“Adjo Means Good-bye”

By Carrie A. Young

It has been a long time since I knew Marget Swenson. How the years have rushed by! I was a child when I knew her, and now I myself have children. The circle keeps turning, keeps coming full.

The mind loses many things as it matures, but I never lost Marget; she has remained with me, like the first love and the first hurt. The mind does not lose what is meaningful to one’s existence. Marget was both my first love and first hurt. I met her when she joined our sixth-grade class.

She stood before the class holding tightly to the teacher’s hand, her blue, frightened eyes sweeping back and forth across the room until they came to rest on my face. From that very first day we became friends. Marget, just fresh from Sweden, and me, a sixth-generation American. We were both rather shy and quiet and perhaps even lonely, and that’s why we took to each other. She spoke very little English, but somehow we managed to understand each other. We visited one another at home practically every day. My young life had suddenly become deliciously complete. I had a dear friend.

Sometimes we talked and laughed on the top of the big, dazzling green hill close to the school. We had so much to talk about; so many things were new to her. She asked a thousand questions and I—I, filled to bursting with pride that it was from me that she wished to learn, responded eagerly and with excesses of superlatives.

Now, sometimes, when I drive my children to school and watch them race up the walks to the doors, I wonder what lies ahead in the momentary darkness of the hall corridors, and think of Marget once more. I think of how she came out of a dark corridor one day, the day she really looked at my brother when she was visiting me. I saw her following him with new eyes, puzzled eyes, and a strange fear gripped me. “Your brother,” she whispered to me, “is African?”

I was a little surprised and a little hurt. Didn’t we cheer for Tarzan when we went to the movies? Were not the Africans always frightened and cowardly? But I answered, “No silly,” and I continued to wait.

“He looks different from you.”

“He should,” I said, managing to laugh. My brother was darker than anyone else in the family. “He’s a boy and I’m a girl. But we’re both Negro, of course.”

She opened her mouth to say something else, then closed it and the fear slipped away.

Marget lived up on the hill. That was the place where there were many large and pretty houses. I suppose it was only in passing that I knew only white people lived there. Whenever I visited, Marget’s mother put up a table in their garden, and Marget and I had milk and kaka, a kind of cake. Mrs. Swenson loved to see me eat. She was a large, round woman, with deep blue eyes and very red cheeks. Marget, though much smaller, of course, looked quite like her. We did our homework after we had the cake and milk, compositions or story reading. When we finished, Mrs. Swenson hugged me close and I knew I was loved in that home. A child knows when it is loved or only tolerated. But I was loved. Mrs. Swenson thanked me with a thick, Swedish accent for helping Marget.

Marget and I had so much fun with words, and there were times when we sat for hours in my garden or hers, or on the hilltop, surrounded by grass and perhaps the smell of the suppers being prepared for our fathers still at work downtown. Her words were Swedish, mine, English. We were surprised how much alike many of them sounded, and we laughed at the way each of us slid our tongues over the unfamiliar words. I learned the Swedish equivalents of mother, father, house, hello, friend, and good-bye.

One day Marget and I raced out of school as soon as the ringing bell released us. We sped down the hill, flashed over gray concrete walks and green lawns dotted with dandelions and scattered daisies, our patent leather buckled shoes slapping a merry tattoo as we went, our long stockings tumbling down our legs. We were going to Marget’s to plan her birthday party. Such important business for ten-year-olds!

Eventually, after much planning and waiting, the day of the party came. I put on my pink organdy dress with the big berth collar, and a new pair of patent leather shoes that tortured my feet unbearably. Skipping up the hill to Marget’s I stopped at a lawn which looked deserted. I set down my gift and began to pick the wild flowers that were growing there. Suddenly, from out of nowhere, an old man appeared. “What do you think you’re doing, pulling up my flowers?” he shouted. Once again I held myself tightly against the fear, awaiting that awful thing that I felt must come. “I wanted to take them to my friend,” I explained. “She’s having a birthday today.”

The old man’s eyes began to twinkle. “She is, is she? Well, you just wait a minute, young lady.” He went away and came back with garden shears and cut a handful and then an armful of flowers, and with a smile sent me on my way. My childish fears had been ambushed by a kindness.

I arrived at the party early and Marget and I whizzed around, putting the finishing touches on the decorations. There were hardly enough vases for all the flowers the old man had given me. Some fifteen minutes later the doorbell rang and Marget ran around to the front, saying, “Oh, here they come!”

But it was Mary Ann, another girl from our class, and she was alone. She put her present for Marget on the table and the three of us talked. Occasionally, Marget got up and went around to the front to see who had come unheralded by the doorbell. No one.

“I wonder what’s taking them so long?” Mary Ann asked.

Growing more upset by the minute, Marget answers, “Maybe they didn’t remember what time the party was.”

How does a child of ten describe a sense of foreboding, the feeling that the bad things have happened because of herself? I sat silently, waiting.

When it got to be after five, Mrs. Swenson called Marget inside; she was there for a long time, and when she came out, she looked very, very sad. “My mother does not think they are coming,” she said.

“Why not?” Mary Ann blurted.

“Betty Hatcher’s mother was here last night and she talked a long time with my mother. I thought it was about the party. Mother kept saying, ‘Yes, yes, she is coming.'”

I took Marget’s hand. “Maybe they were talking about me,” I said. Oh! I remember so painfully today how I wanted her quick and positive denial to that thrust of mine into darkness where I knew something alive was lurking. Although she did it quite casually, I was aware that Marget was trying to slip her hand from mine, as though she might have had the same thought I had voiced aloud. I opened my hand and let her go. “Don’t be silly,” she said.

No one came. The three of us sat in the middle rows and rows of flowers and ate our ice cream and cake. Our pretty dresses, ribbons, and shoes were dejected blobs of color. It was as if the world had swung out around us and gone past, leaving us whole, but in some way indelibly stamped forever.

It was different between Marget and me after her birthday. She stopped coming to my house, and when at school I asked her when she would, she looked as though she would cry. She had to do something for her mother, was her unvarying excuse. So, one day, I went to her house, climbed up the hill where the old man had picked the flowers, and a brooding, restless thing grew within me at every step, almost a knowing. I had not, after all, been invited to Marget’s. My throat grew dry and I thought about turning back, and for the first time the hill and all the homes looked alien, even threatening to me.

Marget almost jumped when she opened the door. She stared at me in shock. Then, quickly, in a voice I’d never heard before, she said, “My mother says you can’t come to my house anymore.”

I opened my mouth, and closed it without speaking. The awful thing had come; the knowing was confirmed. Marget, crying, closed the door in my face. When I turned to go down the stairs and back down the hill to my house, my eyes, too, were filled with tears. No one had to tell me that the awful thing had come because Marget was white and I was not. I just knew it deep within myself. I guess I expected it to happen. It was only a question of when.

June. School was coming to a close. Those days brimmed with strange, uncomfortable moments when Marget and I looked at each other and our eyes darted quickly away. We were little pawns, one white, one colored, in a game over which we had no control then. We did not speak to each other at all.

On the last day of school, I screwed up a strange and reckless courage and took my autograph book to where Marget was sitting. I handed it to her. She hesitated, then took it, and without looking up, wrote words I don’t remember now; they were quite common words, the kind everyone was writing in everyone else’s book. I waited. Slowly, she passed her book to me and in it I wrote with a slow, firm hand some of the words she had taught me. I wrote Adjo min van. Goodbye, my friend. I released her, let her go, told her not to worry; told her that I no longer needed her. Adjo.

Whenever I think of Marget now, and I do at the most surprising times, I wonder if she ever thinks of me, if she is married and has children, and I wonder if she has become a queen by now, instead of a pawn.

**Responding to the Story**

*Directions: for full credit, answer each of the questions below in their entirety—some questions have multiple parts to them.*

1. Explain why Marget was the narrator’s “first love and first hurt.” (RL 6)

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2. What does the author mean when she says of Marget, “I wonder if she ever thinks of me...and I wonder if she has become a queen by now, instead of a pawn”? (RL 4)

Exploring the Author’s Craft

The narrator implies from the beginning that this story will have an unhappy ending. Trace the steps that move this story from happiness to sadness. The technique of providing clues to future action is called foreshadowing. Does the foreshadowing in this story spoil the ending? Why or why not? (RL 5)

Writing Workshop: Choose one of the following options.

1. Does prejudice still exist in our society today? Write an essay in which you explain your opinion; support your position with anecdotes of personal experiences. (W 2)
2. Write a diary entry from Marget’s point of view after she tells the narrator that she can’t come to Marget’s house anymore. (W 3)