



History on a Personal Note

By Binnie Kirshenbaum
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Introduction

The characters in these short stories -- some interconnected -- grapple with love, loss, greed, perversion, and other awful truths as they try to transcend their backgrounds and limitations with occasional humor and dignity. In the title story, Lorraine, a Southerner, wonders if her German paramour will find the inspiration to leave his wife amidst the destruction of the Berlin Wall. In "Viewing Stacy from Above," a pregnant woman descends into a pit of despair as she contemplates the constraints of motherhood. In "Money Honey," a young woman who ditches her husband is reprimanded by an extended family of elders whose morals are even more dubious than her own.

Alternately realistic, allegorical, witty, and contemplative, *History on a Personal Note* takes us into a world laced with black humor and makes us laugh-until it hurts.

Discussion Questions

1. How do historical and political events inform and shape the stories in *History on a Personal Note* (i.e. reunification of Berlin in the title story, Vietnam War in "For Widgeit Stands," Kennedy/Nixon election in "White Houses," "Bill Clinton says he's a new Democrat" in "Rural Delivery")?
2. The stories "History on a Personal Note," "Halfway to Farmville," and "Rural Delivery" follow the lives of the narrator and Lorraine. How does Lorraine change over the course of the stories? Does the narrator change in the same ways as Lorraine? What do you think keeps their friendship going all these years?
3. Longing to be a part of the protest movement in the 60s, the narrator in "For Widgeit Stands" refuses to say the Pledge of Allegiance, making her the target of the school bully. Discuss how power shifts throughout the story, especially the final shift from the bully, Lydia, to the narrator.
4. "Money Honey": A woman escaping her marriage lands in the middle of her family's plans to defraud their uncle of his inheritance. How do the narrator's values differ from that of her family? How does she express her rebellion? How does her perception of herself differ from what we know about her?
5. How does the structure of "In the Beginning" mirror the Old Testament? Is the generational transformation described typical of all immigrant populations? How do ethnicities assimilate differently? How is this experience particularly Jewish?
6. "White Houses": How do the childhood attitudes and actions described remind you of social and personal anxiety experienced in adulthood? When the author alludes to the iconic images of the Kennedy years, is she implying that we, as a country, were innocent then, or that our perception of the era is now mostly idealized?
7. "Courtship": Discuss which aspects of her parents' courtship and relationship the narrator admires. Are her recollections delivered with a touch of nostalgia or irony or both? How does our current understanding of love and courtship differ from her parents' era?
8. "Jewish But Not Really": The narrator's experience at the Easter egg hunt is a powerful example of the insidious discrimination that lurks beneath the surface. Discuss two scenes that you found particularly subtle and revealing. How is the discrimination observed become internalized in its victims?
9. "The Zen of Driving": Why does the narrator want to learn to drive, despite an apparent lack of aptitude? Why does an affair she thinks will make her feel more alive, doesn't?
10. "Viewing Stacy from Above": Ross, the husband, is thrilled his wife is having a baby. She does not seem excited or engaged in the event. Instead, she becomes a fervent voyeur in her neighbors' family life. What purpose does the bitter observation of the family routines serve her? Think about what the narrator's life may be after the birth of the baby. Will the marriage survive? Will her actual experiences differ from her expectations?
11. "A Full Life of a Different Nature": How do the sexual attitudes of the narrator and other characters in the story compare? Why is the narrator sex-obsessed? Why does she lie to Violet about masturbating? What does Irving mean when he tells her, "Eat, darling, eat," at the end?

About the Author

Binnie Kirshenbaum is the author of two short story collections and five novels, most recently *An Almost Perfect Moment*. She is a professor of fiction writing at Columbia University and lives with her husband in New York City.