

## ANALYSIS

"The Tea Time of Stouthearted Ladies" (1964)

Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"Two of the three stories set in Adams (Boulder) are specially identifiable as fictional accounts of Stafford's own experiences as a college student there. The dominant images in all three stories, however, are constricting and life-denying. Asked in 1971 about her feelings about the autobiographical Adams stories, Stafford replied: 'No, I don't feel bitter, I feel satiric. I felt much bitterer when I was younger, but now I'm mellowing. (pauses) No, that isn't true. I've no way to test myself, because I've retired to a hermit's life...'

Perhaps Stafford paused because she remembered that two of the most closely rendered and painful stories of that time had been published a very few years previous to her interview: 'The Tea Time of Stouthearted Ladies,' in 1964, and 'The Philosophy Lesson,' in 1968. There is a special clarity and keenness about each of these stories, in which Stafford fictionalized particularly harsh experiences in her own life. Although she had written lightheartedly about her college years in 'Souvenirs of Survival' in 1960, these two stories show the grimness for Stafford of working in her mother's boardinghouse and the outrages of her summer job at the dude ranch as well as the physical and psychological pain of modeling for life-drawing classes at the university.

In 'The Tea Time for Stouthearted Ladies,' Kitty Winstanley lives between her mother's self-delusions about her family's position and Kitty's own harshly realistic perception. Kitty's family--and those of other landladies in Adams--had 'come down in the world,' but she had descended from a stratum so middling, so snobbish, and so uncertain of itself that it had looked on penury as a disgrace....' To compensate, Mrs. Winstanley and her friends have 'straitjacketed the life of the town' with 'maniacal respectability.'

From her bedroom, overhearing her mother and a Mrs. Ewing creating a fantasy of Kitty's summer job at a dude ranch, Kitty visualizes them sitting below in the kitchen in an image that captures both the extreme difficulties of their lives and their careful pretensions: 'Their tumid hands mutilated by work would be clasped loosely on the tulip-patterned oilcloth and their swollen feet would be demurely crossed as they glibly evaluated the silver lining of the cloud beneath which they and their families lived, gasping for every breath.' Kitty listens 'with revulsion, with boredom, pity, outrage...' She knows the realities that the women do not dare mention to each other because otherwise they could not bear their shame. Kitty has for years heard the bitter whispers from her parents' bedroom, sometimes lasting all night. As a result, she hates her father for his ineffectualness and her mother for her injustice. Most terribly, however, she hates herself 'for hating in them what they could not help.'

The landladies console themselves with the social achievements of the well-to-do student boarders and fool themselves with fantasies about the drudgery and embarrassments of the lives of their own children, who were, as Kitty well understood, 'exhausted from classes and study and part-time jobs and perpetually starved for status (they loathed the School of Hard Knocks, they hated being Barbarians) and clothes (a good deal of the time they were not warm) and fun.' Especially humiliating to the sons and daughters was that at home they became maids or footmen to their fellow students who boarded at their mothers' houses.

While Mrs. Winstanley's fantasy about Kitty's summers at the dude ranch is far from the truth of her experience there, Kitty years for the time she can return. At the Caribou, she is released from the humiliation of her life at home. As a servant there, she enjoys 'a servant's prerogative of keeping her distance...' There she knows no one in any other context: 'Friendless, silent, long and exasperating, the summers, indeed, were no holiday. But she lived them in pride and without woe...' Kitty survives by refusing the hypocrisy that sustains her mother and her friends. She maintains her integrity by looking reality straight in the face and acknowledging the irony that life forces upon her."

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh  
*The Tea Time of Stouthearted Ladies*  
(Twayne 1985) 39-40

"The Tea Time of Stouthearted Ladies"--salvaged from her dead novel 'In the Snowfall'--appeared in the *Kenyon Review*... It recaptures Stafford's boredom as a college student listening to her mother and the neighbor lady exchange boardinghouse gossip."

David Roberts  
*Jean Stafford: A Biography*  
(Little, Brown 1988) 352

"The summer before she began college, Stafford worked as a chambermaid and waitress at a dude ranch called Lodge of Pines in the nearby town of Ward. Her experience at this dude ranch served as the basis for her short story 'The Tea Time of Stouthearted Ladies,' a story she might have intended to incorporate into her unpublished autobiographical novel, *The Parliament of Women*. The protagonist of this story, Kitty Winstanley, has the same background and outlook as two other fictional alter egos of Jean Stafford, Joyce Bartholomew in *In the Snowfall* and Cora Savage in *The Parliament of Women*. Kitty's mother, having grown up in Missouri as Jean Stafford's own mother had done, now runs a boardinghouse. Burying her 'woe and bile' during the day, Mrs. Winstanley invents genteel fictions to cover up the fact that her husband is unemployed and that as a result she must support the family herself.

At night, however, in loud whispers that her daughter Kitty cannot help but overhear, she reproaches Kitty's father for having failed to earn a living. Mrs. Winstanley tries to persuade herself, the other landladies in the neighborhood, and--most of all--her daughter Kitty that the ranch where Kitty is employed for the summer, with its swimming pool, its square dances, and its clientele of affluent people from the East, is a wonderful place to work. Kitty, however, is aware that the hired help live not in the lodge but in what had once been a filthy chicken coop; perform exhausting, tedious chores; are patronized by the rich 'dudes' from the East who are guests; and are ordered about by the two hard-drinking women who operate the ranch. She thinks of her summer there as 'friendless, silent, long, and exasperating'; nevertheless, being away from home allows her to avoid the spectacle of her defeated father and to escape her mother's 'palliative fibs' about their sorry circumstances. Furthermore, in the mountains she enjoys the nonhuman world of nature, watching with pleasure the eagles as they soar and bank across the cloudless sky and the saddle horses grazing in the meadow at dusk....

'The Tea Time for Stouthearted Ladies' is a vintage Stafford story about the experiences of a young woman who spends the summer working on a Colorado dude ranch. The story was published in the one hundredth issue of the *Kenyon Review*, which was touted as a 'family reunion' of the early writers for the journal, including Robert Lowell, Peter Taylor, Robert Penn Warren, Randall Jarrell, and John Berryman, in addition to Jean Stafford, and was dedicated to its founder, John Crowe Ransom. For Stafford, the publication of this story in the *Kenyon Review* no doubt was a mixed blessing. Although it is one of her most memorable and moving stories, it deals with important autobiographical material that she might have intended to incorporate into *The Parliament of Women*. Once 'The Tea Time of Stouthearted Ladies' had been published in the *Kenyon Review*, however, Stafford was no longer free to incorporate this episode in its present form into her novel unless she wanted to run the risk of repeating herself."

Charlotte Margolis Goodman  
*Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart*  
(U Texas 1990) 30-31, 285-86

"The Tea Time of Stouthearted Ladies' [is] a sketch that kept finding a place in various unfinished manuscripts... Stafford quietly unearthed it to contribute to a commemorative issue of the *Kenyon Review*, in honor of John Crowe Ransom, and it was a telling revisiting of the past. The story drew quite directly from her life. It was a rare portrait based on Stafford's mother, the self-deluding optimist, whose refusal to face the dismal facts of her family's pinched, provincial life inspired the protagonist, her daughter, to dreams of escape from Colorado, 'from the spectacle of her eaten father than from her mother's bright-eyed lies, from all the maniacal respectability with which the landladies strait-jacketed the life of the town.' A

tour de force of descriptive detail and colloquial dialogue, the story showed Stafford at a distance from her autobiographical character, leavening her brutal bitterness with comedy. Stafford downplayed the resuscitation of her story, neglecting even to mention it to her agent, perhaps because it was an all-too-vivid reminder of her failures with her larger project--and because its publication was presided over by the spirit of Ransom, who had predicted great things for her."

Ann Hulbert  
*The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford*  
(Knopf 1992) 327

"In 1964, Jean Stafford wrote another Adams [Colorado] story, 'The Tea Time of Stouthearted Ladies.' By the 1960s Stafford was finding it more and more difficult to write fiction, and her projected autobiographical novel *The Parliament of Women* continued to elude her. Whether because of a happy but artistically unproductive marriage to her third husband, journalist A.J. Liebling, or her need for the money journalistic pieces brought, Stafford turned increasingly to other forms of writing during the last two decades of her life. Nevertheless, memories of her childhood and adolescence continued to haunt her, as this 1964 story shows.

Intended to be a part of her unpublished novel *In the Snowfall*, about her college years, 'The Tea Time of Stouthearted Ladies' humorously treats one of Stafford's painful memories through its comically ironic tone. The stouthearted ladies of the title are the deluded mother of hardworking students like Kitty Winstanley--mothers who, like Stafford's own, run boardinghouses for the wealthy college students in Adams. Their husbands pitiful and out of work because of the Great Depression, these women resolutely refuse to face reality. Their kitchen table conversation--a parodic version of a Boston tea--concerns not the exhausting lives of their own children but the lives and loves of their wealthy boarders, who provide them with the vicarious excitement they lack. They romanticize their children's summer jobs, thereby exonerating themselves of guilt as they try to believe their children are leading the good life.

To reinforce this discrepancy between fact and fiction, Stafford's story alternates between two simultaneous narratives: the idealistic musing of Kitty's mother and the other landladies juxtaposed with Kitty's own realistic versions of how she spends her summer vacation: 'A little work never hurt anyone, the landladies assured each other, and if it was not Mrs. Winstanley yearning to trade places with Kitty in the debonair life she led as waitress and chambermaid at the Caribou Ranch, it was Mrs. Ewing, similarly self-hypnotized, enumerating the advantages that accrued to her asthmatic son in nightly setting up pins in a bowling alley.' The lovely, cool lake Kitty's mother imagines her swimming in is actually icy and full of mud puppies; the sleek horses available for the summer workers are 'one spooked and spavined old cow pony the kitchen help could ride'; the lively town of Caribou is really only 'a handful of backward people liv[ing] in battered cabins in the shadows of the ore dumps.'

Even the Swiss boarding school--educated Mrs. Bell and Miss Skeen, who own the ranch, though presumed by Kitty's mother to be cultured and selective in their boarders, are secret alcoholics whose nonalcoholic rules force the dudes to buy bootleg liquor. Their hypocrisy, in turn, gives Kitty another source of income, for as we learn near the end of the story, she is their go-between with the bootlegger: 'Kitty kept her trysts with Ratty (his eyes were feral and his twitching nose was criminal) and gave him handfuls of money and orders for bottles of atrocious brown booze and demijohns of Dago Red.... Kitty had no taste for this assignment of hers--she was not an adventurous girl--but she was generously tipped by the dudes for running their shady errands and for that reason she put up with the risks of it--being fired, being caught by the revenue officers and charged with collusion.'

Stafford herself had worked at a dude ranch and at her mother's boardinghouse during the Great Depression--experiences that she kept trying to dramatize in her unpublished novel manuscripts *In the Snowfall* and *The Parliament of Women*, and that she later documents in her 1960 article 'Souvenirs of Survival.' 'The Tea Time of Stouthearted Ladies' finally brings to light these painful memories of her mother--whom she rarely treated in fiction--and herself as a socially inferior, brainy girl from the West. Notably lacking from this story is any real compassion for the equally victimized mothers, who are forced to live in a dream world merely to survive. In a moment of self-revelation early in the story, Kitty reflects on her pathetic, out-of-work father and her alternately despondent and cheerful mother, but most of all she

realizes 'she hated herself for hating in them what they could not help.' The coldness Kitty feels toward these similarly helpless victims who happen to be her parents might be explained by a comment Stafford made in a 1959 lecture at the University of North Carolina Arts Festival. In it she deplores writing whose purpose is to purge the writer of some past guilt and maintains that 'if you write of yourself, you should write with compassion and lay the blame for setting the house on fire on somebody else.' This ironic distance came to be a hallmark of Jean Stafford's writing--a literary as well as a psychological device that would characterize her best fiction."

Mary Ann Wilson  
*Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction*  
(Twayne 1996) 49-50

Michael Hollister (2020)