'scrumptiously rich' Marten ten Brink.

Quick to pass judgment and to assign motives, Priscilla and her audience gossip, speculate, categorize, and otherwise dissect the unhappy woman's life, confident in their smug social superiority that they know her story. When s defrocked clergyman in the group tentatively suggests that Bea broke the engagement because she simply did not want to marry Marten, Priscilla vehemently denies the possibility. Like Jenny Peck's friends in 'I Love Someone,' Beatrice Trueblood's friends construct a narrative about her that fits their version of the world, unaware that the protagonist of their invented drama has already subverted their careful plotting.

Stafford's own dissection of the Newport social milieu continues with her shift to Jack Onslager, Priscilla's husband, who listens to her long-winded tale and wishes that he, like Beatrice, could just close his ears and 'seal himself into an impenetrable silence.' As a sympathetic, distanced male character who views his opulent world with scorn and boredom, Onslager provides a crucial narrative voice in Beatrice Trueblood's story, for he alone appears to know the depth of her despair and he alone wishes to share in her dramatic response. As he listens to his wife, Jack has a flashback to his Gatsbyesque life, which seems from his present vantage point like a 'collossal *tableau vivant* that would vanish at the wave of a magic golden wand.' Admittedly bewitched by the women who glide across the endless ballroom floors, he views their actions and intrigues 'with the accuracy of the uninvolved bystander,' and ironically reflecting his wife's myth-making urge, he too 'devise[s]...fiction[s]' about his friends, seduced by what he sees as the drama of their lives. But Onslager is considerably more perceptive and intuitive than his peers, and it is he who really knows Beatrice Trueblood's story. Amid the romantic unrealities these shallow socialites luxuriate in, Onslager's harshly realistic text emerges as an ironic corrective.

Onslager's flashback ends with his memory of Beatrice walking serenely down the lawn to cocktails before lunch, unaware of her affliction. Locked in her blessed silence, she gradually realizes she cannot hear the aimless conversation of her friends, and with a look Priscilla and the others take to be terror but Jack knows to be 'one of revelation,' she announces, 'I am deaf. That explains it.' As the narrative shifts back to the present and the determined recommendations of Bea's friends that she first see a psychoanalyst and then get a husband, the clergyman articulates the key to Beatrice's behavior in his comments to the sympathetic Jack. It is the power of the will, he believes, that lies behind her predicament--a will that in this case has 'cease[d] to be an agent and become a despot.'

With this summation the story moves to an urban setting in every way the antithesis of Newport's manicured lawns and billowy white sails. Beatrice's prosaic new apartment building in the East Seventies is 'an odious mustardy brown,' surrounded by the sights and sounds of the city: obscenity-spouting gangs of angry boys, sprawling bums on the sidewalk, and women leaning out of windows discussing the unbearable heat. Typical of Stafford, the descriptions of the apartment and its surroundings firmly ground her character in a realistic environment that serves to underscore Beatrice's reduced circumstances and, by contrast, Jack Onslager's involuntary snobbery.

Assaulted by the dim lighting, green plastic cushions, and wheezing elevator, he cannot help but think how much better off his friend would be ensconced in the opulent surroundings of Marten ten Brink's apartment. As this urban scene develops, Bea confesses the truth of her condition, which Jack already knows, admitting her fear and loneliness and her profound dread of confrontation: 'She hated any kind of quarrel, she said...but she cold better endure a howling brawl among vicious hoodlums...a degrading jangle between servant and mistress, than she could the least altercation between a man and a woman whose conjunction had had as its origin tenderness and a concord of desire.'

After her confession, Beatrice tells Jack a considerably muted version of her childhood and previous marriage, all the while reminiscing about the horrifying truth of her parents' ill-fated, destructive relationship--which began her lifelong desire to escape. Stafford's brilliant use of the omniscient point of view allows us to contrast the two narratives at this turning point in the story, as we mentally juxtapose the 'story' Jack is hearing with the reality the author reveals through Bea's reminiscence.

Manuscript versions of this story indicate some confusion in its original version at precisely this point in the narrative. Katharine White's editorial commentary--which Stafford wisely followed--indicates her own confusion as to whether Bea is telling the horrendous truth of her past or merely remembering it. In the

revised version Stafford clarifies with the introductory sentence to this section: 'As Beatrice talked in discreet and general terms and candidly met Jack Onslager's eyes, in another part of her mind she was looking down the shadowy avenue of all the years of her life.'

Another editorial change suggested by White concerns the ending of Stafford's story. In previous versions Stafford had Beatrice marry ten Brink and shortly thereafter die. Instead of this somewhat melodramatic and extreme conclusion, White suggests Bea marry someone else after she regains her hearing, but rather than die, simply live in yet another fated version of her parents' miserable union. This, in fact, is how the story ends: in the last section Bea marries a poor research chemist who, in her friends' deluded eyes, appears to make her deliriously happy.

But a conversation Jack Onslager happens to overhear between the newlyweds, coupled with his earlier perceptive observations of them, confirms his suspicions: 'He himself had never been able to meet Bea's eyes.' In this intimate glimpse of another chapter in Beatrice Trueblood's story, the reader sees a devastating cycle of defeat mirrored in the story's circular plot. Trapped in a text where she seems fated to be eternal victim, Beatrice Trueblood is one of Jean Stafford's memorable women for whom a strategic retreat from life into the interior castle of her mind ultimately proves impossible."

Mary Ann Wilson
Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1996) 70-73

Michael Hollister (2020)