

Mary Hannah McPhail-Edwards

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: Calera High School, Calera, AL

Educator: Lee Ann McPhail

Category: Short Story

Burnover District

Burnover District

"This town," said Otis, "Is as dry as the dust from whence we came."

"That's okay," said Louise. "I don't drink."

Otis looked at her, still clad in her pale pink burial dress. She had pink, freckled cheeks and a button nose, and her hair, red with strands of gold, fell in a tangled sheet down her back. "Ah, you don't," he said apologetically. "I can see that you don't." Louise was not listening. Instead, she looked at the tall white trees, so tall that their tops disappeared into a blurry, indistinct mass that served as a sky. There were no visible branches, but silvery leaves still fell to the ground, piling about the storm drains.

"Does it rain here often?" she said.

"Only when it suits the mood," said Otis, "Which it hardly ever does. Only when people fall to discussing the nature of mortality, the human condition, that sort of thing. They call it Asphodel." He pointed to the storm drains, and Louise saw that the leaves were, in fact, damp white flowers.

"Lilies," Louise said fondly.

"No, asphodel. Don't you listen?"

"Hardly," said Louise. "But asphodel is a sort of lily."

"Death has changed, yes," said Otis, as if she had not spoken. "They say that it's one of the only things that stays the same, but my father died in a logging accident and I drove into a tree. The steering column went through my chest. Tell me that it's the same honor, the same dignity."

"I remember now," said Louise. She had been trying to gather flowers as he spoke, but they were too wet to hold. "The meadow of Asphodel. *The Odyssey*."

"Yes, yes," said Otis, coming back to himself. "There's a drug store with a soda fountain, two straws in a strawberry milkshake and all that if it's what you're into."

"It's not," said Louise.

"The drive-in movies," he continued. "There's been an Audrey Hepburn film stuck in the projector for weeks, and it'll be there until next Tuesday. That's the earliest a repairman can come out."

"How do you get repairmen?" asked Louise.

"The same way everyone else does," said Otis. "Of course, at this time of night, everyone would be in the Burnover District. You got in awfully late, you know, for such a little girl."

"I didn't exactly plan it," said Louise. A blush tried to rise to her cheeks and was fought back down by a grayish pallor. "And I'm not so little. What's the Burnover District?"

"The Burnover District is where you go when you're feeling good," said Otis. "I'd hardly think you would enjoy it."

"I am feeling good," Louise lied good-naturedly. She was surprised, as she said it, to realize that she wasn't lying at all. "This is beautiful. There's nowhere better than this." She looked at an apartment building that seemed to be as tall and straight as the trees, painted the same egg-shell color. Each window had curtains drawn over it in varying shades of grey and blue.

"That's what this place does to you," said Otis. "But you must never believe it. There are so many places that are better than this."

"What do you mean?" laughed Louise. "There's no trash in the streets, no graffiti. These trees are being preserved, not chopped down to build shopping malls. The sanitation alone is unreal."

"Exactly," said Otis. "It's unreal. Not real. Any place is better than here. A muddy campground, shambling tenement buildings, suburban neighborhoods where all the grass is the same height. All those places are real."

“Real isn’t as good as all that,” said Louise.

“No?” said Otis. For a moment, his face aged and wrinkled like tissue paper. “Isn’t this beautiful?” he rasped.

“No!” said Louise. She cringed to the edge of the sidewalk. “No, it isn’t.”

Otis blinked back, like a slide changing on a projector, but Louise imagined that she could still see sun spots on his hands and the capacity in his eyes for what she had to admit was an ugly sort of beauty. “No, it isn’t,” he repeated sadly. “It’s not real, but it could’ve been. Do you really want to know what the Burnover District is? First, everyone puts on a mask, but everyone still knows who everyone else is. You know how these things are.” Louise nodded. “Then the costumes. The ladies put on ball gowns, flapper dresses, bell bottoms. The men put on tuxedos and muscle shirts and capes. Everyone tangoes with everyone else. There’s no one standing by the wall who doesn’t know how to dance. It’s all miraculously choreographed.”

“Then someone spots the piano,” Otis continued, “And remembers their childhood piano lessons. They are filled with an overwhelming desire to play Chopsticks, so they do. Everyone who has ever sort of known how to play piano catches the bug, and they all play Chopsticks, one after the other. This is fascinating, and a few people even know how to play Hot Cross Buns, which has some of the more delicate ladies almost in convulsions.”

“You’re not telling the truth,” said Louise faintly.

“There is one and only one person in the bar who truly knows how to play the piano,” Otis shouted to the empty street. “He plays some unidentified piece which reminds everyone of their youth, lost love, and the family hearth. No one is resentful of this talent, nor are they surprised. It is exactly the right thing.”

“Stop it,” said Louise.

“It is always exactly the right thing,” said Otis, becoming louder. “Do you know what? I want the engine on my lawn mower to burn out. I want to go to a restaurant I love and get terrible service. I want to buy a nice coat and cut off all the tags, only to discover that I don’t really like it that much after all. I want to get sick enough to be miserable but not sick enough to be at all interesting or get out of any of my prior commitments. I want to have something stolen off of my balcony and go around for months wondering how anyone managed to get up there. I want to dislike someone for no reason. I want to be unhappy. Don’t you understand?”

“No,” said Louise, now really lying.

“Of course not. I’ve never done anything really remarkable or really awful, and neither have you.”

“You don’t know.”

“I do, don’t I? I don’t want to. You have no idea how much I want you to be a complete mystery to me. Do you know what I’m going to do? I’m going to go into those trees, and I’m not coming back until I’m a person worth knowing. If I have to die every day, I will not die alive.” He turned around and tramped into the bleak forest. From beyond the trees, there were sounds of carnival music and car horns honking, damp wood briefly crackling on a fire and then petering out, the forlorn puff of a train pulling into a station two hours overdue, the yowling of two tomcats fighting in a back alley, an entire tray of dishes breaking on the kitchen floor, and above it all, as all the voices of the Earth shouted, “Why do these things happen?”, one voice sounded almost *happy* about it.

Louise watched him go. “What a strange man,” she said, and headed for the Burnover District.