

ROBERT J. DIXSON

MODERN SHORT STORIES IN

# ENGLISH

A NEW REVISED EDITION



Regents Publishing Company, Inc.

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# Preface

The stories in this book deal almost entirely with present-day life in the United States. They should be of particular interest to students who, while studying English, also want to learn something of the North American scene.

The stories fall within the form known as the short-short story. Stories of this type provide a convenient study medium, as each is only four or five pages long and can be studied easily within one or two class sessions.

Comprehension questions follow each story. These ten questions, and any others which a teacher may supplement them with, immediately test whether the students have a basic understanding of the story. Teachers should pay close attention to vocabulary, since not all students will understand all the terms used. The exercises should be written and may be supplemented at the teacher's discretion. Generally, the exercises use terms and structures from the story, so teachers have an additional opportunity to check understanding of vocabulary and grammar.

The discussion questions are new in this edition. Teachers

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may use them to stimulate the students to use the vocabulary and structures from the story conversationally or for written work. A question such as "Why didn't Mr. Whitney call the police?" can be supplemented with "What did Mr. Whitney do instead of calling the police?" or "What would you have done in Mr. Whitney's situation?" Each question can thus lead to other questions and to interesting and lively class discussions.

*Modern Short Stories in English* is one of a series of three readers for students of English as a second language. The first, *Elementary Reader in English*, is a book of simple reading selections for the beginning student. *Easy Reading Selections in English* is for use on the intermediate level, and *Modern Short Stories* is for the advanced student. If the material in it proves to be too difficult for some classes, it is suggested that one of the two easier readers be tried. For a grammar supplement to this book, the author's *Graded Exercises in English* is suggested.

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# Unit 1: My Best Friend

*Karen Tucker White*



From the time I was a young girl, I had problems with friends. All my girlfriends had "best friends," but I didn't. I never had one special person who always walked home from school with me or called me late at night to talk about things like music or clothes (or later, boys).

My parents used to say that I was a loner, a person who chose her friends carefully, who felt most comfortable when she was alone. It wasn't true. I was never comfortable being alone. I always wished that I had a close friend, like the other kids in my class. Janet Mullaney and Anne Kozach were close friends all through the sixth and seventh grades. How I envied them!

By the time I got to high school, I really began to worry. I knew that I wasn't stupid or ugly or clumsy or any of the other

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things that kids made fun of, but I still didn't have a special friend that I could share my secret thoughts with.

Occasionally I walked to school with the boy who lived next door. He was my age, so we were in the same grade in school. When we were little, I thought he was gross. I guess that's what all little girls think of all little boys when they're young. Boys are gross, dumb, and dirty. It makes me laugh to think that that's what we thought, but it's true. Doug and I walked to school together, and when he didn't have band practice, we also walked home together, but he didn't count as a friend. He couldn't take the place of a girl my age who felt all the same things I was feeling.

The fact that I didn't have any close girlfriends also seemed to influence my relationships with boys. When I reached my third year of high school, my junior year, all the other girls in the school began to date boys—all except me, that is. I was still a loner.

Now the problem seemed worse. Janet was best friends with a girl named Diane, whom she talked to on the phone for hours. They talked about the boys they liked, they gossiped, they did homework together. Anne had a steady boyfriend, but she had a lot of girls as friends, too, whom she could talk to about all the problems of being sixteen years old. I still had only Doug Thomas, the boy next door. And that didn't count.

I think of my best friend problem as a mountain that I began climbing when I was young. It was a long, hard climb, and I seemed to reach the top of it near the end of my junior year.

The time came for the Junior Prom and I didn't have a date. All of my friends—I guess I should call them acquaintances—were going to this important dance. Of course, they were all talking to their best friends about it. But not only didn't I have anyone to go with, I didn't even have anyone to talk to about it.

My mother told me that she hadn't gone to her Junior Prom either, but I'm not sure she was telling the truth. I think she told me that so I wouldn't feel bad. I felt bad anyway.

I felt so bad that I told Doug about it the next chance I got. He said that he didn't have a date either, and that if neither of us found someone to go with, we could always go to the prom with each other.

And that's what happened. Doug and I went to the Junior Prom together. I went because I was embarrassed to stay home, not because I liked Doug. Doug went with me because the girl he liked was already going with someone else. Doug didn't act depressed, and the fact was that we had a pretty good time.

We were invited to a couple of parties after the dance, and then later that week a few acquaintances asked me if I'd like to come to a party they were having. They made it obvious that they wanted me to bring Doug.

I had never paid too much attention to sports in high school, so I didn't know that Doug was now a star swimmer on the school's team. I asked him to go to the party with me and he accepted.

We had a great time at the party, as people crowded around us or joked with us or made references to future events which they hoped we would attend. The attention took me by surprise, but I loved it, since I had never had so many people who wanted to talk to me before.

The new phenomenon continued during the following weeks. Janet called me one day and asked if I wanted to go shopping with her. We had an exhausting yet exhilarating day at the mall and when we got back, she asked me to spend the night at her house. We sat up until 2 A.M. talking about all sorts of things.

A few weeks later, Anne and I worked on a school project together, and I soon realized that I had a couple of "best friends." I was ecstatic.

In the meantime, I went out with Doug a few times. Neither of us was romantically interested in the other, but the other kids in school assumed that we were serious about each other. I liked him, but I was much more interested in my new girlfriends.

Over the summer vacation that year, several events occurred which shook me and my newly found confidence.

Janet and her family moved to another state. We had become good friends by then, and we promised to write and to stay in touch, but we both knew that we probably would never see each other again.

Anne dropped out of school and married her steady boyfriend. She got a job at a local department store, so I see her from time to time; but our interests are different now, so we don't call each other too often.

Doug went to summer swimming camp and fell in love with a girl there. She was a swimmer, too, so they had a lot in common. He dates her now, instead of me, but it's OK. I like her, and they make a pretty good couple.

I'm in my senior year, and my problem of having a best friend doesn't seem so insurmountable to me. I have several girlfriends in whom I confide my secrets. Sometimes I visit them, and sometimes they visit me. It all seems so easy and natural that I wonder what I was so worried about.

When I decided to write this, I analyzed all the events and all my thoughts and came to understand something important. I needed help in being able to get close to people. The help came because Doug was popular. It's an odd way for someone to find friends, perhaps, but at least it worked.

I learned something else, too. All the time I was looking for a best friend, I already had one—Doug. About once a week now, without any special plan, we find a way to walk to school together, as we did in the old days. We talk about all the things that are on our minds, complain about our problems, wonder about the future, remember the past. In other words, we're best friends.

### *Comprehension*

1. Why did the narrator of the story want a "best friend"?
2. How did her parents respond to her difficulties?
3. Whom did she walk to school with in her first years of high school? What was her relationship with this person?
4. During her third year of high school, what happened to the narrator's friendships with Janet and Anne?
5. What was her problem at the time of the Junior Prom? How was it solved?
6. Why did people invite her to parties during the weeks following the dance?
7. When did Janet and Anne become her friends? How did it happen?
8. What happened during the summer between the narrator's junior and senior years?
9. At what point in her life is the story being written? What is her attitude toward friendship?
10. What is her relationship with Doug like at the end of the story?

## Exercises

A. Use each of the following terms in a sentence:  
best friend, loner, to envy, clumsy, gross, band, to reach something or someplace, steady boyfriend or girlfriend, to make reference to, to stay in touch, to fall in love, to confide in, in other words.

B. Match the term in the left column with its OPPOSITE in the right column.

Example: c 6. clumsy      c. graceful

- |                        |              |
|------------------------|--------------|
| — 1. close             | a. stranger  |
| — 2. stupid            | b. obscure   |
| — 3. ecstatic          | c. graceful  |
| — 4. acquaintance      | d. easy      |
| — 5. obvious           | e. past      |
| — 6. clumsy            | f. distant   |
| — 7. tell the truth    | g. smart     |
| — 8. future            | h. lie       |
| — 9. from time to time | i. depressed |
| — 10. insurmountable   | j. often     |

C. The prefix *re-* with verbs means *again*.

He didn't do his work correctly, so he had to do it again.

He had to *redo* it.

Add the prefix *re-* to each verb. Then use the word in a sentence.

Example: redesign      The car didn't work well, so the company had to *redesign* it.

- |             |           |
|-------------|-----------|
| 1. design   | 6. tell   |
| 2. model    | 7. fill   |
| 3. arrange  | 8. settle |
| 4. appear   | 9. build  |
| 5. consider | 10. write |

## Discussion

1. Do you think it's a good idea for people to have "best friends"?
2. Do you have (or have you had) a best friend? What do (did) you talk about with this person?

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3. Name some of the ways in which people become friends.  
How have you made friends throughout your life?
  4. What was the difference, for the narrator of the story, between having girls as friends and having boys as friends?  
What is the difference for you?
  5. Do you think it is easier for sports stars to make friends than for other people? Why? What makes a person popular?

# Unit 2: To Love and to Honor

*Octavus Roy Cohen*



It was rather surprising to discover a deep vein of sentiment in little George Potter. I had been his friend and his lawyer for many years and had watched the always fat and once alert little man settle into a domestic routine. He had been moderately successful in business, sufficiently successful to permit him to retire from it and to travel about the world a little if he had wanted to do so. But instead, he and his present wife, Esther, were content to sit night after night in their pleasant and comfortable living room. She kept busy with her hobby of refinishing old furniture, while he passed the time reading or working on his excellent collection of postage stamps.

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Looking back over the years of my friendship with Potter, I can see that the vein of romance had probably been there all the time. There was, for instance, his very romantic love affair with Althea Deane—an affair which almost became a scandal. But just when people began to gossip about them, George married her.

That marriage appeared to extinguish George Potter's last spark of romanticism. It never had a chance to be successful, and when Althea left him suddenly, George's friends thought that he was fortunate to lose her. Later came the news of Althea's death while living abroad, and a couple of years later George began to call upon Esther seriously. The people of our group were only slightly interested; it is difficult to become greatly excited over a possible marriage when both the man and the woman are equally dull and uninteresting.

The marriage was a very nice affair. There followed the usual series of parties for the newly married couple. Then it seemed that George and Esther retired from life. His business affairs ran so well that there was little need on George's part for my services as his lawyer, and while I never ceased to like him, we found less and less in common as the years passed. I couldn't imagine that they were happy; perhaps they were contented, but not really happy. There wasn't enough sentiment; that's the way I figured George. And nothing happened to change my opinion until a few weeks before their twenty-fifth anniversary.

It was then that George came into my office, his fat little face shining with enthusiasm, and he told me of his unusual plan for their silver anniversary. His bright little eyes shone as he explained the thing, and I'll confess that I was pretty well confused; not only because his plan was very sentimental and profoundly impressive, but mainly because it was quiet, dull, old George Potter who was planning this thing—the very George Potter who had lived a quiet life since his second marriage and who had avoided social contacts.

According to what George told me, he was doing this thing for Esther's sake. "It'll please her," he explained. "She likes that sort of thing, you know, and this seems to me a real idea. You have to be a part of it, because you were the best man when Esther and I were married. It's just a gesture on my part—a sort of sacrifice to please her."

I'll say this for George; he didn't do things halfway. Instead of

the usual party, he presented a perfect duplication of his marriage to Esther twenty-five years before. There was even the same minister—very old now—and the same violinist who had played “Oh, Promise Me” at the other ceremony. A good many of the original guests were there, most of us rather gray-haired now. But the thing was very impressive: Esther in the same bridal dress she had worn twenty-five years before—let out around the hips, perhaps—and carrying a bouquet of bridal roses; the bridesmaids in pink, with bouquets of Killarney roses; even a person to carry the ring. It was great fun and very impressive, whereas one might have expected it to be absurd.

As for Esther, I never saw a woman look more beautiful. She took on an aura of genuine beauty. Of course, she would have been less than human had she failed to respond to this magnificent exhibition of husbandly devotion. George himself was as frightened as he had been on the occasion of their first wedding.

But finally the ceremony was finished, and the guests went to the dining room for the rich supper which had been prepared by special cooks employed for this occasion. George and I were left alone and he sank, exhausted, into a chair. I placed my hand on his shoulder and congratulated him on the success of his party.

“Do you really think it was a success?” he asked hesitatingly. I noticed some wariness in his eyes.

“It was wonderful!” I responded, and I added jokingly, “And you certainly should feel completely married.” I expected a short laugh in return, but received none.

“Yes, I do.” He became silent for a moment or two. When he spoke again, his tone was deeply serious. “There’s something I want to explain to you both as my friend and as my lawyer.” He stopped for a moment and then looked up with a curious expression on his face. “You remember my first wife?”

“Althea?” I was surprised by the question. “Yes, of course.”

His voice was strange. “Did you know that she died only last year?”

“Good Lord! Are you certain? I thought she died twenty-seven years ago.”

“So did I,” he said quietly, looking at me long and pensively. “So did I. I thought I was a widower when I married Esther. I only recently discovered that I wasn’t. Don’t ask me for details, I don’t know any. All I know is that Althea didn’t die until August of last year. As far as I know, there are no legal compli-

cations, but I wanted you to know in case anything ever comes up. I want you to understand that the affair you attended today was a real wedding for Esther and me.”

### Comprehension

1. What was George Potter like? What was his relationship with the narrator?
2. What did George and Esther do to pass the time?
3. What was George's relationship with Althea Deane? How did it end?
4. Why weren't George's friends very interested in his relationship with Esther?
5. How did the narrator feel about George over the years?
6. What plan did George make for his twenty-fifth wedding anniversary? Why did this seem unusual to his lawyer?
7. Describe the ceremony. What was special about the minister and the violinist?
8. How did George and Esther react to the ceremony?
9. What was George's manner as he told his friend the real reason for the wedding ceremony?
10. What was that reason?

### Exercises

- A. Use each of the following terms in a sentence:  
rather, to do so, to keep busy, to pass the time, looking back, romance, scandal, to become excited over, in common, to do something halfway, impressive, as for, wariness, complication, in case.
- B. Circle the term in parentheses which correctly completes the sentence.
- Example: One generally buys stamps in a (bookstore/post office/movie theater/grocery store)
1. If you were involved in a scandal, you would probably be (happy/in a hurry/embarrassed/sleepy).
  2. A bouquet is made of (stones/groceries/stamps/flowers).
  3. They were talking about other people. They were (leaving/planning/gossiping/settling down).
  4. I never ceased to like him. I never (started/avoided/continued/stopped) liking him.