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INTERPRETING BERRIAULT

Alcohol was invented for days which start promising enough: but then boundaries are broken and innocence is scuppered by a scarlet woman in a rose-colored dress. On the eve of her thirteenth birthday, Mary is taken to a decidedly adult party by her mother, with whom she has a transactional relationship. At the party while her mother is gadding around she spends time with her father, who arrived late. They overdo drinks and amuse-gueules, flopping down on a blue velvet sofa. Their repose is interrupted by a woman who is revealed through tone and tension as his mistress. Recognizing that Mary sees his mistress not as a girl, but in buxom fullness, he exits the room. Later Mary finds her mother about to join the revelers at the piano. They are entertained by a performer singing about the foibles of infidelity. Watching the group, Mary feels pangs of love and concern for her mother but she knows that her mother's attempts at feigning happiness is futile.

Berriault is deft at presenting consequences as they collide with choices. She depicts life (already bipolar when given half a chance) in a venomous state as she makes sharp incisions into the marrow of situations. In its circular banality consequences follow choices and decisions are made in response to consequence. Berriault frames characters against loneliness, in resigned acceptance. She captures the labors of lying on a let-go-and-let-God bed. She exposes the heartbreak, toil, and broken dreams that glue together someone else's American dream. In Berriault's world, the price of Mary debuting a green dress with an adult fit is the leery look of a stranger. Besides shedding childhood, Mary will confront her unresponsiveness towards her mother. She will see her mother, father, and his mistress as flesh, blood, and passive-aggression. And she will start to realize that much like life itself, their dynamics are constructed by choice and consequence.

I would like to pause at the consequences of indiscretion. As Mary realizes her father's weakness, her growing sexual maturity recognizes the male predator in her father. He is now a man who, by default, treats girls "with a kind of knowingness" (1). It is unlikely that he would have considered how his exploits will liberate his daughter as a consequence. The woman in the rose-colored dress and the girl in the green one are simultaneously at the heart and the periphery of the story. The stock characters of mistress and mother disrupt Mary's relationship with her father. The two women and Mary are all at various stages of their lives, recipients of the consequences of his actions. For one it will be a reprieve. For the other, it is a house arrest. For the youngest it is a form of liberation as the path to womanhood cannot be unwalked.

A short but complex interaction shows the consequences of rejection. Displaying a tentative hand at sexual politics, Mary is comfortable in the space with the woman. While not engaging, she tacitly explores the dynamics of the moment, aware that they are linked as a consequence of her father's indiscretion. She instinctively reads the physical space between them on the couch as symbolic: they are all dealing with personal versions of the "empty place where my father had been" (2). Her father's choices have catapulted her from needy-child to needed-daughter.

Berriault has a preset for contrasting disconnect with restlessness. The voyeuristic final scene illustrates a reprieve from the daily weathering of the consequences: the anti-consequence thriving on hedonism from heartache. It's the stuff of honky-tonk bars and by-the-hour motels. A deliberate rebellion against life's remorseless wear and tear. Coming to the parlor from the blue velvet, we join a Lynchian hyperreality of sequined cabaret and lurid lyrics. A pastiche of close-to-the-bone mirth, numbed by moonshine in the punch bowl. How can we be miserable if we sound this happy? But here, in a setting rife with the taunting of consequence and feigned shrieks of joy, Mary takes a significant step to maturity. She feels empathy for her mother as the recipient of a lifetime of consequences. Who despite being surrounded by people, is tragically isolated. Mary resigns herself to the possibility that for her mother, and perhaps for herself, "all attempts would end in failure" (3).