

GRACE PERIOD by Will Baker

You notice first a difference in the quality of space. The sunlight is still golden through the dust hanging in the driveway, where your wife pulled out a few minutes ago in the Celica on a run to the mailbox, and the sky is still a regular blue, but it feels as if for an instant everything stretched just slightly, a few millimeters then contracted again. (1)

You shut off the electric hedge trimmers, thinking maybe vibration is affecting your inner ear. Then you are aware that the dog is whining from under the porch. On the other hand, you don't hear a single bird song. A semi shifts down with a long back trap of exhaust on the state highway a quarter mile away. A few inches above one horizon an invisible jet is drawing a thin white line across the sky. (2)

You are about to turn the trimmers on again when you get the startling sense that the earth under your feet has taken on a charge. It is not quite a trembling, but something like the deep throb of a very large dynamo at a great distance. Simultaneously there is a fluctuation of light, a tiny pulse, coming from behind the hills. In a moment another, and then another. Again and more strongly you have the absurd sense that everything inflates for a moment, then shrinks. (3)

Your heart strikes you in the chest then, and you think, instantly, aneurysm. You are 135 over 80, and should have had a checkup two months ago. But no, the dog is howling now, and he's not alone. The neighbour's black lab is also in full cry, and in the distance a dozen others have begun yammering. (4)

You stride into the house, not hurrying but not dawdling either, and punch in the number of a friend who lives in the city on the other side of the hills, the county seat. The tone dances a long pause, then a busy signal. You consider for a moment, then dial the local volunteer fire chief, whom you know. Also busy. (5)

Stretching the twenty-foot cord, you peer out the window. This time the pulse is unmistakable, a definite brightening of the sky to the west, and along with it a timber somewhere in the house creaks. You punch the Sheriff. Busy. Highway Patrol. Busy. 911. Busy. A recorded voice erupts, strident and edged with static, telling you all circuits are busy. (6)

You look outside again and now there is a faint shimmering in the air. One the windowsill outside, against the glass, a few flakes of ash have settled. KVTX. Busy. The Courier. Busy. On some inexplicable frantic whim you dial out of state, to your father-in-law (Where is your wife, she should have the mail by now?) who happens to be a professor of geology on a distinguished faculty. The ringing signal this time. Once. Twice. Three times. A click. (7)

"Physical plant." (8)

Doctor Abendsachs, you babble, you wanted Doctor Abendsachs. (9)

"This is physical plant, buddy. We can't connect you here." (10)

What's going on, you should, what is happening with the atmosphere - (11)

He doesn't know. They are in a windowless basement. Everything fine there. It's lunchtime and they are making up the weekly football pool. (12)

It is snowing lightly now outside, on the driveway and lawn and garage. You can see your clippers propped pathetically against the hedge. Once more, at top speed, you punch your father-in-law's number. Again a ringing. A click. (13)

This time a recording tells you that all operators are busy and your call will be answered by the first available. The voice track ends and a burst of music begins. It is a large studio orchestra, heavy on violins, playing a version of "Hard Day's Night." At the point where the lyrics would "sleeping like a log," the sound skips, wobbles, and skips again as if an old-fashioned needle has been bumped from a record groove. (14)

You look out the window once more, as the house begins to shudder, and see that it is growing brighter and brighter and brighter. (15)

PART A: Selected Response

1. Which of the following is the most likely explanation of the event described in the story?
 - A. Earthquake
 - B. Forest fire
 - C. Hurricane
 - D. Nuclear explosion
2. How has coherence been created in the following line: *“On the other hand, you don’t head a single bird song”* (2)?
 - A. Parallel structure
 - B. Pronoun reference
 - C. Repetition
 - D. Transitions
3. What figurative device has been used in the line, *“A few inches above one horizon an invisible jet is drawing a thin white line across the sky”*? (2)
 - A. Allusion
 - B. Hyperbole
 - C. Irony
 - D. Personification
4. The protagonist is described as *“[striding] into the house, not hurrying but not dawdling either”* (5). What does this seem to suggest about his emotional state?
 - A. He is concerned but tries to remain calm
 - B. He is not bothered and easily maintains his composure
 - C. He is oblivious and continues going about his normal routine
 - D. He is panic-stricken and makes no effort to hide his distress
5. What emphatic device is used in the lines, *“You punch the Sheriff. Busy. Highway Patrol. Busy. 911. Busy”* (6)?
 - A. Punctuation marks
 - B. Repetition
 - C. Rhetorical questions
 - D. Sentence brevity
6. What is the best meaning of the bolded word in the following line: *“A recorded voice erupts, **strident** and edged with static, telling you all circuits are busy”* (6)?
 - A. Calm
 - B. Faint
 - C. Loud
 - D. Shrill
7. What emphatic device is used in the line, *“You look out the window once more, as the house begins to shudder, and see that it is growing brighter and brighter and brighter”* (15)?
 - A. Parallel structure
 - B. Repetition
 - C. Rhetorical questions
 - D. Sentence fragments
8. Which of the following would be the most appropriate theme for this story?
 - A. A life lived to satisfy the desires of someone else is an unfulfilled life
 - B. Humankind is often rendered powerless to the very forces it attempts to control
 - C. It is better to embrace change with the passing of time than to be left behind
 - D. The consequences people face are directly proportional to the actions they take in life

3. From what point of view is this story told? Explain the effectiveness of this choice with TWO specific references to the text.

4. **EXTRA PRACTICE: Analytical Essay in Response to a Prose Piece**

On your final exam, you will be expected to write an analytical essay in response to an unseen prose piece. You can attempt to write a practice analytical essay on “Grace Period” in preparation for this assessment.

Discuss how **point of view**, **imagery**, and **conflict** all create suspense in the short story “Grace Period” by Will Baker.

Planning Space (WILL NOT BE EVALUATED)



