

ANALYSIS

"I Love Someone" (1952)

Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"Forty-three-year-old Jenny Peck, in 'I Love Someone' (1952), has remained a spinster by choice. She lives isolated from the passion of the world, symbolically in her apartment high above the Manhattan streets where young gangsters torture each other, and emotionally in a heart that does not allow itself to feel love. Contrary to the myths her friends have created about her single state, Jenny is honest about herself: 'From childhood I have unfailingly taken all the detours around passion and dedication; or say it this way, I have been a pilgrim without faith, traveling in an anticipation of loss, certain that the grail will have been spirited away by the time I have reached my journey's end. If I did not see in myself this skepticism, this unconditional refusal, this--I admit it--contempt, I would find it degrading that no one has ever proposed marriage to me. I do not wish to refuse but I do not know how to accept. In my unforgivingness, I am more dead now, this evening, than Marigold...'

Moved from her routine by the funeral of her friend Marigold, who has inexplicably committed suicide, Jenny is attracted to the sounds of a gang beating occurring in the area way below her window. She not only looks out and watches the fight to the end, but also attempts to pursue the gang once it leaves: 'to see if I can penetrate at last the mysterious energy that animates everyone in the world except myself.' For once she is breaking from her 'always rational behavior,' which brings her no hope but also no despair. When she reaches the street, she is stopped by a childishly scrawled heart with a 'fading punctuation, I LOVE SOMEONE.' She sees in it a comment on her need for understanding of herself and other human beings. 'As easily it could read, beneath a skull and crossbones, I HATE SOMEONE.' She feels no need to search further. She returns to the well-appointed banquet that is her life, which ironically lacks 'something to eat.'

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh

Jean Stafford

(Twayne 1985) 73

"One of the manuscripts Stafford might have been working on during her stay in the hospital was the short story 'I Love Someone,' which appeared in the first issue of the *Colorado Quarterly* that summer. The story's melancholy narrator, a middle-aged spinster who is living in New York City during the hot summer months, contemplates spending an 'empty evening' alone, for she has failed to provide herself with company or anything interesting to do. Ruminating about the life of her married friends from Fairfield County and especially about Marigold Trask, a wife and mother who had recently committed suicide, she realizes that her married friends, too, were not impervious to suffering.

Nevertheless, as she thinks of her own solitary existence, she concludes bitterly, 'In my ungrudgingness, I am more dead now, this evening, than Marigold Trask in her suburban cemetery,' and she envies the anonymous person who had scrawled I LOVE SOMEONE in chalk in a 'fat, lopsided heart' on the city pavement beneath her window. When the narrator observes two boys fighting in the street below, she is reminded that passion may also lead to violence, but she also acknowledges the sterility of her own solitary life. What is missing 'at this banquet where the appointments are so elegant is something to eat,' she thinks.

Stafford herself was weighing the pros and cons of living alone when she wrote 'I Love Someone.' If she feared that remaining with Oliver in Westport might destroy her, as married life in Fairfield County had destroyed Marigold Trask, contemplating a solitary life in New York City as an alternative to her life with Oliver in Westport terrified her as well. Invited to participate in the Boulder Writer's Conference that summer, she had anxiety about returning there, but she was even more anxious about terminating her marriage as she considered what her life would be like if she divorced Oliver and had to survive on her own

once more. All too vividly she recalled how badly she had fared after she and Robert Lowell had separated from one another."

Charlotte Margolis Goodman
Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart
(U Texas 1990) 228

"The only escape from the cruel complexity of passion, Stafford suggested, was a pure, detached irrationality. Or else a pure, detached rationality, the alternative she explored in the *Colorado Quarterly* the same summer. It was the monologue of a middle-aged spinster surveying her own life after the shocking suicide of a friend. She described with a chilling calmness an existence devoted to the studious avoidance of any involvement beyond herself, of taking anything or giving anything. 'The fact is there has been nothing in my life,' she announced. 'From childhood I have unfailingly taken all the detours around passion and dedication; or say it this way, I have been a pilgrim without faith, traveling in an anticipation of loss, certain that the grail will have been spirited away by the time I have reached my journey's end.' Her state of grace, she acknowledged, was an empty accomplishment: 'I, who never act on impulse, know nearly precisely the outcome of my always rational behavior. It makes me a woman without hope; but since there is no hope there is also no despair.'

She had paid a high price for her placidity and confessed to a curiosity to 'penetrate at last the mysterious energy that animates everyone in the world'--except that she knew what it entailed: to venture forth in search of love was to encounter hate. Once more Stafford set out the alternatives of immersion and retreat, and granted retreat a victory at the same time that she revealed how hollow it was. 'My friends and I have managed my life with the best of taste,' Stafford's narrator declared in closing, 'and all that is lacking at this banquet where the appointments are so elegant is something to eat!'

Ann Hulbert
The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford
(Knopf 1992) 277-78

"Like Mrs. Ramsey in 'The Captain's Gift,' Jenny Peck, a spinster, lives alone, and as the story opens she is mourning the recent suicide of a friend. In a lyrical, meditative first-person voice, Jenny tells her own story of a Jamesian un-lived life, rational, ordered, and sterile. She is conscious, at the age of 43, that she has become a character in her friends' myth-making, a spinster by circumstance, not choice. To explain her situation, they invent a lost love for her, killed perhaps in a war, or wasting away in a tuberculosis sanitarium. They could not face the inescapable fact that becomes clear from Jenny's poignant monologue--that she has chosen this solitary life.

As she confesses, 'From childhood I have unfailingly taken all the detours around passion and dedication; or say it this way, I have been a pilgrim without faith, traveling in an anticipation of loss, certain that the grail will have been spirited away by the time I have reached my journey's end.' She wonders if these friends wish she, without husband and children, had been the one to die rather than their beautiful, charming friend Marigold, dead of an overdose of sleeping pills and leaving a husband and two sons behind.

In a haunting visual image Jenny sees scrawled on the sidewalk--a childishly drawn heart with the cryptic legend 'I Love Someone'--Stafford locates the mystery of identity that lies at the core of her fictional world. Anonymous, plaintive, unknowable, the childish scrawl reveals neither the lover nor the beloved, Jenny ruefully notes. Instead, it expresses the paradox of an intensely personal sentiment couched in clinically impersonal words, a verbal icon summarizing the imaginary life Jenny's friends have constructed for her and in which she wraps herself like a shroud. In a moment of somber realization, Jenny reflects that she is 'more dead now, this evening, than Marigold Trask in her suburban cemetery.' Stripped of her true identity by her well-meaning friends, she is willing to accept her friends' diagnosis of spinsterhood as an 'incurable but unblemishing disease.' To admit the truth to her peers would destroy their illusions.

As Jenny Peck meditates on her friend's suicide, contrasting this irrational act with her own always rational behavior, noise from the courtyard outside intrudes on her reveries: a neighborhood gang of boys is

fighting outside her window. Drawn to the brutal spectacle, which contrasts so strongly with the tomblike silence of her apartment, Jenny watches until one of the boys emerges the bloody victor. In a strange moment of naked communication, he glances up at the curious, staring woman and shrugs his shoulders as if to assert the essential rightness of what he has just done. Shaken out of her placid mood, Jenny rushes outside, propelled by some inner necessity to be in touch with a vital world she rarely allows to touch her. Once she is out on the street, her purpose becomes clear: 'I realize that I want to see the ruffians face to face, both the undefeated and the overthrown, to see if I can penetrate at last the mysterious energy that animates everyone in the world except myself.'

But she fails to reach her destination, stopped abruptly by the crudely scrawled heart, which she imagines could easily proclaim its opposite--a message of hate or of love. As a graphic echo of her own indifferent, anonymous life, the bloated heart becomes Jenny Peck's epiphany, a final tragic self-realization: 'My friends and I have managed my life with the best of taste and all that is lacking at this banquet where the appointments are so elegant is something to eat.'

Jenny Peck is one of many female characters who--single, divorced, widowed--become paradigmatic of the modern condition Jean Stafford so eloquently dissects. Young or old, these women seldom thrive. More often, they retreat into a world of fantasy, as Rose Fabrizio in 'The Bleeding Heart'; denial, as Mrs. Ramsey in 'The Captain's Gift'; or bitter memories, as the sisters from 'In the Zoo.' Even marriage rarely fulfills, as powerful stories like 'A Country Love Story' and 'A Winter's Tale' document. Married women in Stafford's fiction are trapped in loveless unions, driven to create fantasy lovers or doomed to live in a past of bittersweet memories. When the complicating factors of abusive lovers or encroaching old age enter the picture, as in the last two stories of this section--'Beatrice Trueblood's Story' and 'The End of a Career'--the situation takes a decidedly somber turn."

Mary Ann Wilson
Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1996) 68-70

Michael Hollister (2020)