

Name: _____

Class: _____

Marigolds

By Eugenia Collier

1969

Eugenia Collier (b.1928) is an African American author of stories, plays, essays, and criticism. In this short story, a young woman remembers an important moment from her childhood. The following text contains language that some may find outdated or offensive. As you read, take notes on what the marigolds symbolize for Lizabeth and Miss Lottie .

[1] When I think of the hometown of my youth, all that I seem to remember is dust — the brown, crumbly dust of late summer — arid, sterile¹ dust that gets into the eyes and makes them water, gets into the throat and between the toes of bare brown feet. I don't know why I should remember only the dust. Surely there must have been lush green lawns and paved streets under leafy shade trees somewhere in town; but memory is an abstract² painting — it does not present things as they are, but rather as they feel. And so, when I think of that time and that place, I remember only the dry September of the dirt roads and grassless yards of the shantytown where I lived. And one other thing I remember, another incongruency³ of memory — a brilliant splash of sunny yellow against the dust — Miss Lottie's marigolds.



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Whenever the memory of those marigolds flashes across my mind, a strange nostalgia⁴ comes with it and remains long after the picture has faded. I feel again the chaotic emotions of adolescence, illusive as smoke, yet as real as the potted geranium before me now. Joy and rage and wild animal gladness and shame become tangled together in the multicolored skein of fourteen-going-on-fifteen as I recall that devastating moment when I was suddenly more woman than child, years ago in Miss Lottie's yard. I think of those marigolds at the strangest times; I remember them vividly now as I desperately pass away the time.

1. **Sterile** (*adjective*) poor in quality; lifeless
2. **Abstract** (*adjective*) dealing with ideas or feelings instead of concrete objects
3. **Incongruent** (*adjective*) opposite or not the same; out of place
4. **Nostalgia** (*noun*) a longing for the past

I suppose that futile waiting was the sorrowful background music of our impoverished little community when I was young. The Depression⁵ that gripped the nation was no new thing to us, for the Black workers of rural Maryland had always been depressed. I don't know what it was that we were waiting for; certainly not for the prosperity⁶ that was "just around the corner," for those were white folks' words, which we never believed. Nor did we wait for hard work and thrift to pay off in shining success, as the American Dream promised, for we knew better than that, too. Perhaps we waited for a miracle, amorphous⁷ in concept but necessary if one were to have the grit to rise before dawn each day and labor in the white man's vineyard until after dark, or to wander about in the September dust offering one's sweat in return for some meager⁸ share of bread. But God was chary⁹ with miracles in those days, and so we waited — and waited.

We children, of course, were only vaguely aware of the extent of our poverty. Having no radios, few newspapers, and no magazines, we were somewhat unaware of the world outside our community. Nowadays we would be called culturally deprived¹⁰ and people would write books and hold conferences about us. In those days everybody we knew was just as hungry and ill clad as we were. Poverty was the cage in which we all were trapped, and our hatred of it was still the vague, undirected restlessness of the zoo-bred flamingo who knows that nature created him to fly free.

[5] As I think of those days I feel most poignantly the tag end of summer, the bright, dry times when we began to have a sense of shortening days and the imminence¹¹ of the cold.

By the time I was fourteen, my brother Joey and I were the only children left at our house, the older ones having left home for early marriage or the lure of the city, and the two babies having been sent to relatives who might care for them better than we. Joey was three years younger than I, and a boy, and therefore vastly inferior. Each morning our mother and father trudged wearily down the dirt road and around the bend, she to her domestic job, he to his daily unsuccessful quest¹² for work. After our few chores around the tumbledown shanty, Joey and I were free to run wild in the sun with other children similarly situated.

For the most part, those days are ill-defined in my memory, running together and combining like a fresh watercolor painting left out in the rain. I remember squatting in the road drawing a

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5. The Great Depression, a period of economic downturn that lasted from 1929-1939. Many Americans experienced unemployment and poverty during this time.
 6. **Prosperity** (*noun*) wealth or success
 7. **Amorphous** (*adjective*) without form or shape; vague
 8. **Meager** (*adjective*) small; lacking in quantity
 9. cautious or hesitant to do something
 10. **Deprived** (*adjective*) poor or disadvantaged
 11. **Imminent** (*adjective*) about to happen
 12. **Quest** (*noun*) a long and difficult search for something

picture in the dust, a picture which Joey gleefully erased with one sweep of his dirty foot. I remember fishing for minnows in a muddy creek and watching sadly¹³ my cupped hands, while Joey laughed uproariously. And I remember, that year, a strange restlessness of body and of spirit, a feeling that something old and familiar was ending, and something unknown and therefore terrifying was beginning.

One day returns to me with special clarity for some reason, perhaps because it was the beginning of the experience that in some inexplicable¹⁴ way marked the end of innocence. I was loafing under the great oak tree in our yard, deep in some reverie¹⁵ which I have now forgotten, except that it involved some secret, secret thoughts of one of the Harris boys across the yard. Joey and a bunch of kids were bored now with the old tire suspended from an oak limb, which had kept them entertained for a while.

“Hey, Lizabeth,” Joey yelled. He never talked when he could yell. “Hey, Lizabeth, let’s go somewhere.”

[10] I came reluctantly from my private world. “Where you want to go? What you want to do?”

The truth was that we were becoming tired of the formlessness¹⁶ of our summer days. The idleness whose prospect had seemed so beautiful during the busy days of spring now had degenerated¹⁷ to an almost desperate effort to fill up the empty midday hours.

“Let’s go see can we find some locusts¹⁸ on the hill,” someone suggested.

Joey was scornful. “Ain’t no more locusts there. Y’all got ‘em all while they was still green.”

The argument that followed was brief and not really worth the effort. Hunting locust trees wasn’t fun anymore by now.

[15] “Tell you what,” said Joey finally, his eyes sparkling. “Let’s us go over to Miss Lottie’s.”

The idea caught on at once, for annoying Miss Lottie was always fun. I was still child enough to scamper along with the group over rickety fences and through bushes that tore our already raggedy clothes, back to where Miss Lottie lived. I think now that we must have made a tragicomic¹⁹ spectacle, five or six kids of different ages, each of us clad in only one garment —

13. **Elude** (*verb*) to escape
14. **Inexplicable** (*adjective*) unable to be explained
15. **Reverie** (*noun*) a daydream
16. **Formless** (*adjective*) without shape or structure
17. **Degenerate** (*verb*) to worsen or decline
18. large grasshoppers
19. having both sad and funny characteristics

the girls in faded dresses that were too long or too short, the boys in patchy pants, their sweaty brown chests gleaming in the hot sun. A little cloud of dust followed our thin legs and bare feet as we tramped over the barren land.

When Miss Lottie's house came into view we stopped, ostensibly to plan our strategy, but actually to reinforce our courage. Miss Lottie's house was the most ramshackle of all our ramshackle homes. The sun and rain had long since faded its rickety frame siding from white to a sullen gray. The boards themselves seemed to remain upright not from being nailed together but rather from leaning together, like a house that a child might have constructed from cards. A brisk wind might have blown it down, and the fact that it was still standing implied a kind of enchantment that was stronger than the elements. There it stood and as far as I know is standing yet — a gray, rotting thing with no porch, no shutters, no steps, set on a cramped lot with no grass, not even any weeds — a monument to decay.²⁰

In front of the house in a squeaky rocking chair sat Miss Lottie's son, John Burke, completing the impression of decay. John Burke was what was known as queer-headed. Black and ageless, he sat rocking day in and day out in a mindless stupor,²¹ lulled by the monotonous squeak-squawk of the chair. A battered hat atop his shaggy head shaded him from the sun. Usually John Burke was totally unaware of everything outside his quiet dream world. But if you disturbed him, if you intruded upon his fantasies, he would become enraged, strike out at you, and curse at you in some strange enchanted language which only he could understand. We children made a game of thinking of ways to disturb John Burke and then to elude his violent retribution.²²

But our real fun and our real fear lay in Miss Lottie herself. Miss Lottie seemed to be at least a hundred years old. Her big frame still held traces of the tall, powerful woman she must have been in youth, although it was now bent and drawn. Her smooth skin was a dark reddish brown, and her face had Indian-like features and the stern stoicism²³ that one associates with Indian faces. Miss Lottie didn't like intruders either, especially children. She never left her yard, and nobody ever visited her. We never knew how she managed those necessities which depend on human interaction — how she ate, for example, or even whether she ate. When we were tiny children, we thought Miss Lottie was a witch and we made up tales that we half believed ourselves about her exploits.²⁴ We were far too sophisticated now, of course, to believe the witch nonsense. But old fears have a way of clinging like cobwebs, and so when we sighted the tumbledown shack, we had to stop to reinforce our nerves.

[20] "Look, there she is," I whispered, forgetting that Miss Lottie could not possibly have heard me from that distance. "She's fooling with them crazy flowers."

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20. **Decay** (*noun*) the state of rotting or falling apart
 21. **Stupor** (*noun*) daze; a lack of awareness
 22. **Retribution** (*noun*) punishment or revenge
 23. **Stoic** (*adjective*) not showing feelings or emotion
 24. **Exploit** (*noun*) an adventure

"Yeh, look at 'er."

Miss Lottie's marigolds were perhaps the strangest part of the picture. Certainly they did not fit in with the crumbling decay of the rest of her yard. Beyond the dusty brown yard, in front of the sorry gray house, rose suddenly and shockingly a dazzling strip of bright blossoms, clumped together in enormous mounds, warm and passionate and sun-golden. The old black witch-woman worked on them all summer, every summer, down on her creaky knees, weeding and cultivating and arranging, while the house crumbled and John Burke rocked. For some perverse reason, we children hated those marigolds. They interfered with the perfect ugliness of the place; they were too beautiful; they said too much that we could not understand; they did not make sense. There was something in the vigor with which the old woman destroyed the weeds that intimidated²⁵ us. It should have been a comical sight — the old woman with the man's hat on her cropped white head, leaning over the bright mounds, her big backside in the air — but it wasn't comical, it was something we could not name. We had to annoy her by whizzing a pebble into her flowers or by yelling a dirty word, then dancing away from her rage, reveling²⁶ in our youth and mocking her age. Actually, I think it was the flowers we wanted to destroy, but nobody had the nerve to try it, not even Joey, who was usually fool enough to try anything.

"Y'all git some stones," commanded Joey now and was met with instant giggling obedience as everyone except me began to gather pebbles from the dusty ground. "Come on, Lizabeth."

I just stood there peering through the bushes, torn between wanting to join the fun and feeling that it was all a bit silly.

[25] "You scared, Lizabeth?"

I cursed and spat on the ground — my favorite gesture of phony bravado.²⁷ "Y'all children get the stones, I'll show you how to use 'em."

I said before that we children were not consciously aware of how thick were the bars of our cage. I wonder now, though, whether we were not more aware of it than I thought. Perhaps we had some dim notion of what we were, and how little chance we had of being anything else. Otherwise, why would we have been so preoccupied²⁸ with destruction? Anyway, the pebbles were collected quickly, and everybody looked at me to begin the fun.

"Come on, y'all."

We crept to the edge of the bushes that bordered the narrow road in front of Miss Lottie's

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25. **Intimidate** (*verb*) to frighten someone, especially to make them do something
 26. **Revel** (*verb*) to get great pleasure from a situation or experience
 27. a show of courage to impress someone
 28. **Preoccupied** (*adjective*) concerned about only one thing

place. She was working placidly, kneeling over the flowers, her dark hand plunged into the golden mound. Suddenly zing — an expertly aimed stone cut the head off one of the blossoms.

[30] “Who out there?” Miss Lottie’s backside came down and her head came up as her sharp eyes searched the bushes. “You better git!”

We had crouched down out of sight in the bushes, where we stifled the giggles that insisted on coming. Miss Lottie gazed warily across the road for a moment, then cautiously returned to her weeding. Zing — Joey sent a pebble into the blooms, and another marigold was beheaded.

Miss Lottie was enraged now. She began struggling to her feet, leaning on a rickety cane and shouting. “Y’all git! Go on home!” Then the rest of the kids let loose with their pebbles, storming the flowers and laughing wildly and senselessly at Miss Lottie’s impotent rage. She shook her stick at us and started shakily toward the road crying, “Git ‘long! John Burke! John Burke, come help!”

Then I lost my head entirely, mad with the power of inciting²⁹ such rage, and ran out of the bushes in the storm of pebbles, straight toward Miss Lottie, chanting madly, “Old witch, fell in a ditch, picked up a penny and thought she was rich!” The children screamed with delight, dropped their pebbles, and joined the crazy dance, swarming around Miss Lottie like bees and chanting, “Old lady witch!” while she screamed curses at us. The madness lasted only a moment, for John Burke, startled at last, lurched out of his chair, and we dashed for the bushes just as Miss Lottie’s cane went whizzing at my head.

I did not join the merriment when the kids gathered again under the oak in our bare yard. Suddenly I was ashamed, and I did not like being ashamed. The child in me sulked and said it was all in fun, but the woman in me flinched at the thought of the malicious³⁰ attack that I had led. The mood lasted all afternoon. When we ate the beans and rice that was supper that night, I did not notice my father’s silence, for he was always silent these days, nor did I notice my mother’s absence, for she always worked until well into evening. Joey and I had a particularly bitter argument after supper; his exuberance³¹ got on my nerves. Finally I stretched out upon the pallet³² in the room we shared and fell into a fitful doze.

[35] When I awoke, somewhere in the middle of the night, my mother had returned, and I vaguely listened to the conversation that was audible through the thin walls that separated our rooms. At first I heard no words, only voices. My mother’s voice was like a cool, dark room in summer — peaceful, soothing, quiet. I loved to listen to it; it made things seem all right somehow. But my father’s voice cut through hers, shattering the peace.

29. **Incite** (*verb*) to encourage or stir up violent behavior

30. **Malicious** (*adjective*) destructive or cruel

31. **Exuberance** (*adjective*) the quality of being full of energy and cheerfulness

32. a straw mattress

"Twenty-two years, Maybelle, twenty-two years," he was saying, "and I got nothing for you, nothing, nothing."

"It's all right, honey, you'll get something. Everybody out of work now, you know that."

"It ain't right. Ain't no man ought to eat his woman's food year in and year out, and see his children running wild. Ain't nothing right about that."

"Honey, you took good care of us when you had it. Ain't nobody got nothing nowadays."

[40] "I ain't talking about nobody else, I m talking about me. God knows I try." My mother said something I could not hear, and my father cried out louder, "What must a man do, tell me that?"

"Look, we ain't starving. I git paid every week, and Mrs. Ellis is real nice about giving me things. She gonna let me have Mr. Ellis's old coat for you this winter — "

"Damn Mr. Ellis's coat! And damn his money! You think I want white folks' leavings?"

"Damn, Maybelle" — and suddenly he sobbed, loudly and painfully, and cried helplessly and hopelessly in the dark night. I had never heard a man cry before. I did not know men ever cried. I covered my ears with my hands but could not cut off the sound of my father's harsh, painful, despairing sobs. My father was a strong man who could whisk a child upon his shoulders and go singing through the house. My father whittled toys for us, and laughed so loud that the great oak seemed to laugh with him, and taught us how to fish and hunt rabbits. How could it be that my father was crying? But the sobs went on, unstifled, finally quieting until I could hear my mother's voice, deep and rich, humming softly as she used to hum to a frightened child.

The world had lost its boundary lines. My mother, who was small and soft, was now the strength of the family; my father, who was the rock on which the family had been built, was sobbing like the tiniest child. Everything was suddenly out of tune, like a broken accordion. Where did I fit into this crazy picture? I do not now remember my thoughts, only a feeling of great bewilderment and fear.

[45] Long after the sobbing and humming had stopped, I lay on the pallet, still as stone with my hands over my ears, wishing that I too could cry and be comforted. The night was silent now except for the sound of the crickets and of Joey's soft breathing. But the room was too crowded with fear to allow me to sleep, and finally, feeling the terrible aloneness of 4 A.M., I decided to awaken Joey.

"Ouch! What's the matter with you? What you want?" he demanded disagreeably when I had pinched and slapped him awake.

"Come on, wake up."

"What for? Go 'way."

I was lost for a reasonable reply. I could not say, "I'm scared and I don't want to be alone," so I merely said, "I'm going out. If you want to come, come on."

[50] The promise of adventure awoke him. "Going out now? Where to, Lizabeth? What you going to do?"

I was pulling my dress over my head. Until now I had not thought of going out. "Just come on," I replied tersely.

I was out the window and halfway down the road before Joey caught up with me.

"Wait, Lizabeth, where you going?"

I was running as if the Furies³³ were after me, as perhaps they were — running silently and furiously until I came to where I had half known I was headed: to Miss Lottie's yard.

[55] The half-dawn light was more eerie than complete darkness, and in it the old house was like the ruin that my world had become — foul and crumbling, a grotesque caricature.³⁴ It looked haunted, but I was not afraid, because I was haunted too.

"Lizabeth, you lost your mind?" panted Joey.

I had indeed lost my mind, for all the smoldering emotions of that summer swelled in me and burst — the great need for my mother who was never there, the hopelessness of our poverty and degradation,³⁵ the bewilderment of being neither child nor woman and yet both at once, the fear unleashed by my father's tears. And these feelings combined in one great impulse toward destruction.

"Lizabeth!"

I leaped furiously into the mounds of marigolds and pulled madly, trampling and pulling and destroying the perfect yellow blooms. The fresh smell of early morning and of dew-soaked marigolds spurred me on as I went tearing and mangling and sobbing while Joey tugged my dress or my waist crying, "Lizabeth, stop, please stop!"

[60] And then I was sitting in the ruined little garden among the uprooted and ruined flowers, crying and crying, and it was too late to undo what I had done. Joey was sitting beside me, silent and frightened, not knowing what to say. Then, "Lizabeth, look!"

33. In Greek mythology, the Furies are three goddesses characterized by wild and violent anger.

34. an exaggerated image of a person

35. **Degradation** (*noun*) loss of pride or self-respect

I opened my swollen eyes and saw in front of me a pair of large, calloused feet; my gaze lifted to the swollen legs, the age-distorted body clad in a tight cotton nightdress, and then the shadowed Indian face surrounded by stubby white hair. And there was no rage in the face now, now that the garden was destroyed and there was nothing any longer to be protected.

"M-miss Lottie!" I scrambled to my feet and just stood there and stared at her, and that was the moment when childhood faded and womanhood began. That violent, crazy act was the last act of childhood. For as I gazed at the immobile face with the sad, weary eyes, I gazed upon a kind of reality which is hidden to childhood. The witch was no longer a witch but only a broken old woman who had dared to create beauty in the midst of ugliness and sterility. She had been born in squalor³⁶ and lived in it all her life. Now at the end of that life she had nothing except a falling-down hut, a wrecked body, and John Burke, the mindless son of her passion. Whatever verve³⁷ there was left in her, whatever was of love and beauty and joy that had not been squeezed out by life, had been there in the marigolds she had so tenderly cared for.

Of course I could not express the things that I knew about Miss Lottie as I stood there awkward and ashamed. The years have put words to the things I knew in that moment, and as I look back upon it, I know that that moment marked the end of innocence. Innocence involves an unseeing acceptance of things at face value, an ignorance of the area below the surface. In that humiliating moment I looked beyond myself and into the depths of another person. This was the beginning of compassion,³⁸ and one cannot have both compassion and innocence.

The years have taken me worlds away from that time and that place, from the dust and squalor of our lives, and from the bright thing that I destroyed in a blind, childish striking out at God knows what. Miss Lottie died long ago and many years have passed since I last saw her hut, completely barren at last, for despite my wild contrition she never planted marigolds again. Yet, there are times when the image of those passionate yellow mounds returns with a painful poignancy. For one does not have to be ignorant and poor to find that his life is as barren as the dusty yards of our town. And I too have planted marigolds.

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36. the state of being extremely dirty and unpleasant
37. energy or enthusiasm
38. **Compassion** (*noun*) understanding and concern for others

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Which detail from the text best shows how growing up in poverty affected Elizabeth?
 - A. "Perhaps we had some dim notion of what we were, and how little chance we had of being anything else. Otherwise, why would we have been so preoccupied with destruction?" (Paragraph 27)
 - B. "The world had lost its boundary lines... Everything was suddenly out of tune, like a broken accordion. Where did I fit into this crazy picture?" (Paragraph 44)
 - C. "The promise of adventure awoke him. 'Going out now? Where to, Elizabeth? What you going to do?'" (Paragraph 50)
 - D. "Of course I could not express the things that I knew about Miss Lottie as I stood there awkward and ashamed." (Paragraph 63)

2. How does overhearing the conversation between her parents in paragraphs 36-43 affect Elizabeth?
 - A. Elizabeth blames her parents for struggling to support her and Joey.
 - B. Elizabeth feels confused and afraid by the upheaval in her family.
 - C. Elizabeth realizes she was wrong to treat Miss Lottie poorly.
 - D. Elizabeth hopes that the community will come together to help her family.

3. Why does Elizabeth destroy the marigolds in paragraph 59?
 - A. Elizabeth blames Miss Lottie for the decline of her neighborhood.
 - B. Elizabeth's inner turmoil drives her to destroy something beautiful.
 - C. Elizabeth resents Miss Lottie's show of wealth while her family struggles.
 - D. Elizabeth believes destroying the marigolds will earn her the other children's respect.

4. What leads to Elizabeth's revelation in paragraph 62 about what she has done?
 - A. She realizes that she is setting a bad example for her brother Joey.
 - B. She considers how she would feel if someone destroyed her garden.
 - C. She looks into Miss Lottie's eyes and sees the sadness she has caused.
 - D. She thinks about how disappointed her parents will be when they find out.

5. How do the marigolds symbolize something different for Lizabeth and Miss Lottie?

In your response, practice blending your evidence by:

- using only the part of a quote that is essential to your argument
- embedding quotations and context in a way that is natural and grammatically correct

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Many stories share the theme of coming of age and the loss of innocence. What does it mean to "come of age" or "lose your childhood innocence?" Is this realization a necessary step to become an adult?
2. At the end of the story, Lizabeth said Miss Lottie never planted more marigolds. Why do you think that was? Why do you think this detail stood out in Lizabeth's mind after so much time had passed?
3. Have you ever made a mistake that you felt was difficult to make amends for? Did you try to make amends? If so, how?
4. Have you acted impulsively or irrationally out of anger? Why do you think people do this? What are the consequences of acting out of anger?