

# The Beginning of Grief

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*Characters in fiction can be complex and puzzling, and they can evoke mixed responses from the reader. Consider your reactions to the characters in this story. How do you think the author wants you to perceive them?*

From the way his five children gathered around him at the dinner table Stanion could tell something was wrong. He put his silverware down beside his plate, leaving untouched the food he had prepared and heaped there, and leaned his forehead on clasped hands as if to say grace. He was reaching his limit. Beneath his closed eyelids, inflamed by lime burns and bits of sand, he saw pulsing networks, as though his vessels were of neon, and then the substance and strength of his muscles and long limbs seemed to move upward, pulsing, and he felt weak, out of touch with the big bulk of his body, reduced to less than he was, less than he'd ever been, trapped within the small sphere of his eye. The size of his world now.

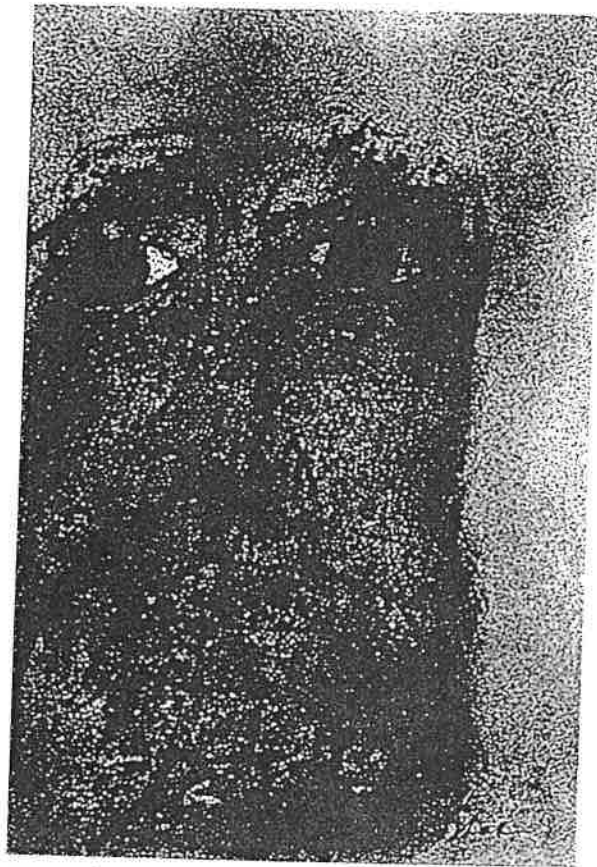
He would quit work late, drive from whatever part of the county his job, plastering, had taken him to that day, back to Minneapolis,

and pick up the little ones, the two girls, at the baby sitter's, and then drive back home, to the outskirts of St. Paul, and cook dinner and call the three boys in to the table—now that it was summer, they spent the day at home—only to see in their attitudes that they were trying to conceal something. Then another circuit, familiar as the first, began. He would have to travel through the events of their day, prying his way into them, find out what the trouble was, find out who had caused it, and set right the one who was at fault, or, if there had been fighting, punish him. He hated it. It was difficult for him to pass judgment on anyone, much less his own children, and even harder for him to see them hurt. His wife had always handled the discipline.

She was prudent and judicious, and had no patience with any kind of wrongdoing. For years she tried to persuade him to give up his job, because she felt his employers were taking advantage of him. They went on long vacations

° Woiwode (woi'wōōd-ē).





*Distressed Man* (1963) by Ben Shahn (1898–1969).  
Watercolor.  
Private Collection

and left the business in his hands. They showed up for work irregularly, at their leisure, knowing that he would keep things in order, and never increased his wages. But they were well-meaning and young, and he stayed on with them, in spite of her disapproval, because he liked them and knew that without him they wouldn't have a business. The memory of it, along with a thousand other memories, tormented him now. A year ago she died. The torment was more than grief. It grew, linking one memory to another, linking networks of them together, and would not let her go.

"Dad? Are you all right?"

He let his arms drop beside his plate. "Yes. Just tired."

She was the periphery of everything, closing around his vision, his mind, his actions, like a second conscience. His ideas, before he could speak them, were observed by her and he gave them up. The sheen of her hair was in the hair of the older girl, who was only five, and to run his hand over the girl's hair was excruciating, almost a sin. Her indignation was in his voice when he began arguing bitterly with his employers and when, ten months ago, he gave them final notice. He mortgaged the house, sold the car, hired a laborer, and started a business of his own. *Wm. Stanion & Sons, Plastering*, he hand-painted on the doors and tailgate of an old pickup he bought.

All they had for transportation was the pickup. In the winter and when it was raining, the six of them rode in the cab, the boys holding the girls on their laps, an acrid smell of rubber and gasoline enwrapping them, the bags of plaster color breaking and spilling and staining the floorboards, then merging into a muddy gray. In good weather the boys rode in the bed of the truck, and at first they liked it so much that they sang and shouted, they stood and made wings like birds, they held their arms like Superman, and he had to keep knocking on the rear window and signaling them to sit. But lately when they went anywhere the boys huddled down with their backs against the cab, and Stanion could see, as they climbed out over the tailgate at their destination, her gestures and her averted eyes when she was suffering silent humiliation.

He would have taken his life just to end the torment, just to be at peace, and maybe to be with her (who could say?), if it hadn't been for the children. And when they were bad or unhappy he felt there was no use. He looked across the table at his middle son, Kevin, aged



ten, who sat with his elbows on the tabletop and his eyes lowered, forking food into his mouth as fast as he could. Kevin's large skull had a bluish tint to it. A few days ago, for some unaccountable reason, he had taken out the electric razor and shaved off all his hair.

"Well, what kind of trouble did you cause today?" Stanion asked, and his words made him feel weary and resentful. He was being unjust. He couldn't help it. It seemed Kevin was always the guilty one. He had a bad temper, a savage energy, and was unpredictable. When she was alive, she seemed to favor Kevin, yet he was the only one she lost her temper with. Once she caught him striking matches along the foundation of the house and came up behind him, grabbed him by the arm, grabbed up a bundle of the matches, set the matches ablaze, and held them under his hand until he understood what it felt like to be burned.

Kevin couldn't stand to lose. When the simplest game or argument didn't go in his favor, he started a fight, and if he was left alone with the younger ones he set up strict rules, such as no singing or talking, no TV, no dinner, or he made them march in unison around the room, and if they violated the rules or disobeyed his commands he hit them or shoved them into a closet and held the door shut.

Kevin looked up, gave an impatient scowl, and said, "What did I *do*? Nothing." His gray eyes looked even larger now that he had no hair, and his long eyelashes, catching the light of the bare bulb overhead, sparkled as he blinked several times. He was also a practiced liar.

"*Nothing*? Then what's the matter? Why do you act so guilty? Why are you all so quiet?"

"We're eating," Kevin said.

Stanion turned to his eldest son, who sat next to Kevin, and said in a restrained and altered tone, as though speaking to an arbiter,

"Carl, what is this?" Carl was twelve but could be left alone with the girls, the youngest of whom was only three, in complete trust. He understood them, sensed their needs, anticipated their whims, was gentle, and so could care for them better than most adults. He was straightforward and truthful unless he was protecting one of the others, in which case, with his intelligence, he could make himself a blank.

"Carl," Stanion said, placing both fists, broad as saucers, on the tabletop. "I asked you a question. What's been going on here?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I don't think I really saw it."

"Saw what?"

"Anything that happened."

"Then something did happen."

"I don't know."

"You just said it did."

"I didn't see it."

"Ach!"

It was futile. The two girls, sitting along the side of the table to his left, their wide eyes fastened on him, went pale at the sound of his voice. It angered him to keep at it this way, to give it such importance, but his interrogating and lecturing were becoming harder to control, obsessive, and more involved and emotional. He rarely lifted a hand against the children, as she sometimes had; he felt it was unnecessary and wrong, and, besides, he feared the strength of an adult against a child, especially his own strength. He stared for a long time at the open lime burns on his knuckles, clenching his fists, angered even more by his indecisiveness, and then reached for his fork. He stopped. His youngest son, Jim, who sat across from the girls, alone at that side of the table, looked anxiously at Stanion, then at his brothers, and then at his food, which he had hardly touched.



This boy, changed so by her death, had become Stanion's favorite. He was no longer exuberant and cheerful. He woke at night and wandered through the bedrooms trailing a blanket, saying her name, and if his wanderings and the sound of his voice didn't wake Stanion so that he could take the boy into bed with him, he searched through all the rooms of the house, went out the door into the backyard, went to the plot where she had had her garden, and lay down there and slept until morning. He was old enough to know his mother as his sisters would never know her, but too young to be a companion to his brothers, who became close after her death. When he approached them, shy and ill at ease, they sent him to play with the girls. For a while he had quietly accepted this. But since he started school he had been bringing home his own playmates—a procession of the most reticent, underfed, tattered, backward boys in his class. He invited them in for meals, offered them the pick of his toys, and attached himself to them, feeding off their presence, praising them, devoting himself to them, until they became bored with his passive reverence and worshipful stare and stopped coming to the house. Now the boy's eyes, light green, large and seductive, were traveling around the table with a harried look.

With his lime-burned hand, Stanion reached out and touched the boy's shoulder. "You didn't do anything, did you, Jim?" he asked, and the boy, shrugging off Stanion's hand, turned clear around and took hold of the back of his chair and broke into tears.

"Carl! What's this about? Answer me!"

"I don't know how to," Carl said, and looked aside at Kevin, who was still eating as fast as he could.

"Did he hurt Jim?" Stanion demanded. "Is Kevin the cause of this?"

Carl lowered his eyes.

"Jim, you can tell me," Stanion said. "You don't have to be afraid now."

"I'm done," Kevin said, and scraped back his chair. "I'm going out."

"You sit right where you are till I'm through with you."

Kevin sat, piled more food on his plate, and started eating again.

"And if we have to sit here all night till I find out what's been going on," Stanion said, "we will."

Jim shifted his weight restlessly, his eyes made an anxious circuit of the table, and then, shrinking back in his chair, he cried out, "He kicked Marvin!"

"Who did?"

"Kevin!"

"Kicked him?"

"Then Marvin went home! He was crying!" Marvin, a frail boy who had just moved up from Kentucky, was Jim's most recent and most enduring friend.

"What is this? Carl!"

Carl kept his eyes down, picking at his food, then murmured, "We were having a track meet over at the school and Marvin was on Kevin's side. Jim and I were on the other. Marvin got tired toward the end and didn't want to run, so maybe Kevin did something. I don't know. I didn't see it. I was running."

Realizing that Carl had said all he was going to say, Stanion moved his eyes to Kevin. "Is this true?"

"No."

"Don't lie to me."

"Marvin just started crying and wanted to go home, that's all. He's a baby."

"Quit eating and look at me when I speak to you. Now nobody just starts crying for no reason—I know that and you know it too."

"I told him to play right. He wasn't playing right."

"Wasn't playing right. What's right?"



Sensing he had exposed himself, brought out something that had caused trouble in the past, Kevin's face lost its color and he seemed breathless, as though he were running again, circling something dangerous. "We were way ahead in points," he said, "and then Marvin faked like he was tired. He wouldn't do anything any more. Then when we were all running the mile he just walked along. He could have got second or third, at least, and we score 5, 3, 1. He didn't care whether we got those last points. We needed them."

"You mean you hurt him just because you were worried about losing?"

"Who says I hurt him?"

"Jim said you kicked him."

"If I had to run every race, Marvin could run at least one. He was just in the field events."

"How could you do such a thing?"

"What?"

"Whatever you did."

"Well, what would you do if you were all tired out and came around the track about the third time and there your teammate was, just walking along just like an old lady."

"So you kicked him."

"I brushed against him. Maybe I nicked him with my foot."

"Can't you leave other people alone? Don't you realize he's one of the few friends Jim's got? Let him run or walk or crawl or sit on his can or do what he wants. You hear me!" Silverware jumped as Stanion hit the tabletop. "What's the matter with you? What makes you think you're a judge of others?"

"I know I was running and he wasn't."

"He's not you. He's——"

"He was on my side!"

"Will you *listen* to me!"

Stanion started to rise, and his belt caught on the edge of the table, upsetting his coffee and a carton of milk. Kevin pushed himself

back from the table and tipped over his chair, and the slap that was meant for him carried past and struck the youngest girl. She went back off her stool neatly as a bundle and dropped to the floor. When she realized where she was, she started wailing, and her sister joined in.

"Now look! Look what you made me do," Stanion said, and started around the table with all the galling details—the girl on the floor, the puddle of coffee and milk beside her, Jim with his hands over his face—streaming along the edge of his vision, sharpening his outrage. Kevin hadn't got to his feet, and was maneuvering around among the chairs on his hands and knees, trying to make it to a safe spot, his rump raised. Stanion came up behind him and kicked hard and struck bone, and Kevin, his limbs splaying out, hit flat on his stomach. Stanion lifted him to his feet. "Now get upstairs," he said. "Get upstairs before something worse happens."

Kevin gave him a furious going over with his eyes before he turned and ran up the steps. And then, as Kevin disappeared around the corner, Stanion realized what he had done and started trembling. He sent Jim and Carl outside, took the girls, one in each arm, and carried them into the bedroom and tried to comfort them. Their eyes were wide with terror, and the youngest girl didn't want to be touched.

When they were calmed, he undressed them and put them to bed, hardly aware of what he was doing. The presence in the upstairs room demanded all his attention. He went into the kitchen and sat at the table, his broad workman's knees bending with effort. He ached from balancing on a springy scaffold the whole day, all the while carrying a hawk of heavy plaster and reaching overhead to skim a finish coat on the ceiling. He felt too old to go on with the work. Tonight brought it to an end.



No. There was bookwork to do, orders to call in, material to get, his lunch to pack.

He wanted to go upstairs but wasn't sure it was the right thing to do. He didn't want his thoughts to focus. He was afraid of what he'd done. He started eating, but the food was chilly and he had no appetite.

He gathered up the dishes, carried them to the sink, shook detergent over them, adjusted the temperature of the water, and let it run while he took a rag from the S-trap under the sink and wiped off the table. Then he got down on his hands and knees, and as he was mopping up the milk and coffee his vision narrowed, the patch of linoleum he was staring at darkened, and he felt faint. He stood up and leaned against the table. An even, abrasive sound was traveling through his consciousness as though it meant to erode it. He hurried over to the sink and shut off the water. The sound stayed.

He dipped a plate in and out of the water, rinsing off the grease, and his sight fastened on the soapy rainbow sliding along the plate's rim. He let it slip beneath the suds. He had an image of her turning from the sink, inclining her head to one side and lifting the hair from her cheek with the back of her hand, her face flushed, her eyes traveling around the room restlessly, but with an abstract look, as though there was no name for what she was searching for.

He went up the steps. Kevin was lying face down on the unmade bed, his back heaving, his exclamations and sobs muted by a pillow he held clasped over his head. Stanion eased himself onto the edge of the bed and lifted the pillow away. "Listen. Listen, now. I've tried——"

The boy grabbed at the loose bedclothes and tucked them around his face.

"How many times have I told you——" Stanion began, then stopped. He couldn't stand

being sanctimonious. He looked away and saw the bed—with Kevin's legs, Kevin's body half covered with a sheet stretched out on it—and part of his own shoulder enclosed in a mirror, and it was as though he were looking through to the past. The scene, scaled down, dimmer than in hospital light, was a scene he had lived through once, with her, and it was the same. Those close to you showed up well and were solid and understandable, were fixed for good in your mind—but only in your mind. Their real selves were at a distance, a part of the world, and the world opened up, took them without reason; was opening up just as before, the body beside him falling away, while he sat off to the side, his shoulder showing in the tilted mirror, helpless.

Then he felt himself being drawn down too. He searched for something outside him to hold to. Wadded socks lay on the floor, gathering tufts of dust. Tubes and coils of a dismantled radio were strewn in one corner along with a model pistol of plastic, model ships, and a Boy Scout neckerchief. Dirty clothes were spread over the top of the dresser, trailing down its front, and more clothes were draped over the back of a chair.

"If your mother——" Stanion stopped. The words only took him down deeper. He put his hands on the boy's shoulders and tried to lift him up, but Kevin struggled free and dropped back onto the mattress.

"Don't now," Stanion said. "Don't carry on so. Please. Sit up."

"I'm sorry!"

"I know. Now don't."

"I can't stop!"

"Try to look at it——"

"My head hurts! It feels like something wants to come out of it!"

Stanion passed his hand over Kevin's skull, and the sensation of stiff stubble rubbing across the palm of his hand—what led the boy



to do this? what did this hark back to?—made him feel even more helpless and afraid. “Don’t now,” he said, and his being closed around the words. Father, mother, nurse, teacher, arbiter, guardian, judge—all the roles were too much. He no longer had the power to reach through to his children as the person he was, their father, the man who loved them, and let them know he loved them, and that inability, more than anything else, was the thing breaking him.

He heard a muffled sound, regular and tense, and at first he thought it was a summons, a last thing he would have to face up to, and when nothing came he believed it was the labored beating of his own heart. He turned. Kevin was lying in the same position, face down, but his hand was tapping over the covers in a widening arc, feeling its way toward Stanion; it touched him tentatively, backed away, and then came down, damp and hot with perspiration, on his thigh. Stanion took the hand in his and an order came over the room.

“I’m sorry,” Kevin said in a muffled voice. “Forgive me.”

“Did I hurt you?”

“No.”

“Do you want to come downstairs?”

“No.”

“Do you feel any better?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve sent Jim and Carl outdoors. The girls are in bed. I’m sorry they had to see it.”

“I didn’t mean to do it. He wasn’t playing right.”

“I know. Here,” he said, and raised Kevin and arranged him so they were sitting next to one another. “Let’s go downstairs and do the dishes,” Stanion said. “Then we’ll both feel better.” He put his arm around his son’s waist. “Will you come downstairs and help me do the dishes?”

## Reading Check

1. Who takes care of the children while Stanion is working?
2. Which of the children has become Stanion’s favorite?
3. Why is Kevin difficult to play with?
4. How does Stanion punish Kevin?
5. How are father and son reconciled?

## For Study and Discussion

### Analyzing and Interpreting the Story

1. The main characters in this story are William Stanion and his son Kevin. The father’s character is well defined because we are able to share his inner thoughts and feelings. Using details from the story, tell what kind of person William Stanion is.
2. We can watch Kevin and listen to him, and we know how other people feel about him, but his inner thoughts and feelings are not directly revealed. Using clues you are given in the story, tell what kind of person you think Kevin is.
3. Stanion’s dead wife is an important presence in this story. **a.** How has her death affected the entire family? **b.** In what specific ways do memories of his wife “torment” Stanion?
4. Kevin, who has shaved his head, cries out, “My head hurts! It feels like something wants to come out of it!” What do you think Kevin is trying to release?
5. The climax of this story occurs when Stanion takes Kevin’s outstretched hand. **a.** What comes “over the room” when this happens? **b.** What changes do you think are taking place in Kevin and his father?



## Literary Elements

### Complex Characterization

In simple forms of fiction—such as in some mystery and adventure stories—the characters are “all good” or “all bad.” But in serious fiction, we find that characters cannot be so easily pigeonholed. These characters are complex. We find there is more than one side to them, just as there is more than one side to us all. At times, the central characters in such stories do things we admire a great deal, but they also do things that are not so admirable. It is important in such stories to understand the characters’ **motivations**—the reasons they act as they do.

The character of William Stanion in this story is a complex one. We are told in the opening paragraph that Stanion is “reaching his limit,” that he feels “weak” and “out of touch.” When we learn that his wife has died, we feel great sympathy for him. But then he tangles with a difficult son. What other side of Stanion do we see when he strikes out at Kevin? What are his motives for acting so impulsively, even cruelly?

Kevin is also a complex character. How would you explain Kevin’s cruelty to a younger child?

## Language and Vocabulary

### Determining Precise Meanings

When Stanion recalls his wife, he thinks of her as “*prudent* and *judicious*.” The words *prudent* and *judicious* are close in meaning, but they are not exact synonyms. The word *prudent* means “careful” or “cautious,” while *judicious* means “wise” or “sound in judgment.” One could be *prudent* without being *judicious*.

Using a college or unabridged dictionary, determine the precise meanings of the following pairs of italicized words:

He understood them, *sensed* their needs, *anticipated* their whims . . .

He was *straightforward* and *truthful* . . .

He was no longer *exuberant* and *cheerful*.

“Father, mother, nurse, teacher, *arbiter*, guardian, *judge* . . .

## Writing About Literature

### Expressing an Opinion

Stories like “The Beginning of Grief,” which trace the pattern of an internal conflict, are different in many ways from stories like “Leinigen Versus the Ants,” which trace the pattern of an exciting external conflict. In a paragraph, tell which kind of story you prefer to read, and why. If you enjoy both kinds of stories, state your reasons and tell what effect each kind of story has on you.

## About the Author

Larry Woiwode (1941– )



Larry Woiwode was born in Carrington, North Dakota. He has said: “In the novel we want to see dramatic interaction among people, building up, we hope, to a climax, or a denouement, and that’s what I attempt to do. . . .” Woiwode’s first novel, *What I’m Going to Do (I Think)*, won the 1969 William Faulkner Foundation Award for best first novel. His second novel, *Beyond the Bedroom Wall*, published in 1975, also earned much critical praise. A book of poems, *Even Tide*, appeared in the same year. In 1981 Woiwode published his novel *Poppa John*. His most recent novels are *Indian Affairs* (1992) and *Silent Passengers* (1993).

