“He’ll be fine,” she’d replied, not understanding, speaking instead to the other fear. “Don’t we have a tradition of bastards?”

He was fine, a classically ugly healthy little boy with that shock of white hair that marked so many of us. But afterward, it was that bad year with my sister down with pleurisy, then cystitis, and no work, no money, having to move back home with my cold-eyed stepfather. I would come home to see her, from the woman I could not admit I’d been with, and take my infinitely fragile nephew and hold him, rocking him, rocking myself.

One night I came home to screaming—the baby, my sister, no one else there. She was standing by the crib, bent over, screaming red-faced, “Shut up! Shut up!” With each word her fist slammed the mattress fanning the baby’s ear.

“Don’t!” I grabbed her, pulling her back, doing it as gently as I could so I wouldn’t break the stitches from her operation. She had her other arm clamped across her abdomen and couldn’t fight me at all. She just kept shrieking.

“That little bastard just screams and screams. That little bastard. I’ll kill him.”

Then the words seeped in and she looked at me while her son kept crying and kicking his feet. By his head the mattress still showed the impact of her fist.

“Oh no,” she moaned, “I wasn’t going to be like that. I always promised myself.” She started to cry, holding her belly and sobbing. “We aren’t no different. We aren’t no different.”

Jesse wraps her arm around my stomach, presses her belly into my back. I relax against her. “You sure you can’t have children?” she asks. “I sure would like to see what your kids would turn out to be like.”

I stiffen, say, “I can’t have children. I’ve never wanted children.”

“Still,” she says, “you’re so good with children, so gentle.”

I think of all the times my hands have curled into fists, when I have just barely held on. I open my mouth, close it, can’t speak. What could I say now? All the times I have not spoken before, all the things I just could not tell her, the shame, the self-hatred, the fear; all of that hangs between us now—a wall I cannot tear down.

I would like to turn around and talk to her, tell her... “I’ve got a dust river in my head, a river of names endlessly repeating. That dirty water rises in me, all those children screaming out their lives in my memory, and I become someone else, someone I have tried so hard not to be.”

But I don’t say anything, and I know, as surely as I know I will never have a child, that by not speaking I am condemning us, that I cannot go on loving you and hating you for your fairy-tale life, for not asking about what you have no reason to imagine, for that soft-chinned innocence I love.

Jesse puts her hands behind my neck, smiles and says, “You tell the funniest stories.”

I put my hands behind her back, feeling the ridges of my knuckles pulsing.

“Yeah,” I tell her. “But I lie.”  

(1988)

MARGARET ATWOOD

Margaret Atwood, born in 1939 and raised in Ontario and Quebec, has published more than thirty acclaimed novels and collections of poems, essays, and stories. An important critic, she has helped define contemporary Canadian literature and has a distinguished reputation among feminist writers in North America and abroad. Her novels include Surfacing (1972); The Handmaid’s Tale (1986), which received Canada’s Governor General’s Award; Cat’s Eye (1989); The Robber Bride (1993); Alias Grace (1996), which won the Giller Prize in Canada; the Booker Prize-winning The Blind Assassin (2000); and Oryx and Crake (2003). Atwood’s story collections include Dancing Girls and Other Stories (1982), Bluebeard’s Egg and Other Stories (1983), Wilderness Tips and Other Stories (1991), and Good Bones and Simple Murders (1994). Atwood has said about her experimental story “Happy Endings,” “I did not know what sort of creature it was. It was not a poem, a short story, or a prose poem. It was not quite a condensation, a commentary, a questionnaire, and it missed being a parable, a proverb, a paradox. It was a mutation. Writing it gave me a sense of furtive glee, like scribbling anonymously on a wall with no one looking... It was a little disappointing to learn that other people had a name for such aberrations [metafiction], and had already made up the rules.”

Happy Endings

John and Mary meet.  
What happens next?  
If you want a happy ending, try A.
A
John and Mary fall in love and get married. They both have worthwhile and remunerative jobs which they find stimulating and challenging. They buy a charming house. Real estate values go up. Eventually, when they can afford live-in help, they have two children, to whom they are devoted. The children turn out well. John and Mary have a stimulating and challenging sex life and worthwhile friends. They go on fun vacations together. They retire. They both have hobbies which they find stimulating and challenging. Eventually they die. This is the end of the story.

B
Mary falls in love with John but John doesn't fall in love with Mary. He merely uses her body for selfish pleasure and ego gratification of a tepid kind. He comes to her apartment twice a week and she cooks him dinner, you'll notice that he doesn't even consider her worth the price of a dinner out, and after he's eaten the dinner he fucks her and after that he falls asleep, while she does the dishes so he won't think she's untidy, having all those dirty dishes lying around, and puts on fresh lipstick so she'll look good when he wakes up, but when he wakes up he doesn't even notice, he puts on his socks and his shorts and his pants and his shirt and his tie and his shoes, the reverse order from the one in which he took them off. He doesn't take off Mary's clothes, she takes them off herself, she acts as if she's dying for it every time, not because she likes sex exactly, she doesn't, but she wants John to think she does because if they do it often enough surely he'll get used to her, he'll come to depend on her and they will get married, but John goes out the door with hardly so much as a good-night and three days later he turns up at six o'clock and they do the whole thing over again.

Mary gets run-down. Crying is bad for your face, everyone knows that and so does Mary but she can't stop. People at work notice. Her friends tell her John is a rat, a pig, a dog, he isn't good enough for her, but she can't believe it. Inside John, she thinks, is another John, who is much nicer. This other John will emerge like a butterfly from a cocoon, a Jack from a box, a pit from a prune, if the first John is only squeezed enough.

One evening John complains about the food. He has never complained about the food before. Mary collects all the sleeping pills and aspirins she can find, and takes them and a half a bottle of sherry. You can see what kind of a woman she is by the fact that it's not even whiskey. She leaves a note for John. She hopes he'll discover her and get her to the hospital in time and repent and then they can get married, but this fails to happen and she dies.

John marries Madge and everything continues as in A.

C
John, who is an older man, falls in love with Mary, and Mary, who is only twenty-two, feels sorry for him because he's worried about his hair falling out. She sleeps with him even though she's not in love with him. She met him at work. She's in love with someone called James, who is twenty-two also and not yet ready to settle down.

John on the contrary settled down long ago: this is what is bothering him. John has a steady, respectable job and is getting ahead in his field, but Mary isn't impressed by him, she's impressed by James, who has a motorcycle and a fabulous record collection. But James is often away on his motorcycle, being free. Freedom isn't the same for girls, so in the meantime Mary spends Thursday evenings with John. Thursdays are the only days John can get away.

John is married to a woman called Madge and they have two children, a charming house which they bought just before the real estate values went up, and hobbies which they find stimulating and challenging, when they have the time. John tells Mary how important she is to him, but of course, he can't leave his wife because a commitment is a commitment. He goes on about this more than is necessary and Mary finds it boring, but older men can keep it up longer so on the whole she has a fairly good time.

One day James breezes in on his motorcycle with some top-grade California hybrid and James and Mary get higher than you'd believe possible and they climb into bed. Everything becomes very underwater, but along comes John, who has a key to Mary's apartment. He finds them stoned and entwined. He's hardly in any position to be jealous, considering Madge, but nevertheless he's overcome with despair. Finally he's middle-aged, in two years he'll be bald as an egg and he can't stand it. He purchases a handgun, saying he needs it for target practice—this is the thin part of the plot, but it can be dealt with later—and shoots the two of them and himself.
The Lesson

Madge, after a suitable period of mourning, marries an understanding man called Fred and everything continues as in A, but under different names.

D

Fred and Madge have no problems. They get along exceptionally well and are good at working out any little difficulties that may arise. But their charming house is by the seashore and one day a giant tidal wave approaches. Real estate values go down. The rest of the story is about what caused the tidal wave and how they escape from it. They do, though thousands drown, but Fred and Madge are virtuous and lucky. Finally on high ground they clasp each other, wet and dripping and grateful, and continue as in A.

E

Yes, but Fred has a bad heart. The rest of the story is about how kind and understanding they both are until Fred dies. Then Madge devotes herself to charity work until the end of A. If you like, it can be “Madge,” “cancer,” “guilty and confused,” and “bird watching.”

F

If you think this is all too bourgeois, make John a revolutionary and Mary a counterespionage agent and see how far that gets you. Remember, this is Canada. You’ll still end up with A, though in between you may get a lustful brawling saga of passionate involvement, a chronicle of our times, sort of.

You’ll have to face it, the endings are the same however you slice it. Don’t be deluded by any other endings, they’re all fake, either deliberately fake, with malicious intent to deceive, or just motivated by excessive optimism if not by downright sentimentality.

The only authentic ending is the one provided here: John and Mary die. John and Mary die. John and Mary die.

So much for endings. Beginnings are always more fun. True connoisseurs, however, are known to favor the stretch in between, since it’s the hardest to do anything with.

That’s about all that can be said for plots, which anyway are just one thing after another, a what and a what and a what.


TONI CADE BAMBARA

Known for her civil rights activism as well as her fiction and essay writing, Toni Cade Bambara (1939–1995) grew up in Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant in New York. In 1972 she published the short story collection Gorilla, My Love, which has received widespread critical attention. Her other works include the collection The Sea Birds Are Still Alive (1977) and the novels The Salt Eaters (1980), which won the American Book Award, and If Blessing Comes (1987). She was also an editor of and contributor to several essay collections, including The Black Woman: An Anthology (1970) and Tales and Stories for Black Folks (1971). In addition to her activism and writing, Bambara taught in colleges and independent community schools in numerous cities. In an interview in Black Women Writers at Work, she explained the value of her variety of experiences: “It’s a tremendous responsibility—responsibility and honor—to be a writer, an artist, a cultural worker . . . whatever you call this vocation. One’s got to see what the factory worker sees, what the prisoner sees, what the welfare children see, what the scholar sees, got to see what the ruling-class mythmakers see as well, in order to tell the truth and not get trapped.”

The Lesson

Back in the days when everyone was old and stupid or young and foolish and me and Sugar were the only ones just right, this lady moved on our block with nappy hair and proper and no makeup. And quite naturally we laughed at her, laughed the way we did at the junk man who went about his business like he was some big-time president and his sorry-ass horse his secretary. And we kinda hated we did the winos who cluttered up our parks and pissed on our handball walls and stank up our hallways and stairs so you couldn’t halfway play hide-and-seek without a goddamn gas mask. Miss Môore was her name. The only woman on the block with no first name. And she was black as hell, cept for her feet, which were fish-white and spooky. And she was always planning these boring-ass things for us to do, us being my cousin, mostly, who lived on the block cause we all moved North the same time and to the same apartment then spread out gradual to breathe. And our parents would yank our heads into some kinda shape and crisp up our