

Lysandra's Poem

a short story by Budge Wilson



Ludvine c. 1930 by Edwin Holgate, Vincent Massey Bequest, 1968, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

When I was a child, my family lived beside the sea. But not precisely so. Not right on the edge of the Atlantic Ocean, with the horizon sliding away flat all the way to Spain. No. We lived in a little harbour town in Nova Scotia, a full mile from any point of land where you could view the open sea. But apart from the fact that you couldn't see the ocean (except insofar as the harbour was a part of it), the sea might just as well have been smack dab in the middle of our town. A day without fog was a time for rejoicing.

focus YOUR LEARNING

Reading this short story will help you:

- explain irony
- role-play a meeting between two story characters
- identify the story problem
- brainstorm and evaluate solutions

Most days, tourists crept through our streets in their shiny American cars, fresh off the Bar Harbour ferry from sunny New England, headlights on and honking. The winters were windy and damp and dispiriting, the springs endless and fluky—promising summer one day and sprinkling snow on the stunted tulips the next. In summertime, all expeditions were planned tentatively; sentences ended with the phrase “if it doesn’t rain.” Packed linens were attacked by mildew; wire coathangers rusted; envelopes stuck together if they weren’t stored in airtight plastic bags.

The fact is that we can’t cope with too much fine weather in Nova Scotia. We’re chicken-hearted about the heat, and are beaten down by it, ploughed right under. And a brisk sunny day—a perfect day—undoes us. People with indoor jobs are irritable, tense; spirit and body are in active resistance to any activity that takes place inside a building. Those who are free to go outside—housewives, the unemployed, mothers trailing children, people on vacation—spill out of their houses onto the water, the beaches, the parks, or their own backyards. On such a day, not all those smiling people strolling along our Main Streets are tourists. Most of them are native Nova Scotians, agape at a miracle. People call in sick, sleep through the alarm, quit jobs. If there are six or seven of these days in a row, the whole economy is at peril: editors miss deadlines; back orders are ignored; laundry accumulates; cupboards are bare. The sighting of a fog bank or the first rainy day is almost a relief.

One way or another, a climate like this is bound to rub off on people. One person may become surly and fixed, grey and dank of spirit, long-lived and persistent and a trial to his family. Another can end up hopeful—the fruit of those spectacular sunny days when the light is clearer, more pungent than most other Canadians could ever imagine; if one dwells on and in those days, an optimist is bred, living for and believing in the arrival of such rare and golden times. Or you can be the way I was, stubborn and opportunistic, snatching what I could out of a resistant environment. Or like Lysandra Cochrane, at first tentative and careful, and then with no softness in her, bitter and barbed, with a heart as hard and as cutting as diamonds.

Lysandra! you may exclaim. What a name to issue forth from such a small and simple town in one of the back places of our land. No town is simple, let me say, but that does not explain Lysandra’s name. Nova Scotians—especially those in coastal areas—have a way of leafing through literature (by which I mean anything from old school texts to the Bible and the obituary columns) to find names for their babies. The Cochranes fished around in heaven knows what sources, and pulled up Lysandra. Rumour had it that Mr. Cochrane—addicted to libraries, in any case—spent the day his wife was in labour in the reference library in Halifax, looking for names. He was a smart man, a sky-high scholarship student in his day. His Dalhousie bur-

sary had covered tuition only, and he had lacked sufficient cash to puff out the sum enough to accept it. He was one of those ones who are "grey and dank of spirit." His ambition had been snuffed out before it had had a chance to warm up, and he lived his whole adult life as a minor clerk in a law office, watching other people cash in on the benefits of a university education. He drank a large percentage of his earnings, snapped at his pale wife (once a beauty according to my mother, but my imagination failed to grasp such an improbability), and sired four thin children.

Lysandra was my best friend. She was as dark as her mother was fair, a skinny kid, all angles and elbows and bony knees. Her skin was smooth and sallow, her hair long and limp. She was tall for her age when we were kids, and shy. She looked at strangers—and at teachers and fathers—out of enormous black eyes, head bent forward and down. She walked with an awkward jerky gait, as though she were not at home on her own legs, and as she passed by, the other kids would whisper, "Pigeon-Toed Cochrane!"

But when we were alone together, Lysandra was full of amazing thoughts, large ambitions, bizarre projects. Without being instructed, she thought in metaphors, and her speech was full of exotic images and odd rhythms. She invented a whole mini-language so that she and I could talk to one another without being understood by others. She intended to be a writer—an *author*, she said—famous and rich, and this thought permeated most of her other plans and inventions. Like her father, she haunted the library, but equipped with a hope he had long ago relinquished. She read all the good poets before she was twelve, and a lot of the bad ones, too. She was gobbling up Shakespeare while I was stretched out on the floor on my stomach with *Crime Comics*. It was to her books that she retreated when her father went on his rampages, escaping his noise and the sight of her frowsy mother's stricken face—losing herself in whatever volume she had in her room, finding her place at a neatly inserted bookmark. If I were in the house at the time, we would race upstairs at the first hint of conflict, and I would watch this withdrawal. She wouldn't say a word to me, but would just sit up straight on a little yellow chair she had, her book held close to her face, not moving except to turn the pages. I both hated and relished these occasions. We didn't have high drama like this in my house, and I listened, breath held, to Mr. Cochrane's fierce catalogue of oaths—words to make me shudder all the while I was straining to keep from missing any of them. I was single-mindedly troubled by the sounds that came from Mrs. Cochrane, but this was part of the performance and had to be endured if I were to benefit from the rest of it. Besides, there was no escape for me. I could hardly march downstairs and walk through that battlefield and out the back door. I sat on the bed hunched under an afghan while Lysandra read on, her lips in a thin, tight smile.

In March of the year when we were in grade seven, the principal announced a poetry contest. He told us about it during Monday morning assembly, just before the national anthem. The entries to the contest would be due on May 27th. There would be three judges, headed by Miss Alexander, the vice-principal. The other two would be Mr. Knickle, the town mayor, and Mr. Reuben, the editor of the local newspaper, the *South Shore Standard*. Thus were prestige, professionalism, and masculinity added to the team of judges.

I was standing beside Lysandra in assembly when the competition was announced. Her bent head shot up, and she stared into space with eyes so wide open that they almost frightened me. Then she looked at me with oh such a gaze of wonder, such a look of peace and triumph. When she walked out of the auditorium, her step was smooth and sure, her shoulders high. No one whispered "Pigeon-Toed Cochrane" as she passed. No one would have considered mocking such a display of calm self-confidence.

Not everyone entered the poetry contest, but our English teachers urged us to write something for it, and many of us did. However, Lysandra was the only one to devote her entire life to it, filling a whole shoe box with poetry, long before May 27th. You could see her scribbling in her loose-leaf at recess time on the school swing set, or high on the jungle gym after the little kids had gone home from school in the afternoon. On Saturdays she would do her writing out on the granite bluff overlooking the harbour, or seated at the lunch counter at the Seaway Restaurant, making her Coke last for an hour and forty-five minutes. I played with other kids during this period, because Lysandra was of no use at all to me.

The poem I entered in the contest was about a shipwreck, and it had eighteen stanzas. The rhythm went jig-a jig-a jig-a jig, and there was rhyme at the ends of lines 1 and 2 and again at 3 and 4. Like slope, dope; eat, feet. It wasn't a forced kind of rhythm or anything. The beat went along effortlessly without any little words tacked on to make the right number of feet. I wrote it in March, during the week after the contest was announced, so that I would have the ordeal over and done with. It was a little like getting your Christmas shopping done all in one day on the first of November.

That spring was one that most Nova Scotians will always remember. The snows melted by the end of March, and April came sailing in with sunshine and a kind of sheltering softness that was foreign to all of us. We were playing softball and kick-the-can one month ahead of time, and by mid-May people were ignoring all warnings and planting their gardens in the warm moist earth. Even Mr. Cochrane looked cheerful as he walked to and from the law office, and Lysandra floated around town, notebook held close to her chest, looking as though she were in touch with a vision; and I suppose she was. On one of the rare occasions when she had time for me, she

told me that her poem was already twenty-two pages long. I asked what it was about, and she said, "Life."

"Oh," I replied. She wouldn't let me read it, but one afternoon I looked at the manuscript upside down when she spread the pages out on the bed so that I might admire its magnitude. The poetry wandered all over the sheets, with short lines and long ones, sometimes with whole sections dribbling down the centre of the page. After this unsatisfactory demonstration, she took the papers, folded them tenderly, and put them carefully back into the shoe box, stroking the top page with the flat of her hand. She closed her eyes and lifted her head as though in prayer. "I'll die if the house burns down," she said, her teeth clenched. At first I didn't understand, but then I did. I remember thinking, I hope I never love or want anything that hard. Just thinking about it exhausted me.

"You should make a copy," I said.

"Oh, well," she sighed.

Of course I was a shoo-in to win that contest. Miss Alexander, the vice-principal, was about 200 years old, and had no truck with any kind of verse that didn't rhyme and wasn't of the jig-a jig-a jig variety. I had often heard her speak scathingly of free verse: "the lazy poet's way of avoiding a lot of hard work," she'd say, lips pulled down at the corners, eyebrows drawn together behind her thick glasses. What's more, her father had been a fisherman on the Banks, and had been shipwrecked way back in 1920, when she'd been old enough to take in all the details. Those same details she liked to dole out to anyone who presented a willing ear. I liberally stacked my poem with material that was not so much lifted from her as it was spiced with the flavour of her own tale.

But there were two men on the jury. Could they not have taken Miss Alexander's prejudices and swung them around? No, they could not. Mayors do not by definition necessarily know a great deal about poetry. Mr. Knickle knew next to nothing. The principal had put him on the jury to give it status. Mr. Knickle had agreed to serve because of political visibility. He had no intention of rocking any boats, poetic or otherwise.

Mr. Reuben, the editor of the *South Shore Standard*, knew a lot about local politics and the economic problems of the Atlantic seaboard; from time to time he wrote flat-footed editorials about these matters. He was familiar with the inequalities of freight rates and the need for federal subsidies. Poetry was not his territory. Moreover, both Mr. Knickle and Mr. Reuben had been taught by Miss Alexander when they were in grade four. Mr. Reuben remembered what she had done when he had cracked his knuckles once too often during Silent Prayer. During the meetings of the poetry jury, Mr. Knickle had to stifle an impulse to raise his hand every

time he wanted to speak.

Besides, consider my poem. Where could you find a subject better designed to please two men? A shipwreck. Men doing traditionally male things—heroic and beset by danger. I won by acclamation.

On the afternoon when the contest results were announced, we were handed back our poems. I received a wristwatch and a return ticket to Halifax; best of all, the eighteen verses of my poem were to be published in the next week's issue of the *South Shore Standard*—heady matters for a thirteen-year-old. I wound my watch noisily and put it on, arranging my face into an expression of humility.

Lysandra ran out of the schoolyard ahead of me, tripping over a discarded hockey stick and almost falling. The many pages of her poem went flying, and she had to chase around after them, rescuing them from the wind. Her face was ashen and without expression of any kind. She walked home alone, chin up, legs unsteady once again. A disembodied voice from somewhere behind me called out, "Pigeon-Toed Cochrane!"

That evening Mr. Cochrane took Lysandra's shoe box and threw its contents into the kitchen stove. Then, I was told by a neighbour, he stormed out of the house, swinging a bottle in each hand. He stayed away for three days, blind drunk in the middle of his grandfather's old woodlot.

The days, the months that followed, were difficult for me. Lysandra withdrew into a secret self and refused to speak to me. She arrived at school late, never calling for me, and left the minute the bell rang, walk-running home with her huge eyes staring straight ahead. Twice I called for her at her house. The first time, her thin, sad mother answered the door, looked at me, and sighed. "She's not feeling well today, Elaine," she said. The other time, her father greeted me. "You!" he growled, and slammed the door. I didn't try again.

The long summer vacation passed, and I found other friends. Sometimes I would see Lysandra off in the distance, walking alone on the beach, or sitting on Rocky Point hugging her knees, eyes fixed on the water. But never writing. The weather, tired after a halcyon spring, turned rainy and chilly, but Lysandra still paced the shore, her hair blowing in the wet wind. Not fair, I thought. Twenty-three kids had entered that contest. It wasn't my fault that I won. Was it? Once I met her on the blueberry barrens. I had come up to get enough berries for Mom to make a pie. Lysandra was just sitting there on a granite boulder, hands limp in her lap.

"Lysandra," I pleaded. "It wasn't my fault."

"Wasn't it?" she said, eyes distant.

I looked hard at her, and noticed that she was pretty now, with a kind of wild gypsy beauty that didn't need fancy clothes or a trendy haircut.

"Lysandra. Please. Be nice again. I don't want our friendship to be wrecked."

"But it is," she said quietly.

"How can you do this to me for such a small thing?" I begged, not letting go.

"Small," she whispered. It was neither a question nor a statement. Then she got down clumsily from the rock and walked out of the woods without looking back, picking her way carefully through the bushes and over the hummocks and outcroppings of stone.

I went home and cried for a while in my room. Then I picked up my wrinkled copy of the *South Shore Standard* and reread my poem. A part of me wanted to tear it into little pieces, press it all into a hard damp ball, and throw it at the wall. The other part folded it carefully and put it in my desk drawer. Then I grabbed my swimsuit off a hook and went down to the beach to go swimming with my other friends.

Four years passed, and I was in grade eleven. Grade seven was long years behind me, and I scarcely noticed Lysandra as she came and went. Besides, my whole consciousness was absorbed by my feelings for Brett Houston. He had arrived fresh from the city of Toronto on the first day of school that year, and I had spent twenty-four weeks wanting him. As the year progressed, he had moved from pretty girl to pretty girl—in and out of our class—and I took courage from this fact. An early solid attachment, for instance, to the beautiful Sally Cornwall of grade ten, would have spelled permanence and hopelessness for me. But obviously he was still searching. Any minute it might be my turn.

And suddenly, miraculously, it was. Coming up behind me one day as I pulled books from my locker, he grabbed my arm and swung me around to face him. "Hi, cute stuff," he said in his wonderful flat Toronto voice. I looked at his size, his blond good looks, his casual grin, and my chest was alive with thundering heartbeats, tight with constricted breathing.

"Tonight," he said, moving his gum over to the other side of his mouth. "The movies. At eight. Time for a little ride first."

"Okay," I said, my hands shaking as they once again reached for my books, my eyes only marginally in focus.

"I'll walk you home," he said, slamming my locker door with a masterful bang.

Holy toledo, I thought.

As the weeks went by, as March moved into April and then into May, I marvelled that this beautiful person was in my possession. Gone were the months of moving from girl to girl. We were going steady. It had lasted

seven whole weeks. I waited on him, packed picnic lunches, wrote essays for him, massaged his shoulders after baseball practice, watched sports programs on TV all Saturday afternoon, mended his socks, walked his dog. Even I could see that I looked different, my skin aglow, my eyes eager, my smile at the ready. I adored him. I watched his coming and his going with undisguised worship.

I had a part-time job at a local variety store, and on the night of the Spring Dance, I had to work the evening shift. I told Brett I'd meet him at the school after the store closed at nine o'clock. He had to get there early to attach the balloons to the ceiling. When I entered the darkened gymnasium by the side door, I almost bumped into him. Him and Lysandra. They were facing one another, standing sideways to me. She had cut her hair in low bangs, and the rest of it hung almost to her waist, black as night. She had on large hoop earrings and a low-cut black peasant blouse. There was a lot of chest to see, and her chest was a good one. That's all I remember about what she was wearing. I was too busy taking note of the way she was running a slender finger up and down his forearm, saying, "C'mon, Brett. Let's dance just a little bit while you're waiting. No point just standing around. She won't mind."

As they came together to dance a slow number, I watched that same finger move slowly up his spine and then come to rest on the back of his neck. She lifted her lovely face to his, enormous eyes mocking, ready. As she and Brett moved off in the darkness they looked like one person. They were dancing that close.

He came back and collected me. I'll say that for him. That evening we danced like mechanical dolls—arms and legs moving, but no life in us or between us. I could see Lysandra over by the springboards and the parallel bars, watching us, smiling. Brett waited until the next day to abandon me—without a word of explanation or farewell.

I thought I would die of heartbreak or wished I could, but of course I did nothing of the sort. Brett followed Lysandra around like a panting puppy all spring, servile, pliant, and sent her an orchid for the graduation formal. I went to that dance with Horace MacNab, who danced like a tractor, lumbering along, squashing my feet. I laughed loudly and frequently, tossing my hair over my shoulders. Brett and Lysandra glided around the gym with their eyes closed, slow-dancing to everything, their bodies pressed hard together.

The day after the formal, Lysandra told Brett she was tired of him and gave him back his baseball crest. Then she could be seen once again in the town library, reading, reading, and writing page after page of poetry. She had lost her stunned, vapid look. She moved once more with measured coordination, with grace. She even spoke to me from time to time—a neutral unadorned hello in passing.

Brett moved away with his family in the fall of that year. His father said he couldn't hack the climate. He said he wanted to live someplace where he could depend on owning a dry pair of shoes. I met Brett twenty years later at a high school reunion. He was thirty-eight years old, balding, stout, boring, a petulant wife in tow, Lysandra did not attend the reunion.

By now I've read a lot of Lysandra's poetry. It appears in academic journals and in the better popular magazines. She has published seven volumes and has won two national awards. She often turns up on the literary pages of newspapers, and I'm as likely to see her name in *The Globe and Mail* as in *The Halifax Mail-Star*. The CBC loves to interview her. I don't understand many of her poems. They seem to be speaking a language that I never learned, and are plugged into a source of power that is a puzzle to me. But I can tell you this: her poetry contains such bitterness that the mind reels as it reads, dizzy from such savage images, such black revelations. The words claw out from the pages like so many birds of prey. And all of them seem to be moving in my direction. ■