

1st person narrator, 18-year-old female, unnamed, past tense.

Birthday triggers the action--gift of a diary.

Conflict expressed in action.

Other characters: Jack, narrator's older lover; his wife.

No One's a Mystery by Elizabeth Tallent

For my eighteenth birthday Jack gave me a five-year diary with a latch and a little key, light as a dime. I was sitting beside him scratching at the lock, which didn't seem to want to work, when he thought he saw his wife's Cadillac in the distance, coming toward us. He pushed me down onto the dirty floor of the pickup and kept one hand on my head while I inhaled the musk of his cigarettes in the dashboard ashtray and sang along with Rosanne Cash on the tape deck. We'd been drinking tequila and the bottle was between his legs, resting up against his crotch, where the seam of his Levi's was bleached linen-white, though the Levi's were nearly new. I don't know why his Levi's always bleached like that, along the seams and at the knees. In a curve of cloth his zipper glinted, gold.

"It's her," he said. "She keeps the lights on in the daytime. I can't think of a single habit in a woman that irritates me more than that." When he saw that I was going to stay still he took his hand from my head and ran it through his own dark hair.

"Why does she?" I said.

"She thinks it's safer. Why does she need to be safer? She's driving exactly fifty-five miles an hour. She believes in those signs:

The conflict of the story is between the narrator and Jack; she wants to believe in a romantic future for them and he doesn't believe in it. There are basically two scenes each of which has its own interference, or secondary conflict, something that drives the dramatic interest of the scene and also expresses the main conflict. The first scene uses Jack's wife driving by and the second scene uses the diary.

Beginning of wife theme: wife causes interference that drives the scene.

They've been drinking--comedy here.

Eroticism in her observations about his crotch.

safer, safer

Begins a pattern of little things not quite right in the scene. See also the manure below. Also helps fix diary in reader's mind for later. Also seems vaguely symbolic, of what I don't know.

Dialogue technique: not-answering by the use of questions.

Run of parallel constructions: she'll see, she'll know, she'll think--the last is a dialogue interruption.

Wife 55 mph; Jack 80 mph. Characterization by contrast.

Manure--another things not quite right in the scene.

Dialogue technique of not answering by repeating the words of the previous speaker.

A triplet: little kids, little kids, kid.

Five repetitions of "know" make the transition to the diary theme.

Here we have the first of two blocks of text structured around two sets of answering parallel structures hypothesizing future diary entries; the diary entries embody the conflict between the narrator and Jack, their contrary dreams for the future.

Time: She's 18, they have been together 2 years, the blocks of parallel constructions send the story into conflicting constructions of the future, 3 years hence.

Story title repeated in text.

No backfill in story, only this reference to their 2 years together.

Rosanne Cash repeated twice.

Dial. technique of not answering by indirection.

End of wife theme.

Start of diary theme.

Structural transition.

'Speed Monitored by Aircraft.' It doesn't matter that you can look up and see that the sky is empty."

"She'll see your lips move, Jack. She'll know you're talking to someone."

"She'll think I'm singing along with the radio."

He didn't lift his hand, just raised the fingers in salute while the pressure of his palm steadied the wheel, and I heard the Cadillac honk twice, musically; he was driving easily eighty miles an hour. I studied his boots. The elk heads stitched into the leather were bearded with frayed thread, the toes were scuffed, and there was a compact wedge of muddy manure between the heel and the sole—the same boots he'd been wearing for the two years I'd known him. On the tape deck Rosanne Cash sang, "Nobody's into me, no one's a mystery."

"Do you think she's getting famous because of who her daddy is or for herself?" Jack said.

"There are about a hundred pop tops on the floor, did you know that? Some little kid could cut a bare foot on one of these, Jack."

"No little kids get into this truck except for you."

"How come you let it get so dirty?"

"How come," he mocked. "You even sound like a kid. You can get back into the seat now, if you want. She's not going to look over her shoulder and see you."

"How do you know?"

"I just know," he said. "Like I know I'm going to get meat loaf for supper. It's in the air. Like I know what you'll be writing in that diary."

"What will I be writing?" I knelt on my side of the seat and craned around to look at the butterfly of dust printed on my jeans. Outside the window Wyoming was dazzling in the heat. The wheat was fawn and yellow and parted smoothly by the thin dirt road. I could smell the water in the irrigation ditches hidden in the wheat.

"Tonight you'll write, 'I love Jack. This is my birthday present from him. I can't imagine anybody loving anybody more than I love Jack.'"

"I can't."

"In a year you'll write, 'I wonder what I ever really saw in Jack. I wonder why I spent so many days just riding around in his pickup. It's true he taught me something about sex. It's true there wasn't ever much else to do in Cheyenne.'"

"I won't write that."

"In two years you'll write, 'I wonder what that old guy's name was, the one with the curly hair and the filthy dirty pickup truck and time on his hands.'"

Second block of parallels.

I won't write that,
I won't write that.

"I won't write that."

"No?"

"Tonight I'll write, 'I love Jack. This is my birthday present from him. I can't imagine anybody loving anybody more than I love Jack.' "

"No, you can't," he said. "You can't imagine it."

"In a year I'll write, 'Jack should be home any minute now. The table's set—my grandmother's linen and her old silver and the yellow candles left over from the wedding—but I don't know if I can wait until after the trout a la Navarra to make love to him.' "

"It must have been a fast divorce."

"In two years I'll write, 'Jack should be home by now. Little Jack is hungry for his supper. He said his first word today besides "Mama" and "Papa." He said "kaka." ' "

Jack laughed. "He was probably trying to finger-paint with kaka on the bathroom wall when you heard him say it."

"In three years I'll write, 'My nipples are a little sore from nursing Eliza Rosamund.' "

"Rosamund. Every little girl should have a middle name she hates."

"Her breath smells like vanilla and her eyes are just Jack's color of blue."

"That's nice." Jack said.

"So, which one do you like?"

"I like yours," he said. "But I believe mine."

"It doesn't matter. I believe mine."

"Not in your heart of hearts, you don't."

"You're wrong."

"I'm not wrong," he said. "And her breath would smell like your milk, and it's kind of a bittersweet smell, if you want to know the truth."

kaka, kaka

Anadiplosis

Epanalepsis

In this last passage, an instance of epanalepsis brackets a delicate and poetic run of repetitions, all in dialogue, all terse, all in disagreement, except for "heart of hearts."

The story is so formally structured on parallels and repetitions (rhymes) that it can't but remind one of Viktor Shklovsky's theories about the use of parallel structure and repetition as devices of delay, delay being one of the essential functions of literary language. See his discussion of parallelism, repetition and step-by-step construction in "Plot Construction and Style" in his book Theory of Prose (pp24-30).