The Story of an Hour

by Kate Chopin

Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble, great care was taken

to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband’s death.

It was her sister Josephine who told her, in broken sentences; veiled hints that

revealed in half concealing. Her husband’s friend Richards was there, too, near her. It

was he who had been in the newspaper office when intelligence of the railroad disaster

was received, with Brently Mallard’s name leading the list of “killed.” He had only taken

the time to assure himself of its truth by a second telegram, and had hastened to forestall

any less careful, less tender friend in bearing the sad message.

She did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with a paralyzed

inability to accept its significance. She wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment, in

her sister’s arms. When the storm of grief had spent itself she went away to her room

alone. She would have no one follow her.

There stood, facing the open window, a comfortable, roomy armchair. Into this she

sank, pressed down by a physical exhaustion that haunted her body and seemed to reach

into her soul.

She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all

aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street

below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which some one was

singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves.

There were patches of blue sky showing here and there through the clouds that had

met and piled one above the other in the west facing her window.

She sat with her head thrown back upon the cushion of the chair, quite motionless,

except when a sob came up into her throat and shook her, as a child who has cried itself

to sleep continues to sob in its dreams.

She was young, with a fair, calm face, whose lines bespoke repression and even a

certain strength. But now there was a dull stare in her eyes, whose gaze was fixed away off

yonder on one of those patches of blue sky. It was not a glance of reflection, but rather

indicated a suspension of intelligent thought.

There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully. What was

it? She did not know; it was too subtle and elusive to name. But she felt it, creeping out of

the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air.

Now her bosom rose and fell tumultuously. She was beginning to recognize this

thing that was approaching to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back with her

will—as powerless as her two white slender hands would have been.

When she abandoned herself a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips.

She said it over and over under her breath:

“free, free, free!” The vacant stare and the

look of terror that had followed it went from her eyes. They stayed keen and bright. Her

pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body.

She did not stop to ask if it were or were not a monstrous joy that held her. A clear

and exalted perception enabled her to dismiss the suggestion as trivial.

She knew that she would weep again when she saw the kind, tender hands folded in

death; the face that had never looked save with love upon her, fixed and gray and dead.

But she saw beyond that bitter moment a long procession of years to come that would

belong to her absolutely. And she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome.

There would be no one to live for her during those coming years; she would live for

herself. There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with

which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-

creature. A kind intention or a cruel intention make the act seem no less a crime as she

looked upon it in that brief moment of illumination.

And yet she had loved him—sometimes. Often she had not. What did it matter!

What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in face of this possession of self-assertion

which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being!

“Free! Body and soul free!” she kept whispering.

Josephine was kneeling before the closed door with her lips to the keyhole,

imploring for admission. “Louise, open the door! I beg; open the door—you will make

yourself ill. What are you doing, Louise? For heaven’s sake open the door.”

“Go away. I am not making myself ill.” No; she was drinking in a very elixir of life

through that open window.

Her fancy was running riot along those days ahead of her. Spring days, and summer

days, and all sorts of days that would be her own. She breathed a quick prayer that life

might be long. It was only yesterday she had thought with a shudder that life might be

long.

She arose at length and opened the door to her sister’s importunities. There was a

feverish triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory.

She clasped her sister’s waist, and together they descended the stairs. Richards stood

waiting for them at the bottom.

Some one was opening the front door with a latchkey. It was Brently Mallard who

entered, a little travel-stained, composedly carrying his grip-sack and umbrella. He had

been far from the scene of accident, and did not even know there had been one. He stood

amazed at Josephine’s piercing cry; at Richards’ quick motion to screen him from the

view of his wife.

But Richards was too late.

When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease—of joy that kills.