

Shoofly Pie

Short Story by Naomi Shihab Nye

Is there a cure for GRIEF?



**INDIANA
STANDARDS**

READING STANDARD

10.3.4 Analyze characters' traits by what the characters say about themselves in narration, dialogue, and soliloquy (when they speak out loud to themselves).

KEY IDEA The death of a loved one can be overwhelming. Yet people who experience such losses must eventually get on with their lives. In "Shoofly Pie," employees at a restaurant give new meaning to the term *comfort food* when they find a way to deal with grief.

QUICKWRITE With a small group, make a list of strategies that can help a person overcome grief. You may use the list that is shown to get started. Then write a short paragraph explaining which strategy or strategies might be most helpful to you or someone you know.

*Ways of Dealing
with Grief*

1. Talk to friends.
2. Keep busy.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Author Online

LITERARY ANALYSIS: CHARACTER TRAITS

Characters often have consistent qualities, or **character traits**, that readers learn about over the course of a story. A trait may be a physical quality, such as clumsiness, or an aspect of the character's personality. In "Shoofly Pie," Nye sometimes directly describes a character trait. For example, we find out that the main character's boss is a good mentor in the following statement by the narrator:

That was the greatest thing about Riyad—he never made anyone feel stupid for not knowing something.

Instead of directly describing a character's traits, writers often let the reader draw conclusions about them. Your conclusions may be based on

- the character's words, thoughts, and actions
- what other characters say or think about the character

As you read "Shoofly Pie," note the traits of the main characters.

Review: Static and Dynamic Characters

READING SKILL: CONNECT

You can enhance your understanding and enjoyment of a story when you **connect** to it, or relate the content to your own experiences and knowledge. For example, you might connect your own experience of grief with the main character's grief in "Shoofly Pie." Ask the following questions to help make connections:

- Does a character remind me of myself or of someone I know?
- What do I know about the time, place, event, or situation described in the story?
- How is the story similar to other works I have read?

As you read "Shoofly Pie," record connections you make in a chart like the one shown.

Episode in the Story	My Connection
Mattie grieves over her mother's death.	When my uncle died, I stayed in my room all weekend.

Review: Compare and Contrast

Bicultural Upbringing

Like the character of Mattie, Naomi Shihab Nye (nī) is of Arab descent. She was raised in a bicultural household by her American mother and Palestinian father. As a teenager she spent a year in the Middle East and got to know her Palestinian grandmother, who became an important inspiration to her. Nye started writing poetry at age six, taking as subject matter her neighborhood's cats, squirrels, and trees.



Naomi Shihab Nye
born 1952

In Praise of Diversity Today, Nye is an award-winning poet and fiction writer. She still loves to write about familiar sights and sounds, but she also seeks to promote peace and cross-cultural understanding through her work. Nye believes that connections between people from different backgrounds enrich society as a whole: "I've never understood the impulse to be with people only like ourselves. How dull that would be."



MORE ABOUT THE AUTHOR
For more on Naomi Shihab Nye, visit the Literature Center at ClassZone.com.

Background

A Restaurant Remembered Nye's inspiration for the Good for You Restaurant in "Shoofly Pie" came from her own memories. While attending college, she worked as a cook at a natural foods restaurant called the Greenwood Grocery. The experience left a lasting impression. Nye says that she has made several attempts in her writing to memorialize the "characters, flavors, and fragrances" of a place that has since passed out of existence.

SHOOFLY PIE

Naomi Shihab Nye

*On our way somewhere we sat at this table—
wood clear-varnished, a design to hold the days:
two people talking toward the center;
candlelight on each face . . .*

—William Stafford¹

Mattie couldn't believe she dropped the giant honey jar on the floor the moment the boss entered the kitchen after his overseas trip. Have you ever watched a gallon of honey ooze into a slow-motion golden dance around a mound of broken glass?

It might have looked glorious if she hadn't been the one who dropped it. The boss stared at her with his deep eyes, his mouth wide open. "And you . . . must be . . . ?" he asked.

A secret voice in her head replied, *The idiot. The donkey.* But her real voice said, "The person they hired while you were out of town." Then she said, "I'm
10 so sorry—I'm also very sorry about your father," and knelt down.

You couldn't exactly use a *broom* on honey. A shovel maybe? She had a weird desire to stick both her hands into it.

Or, she might faint. Having never fainted before, she always imagined it as a way to escape a difficult scene. That, or going to the bathroom. "Excuse me," she'd said, many other times in her life. "I'll be right back." At her own mother's funeral recently, she'd spent a lot of time in the bathroom with her

ANALYZE VISUALS
Examine the photograph.
What details help you
form a mental image
of the story's setting?

1. William Stafford (1914–1993): an American poet who wrote about the daily concerns of people.



PUMPKIN
VEGIE LENTIL
REAL
MISO
SALAD

MONIN

forehead pressed against the cool tiles. She felt safe, removed from the grief of what was waiting for her back in the world. **A**

In this case, a huge mess to clean up, and twelve sprouty salads to make, **20** *pronto*.² A bouquet of orders hung clipped to the silver line strung over the window between the kitchen and the dining room. She could peek out into the happier part of the restaurant, the eating domain, where regular people with purses and backpacks and boyfriends were waiting for their lunches.

How had she gotten into this?

Long ago, before her mother was diagnosed with cancer, when she still thought she just had migraine headaches, Mattie offered to make dinner by herself. She was twelve. During the whirl of washing lettuce, hulling fresh peas, stirring spaghetti sauce, and lighting the oven to heat the bread, she'd managed to pull down from the wall the giant shelf over the stove that held **30** matchbooks, tea, boxes, spice jars, recipes, birthday candles, half-empty sacks of Arabic coffee, yellowed grocery lists, vitamins, and her mother's favorite cabbage teapot with a china rabbit for a lid. One ear broke off the rabbit and chips of china fell into the spaghetti pot. Her mother came into the kitchen with a wet rag over her head to see what was happening.

Mattie should have known she was destined for disaster.

Today the boss squatted beside her. She felt comfortable to be in the presence of another American-of-Arab-descent, but it didn't seem the right moment to mention it. She'd seen his name on the mail that came in his absence. Despite her clumsiness, he was smiling and mild. "Thank you," he **40** said. "My father was a good man. As for the honey, I think I'll get one of those big scoops we use in the cooler and take care of it myself. Why don't you go back to what you were doing? Don't worry about it!" **B**

She stared after him. What a nice voice! Relieved, she turned back to the counter to sprinkle sunflower seeds and shaved cheese over the bowls of lettuce . . . and there was the empty honey bear sitting with its hat off, waiting for her to refill it for the waitress who had shoved it at her—Mattie would suggest the waitresses take care of such details themselves from now on.

Two weeks ago she'd never even thought about being a cook in a restaurant and now she was ready to help run the place.

50 The boss could have fired her. Some bosses were mean. She'd heard about them from her parents over the years. But suddenly she wanted this job very much. She needed it.

She needed the money, but even more, she needed distraction. It was too hard to be home by herself for the summer since her mother had died the first week of June. Her father was at work all day long until suppertime. Three days after the funeral, she'd gotten on a bus to ride downtown to the library and, in her distraction, had gotten off too early. She saw the *Good for You Restaurant* staring her in the face. **C**

That's what she needed. Something that was good for her.

60 So she stepped inside for a late lunch. After ordering an avocado sandwich

A **CONNECT**

Reread lines 1–18. Based on your experiences, do you find Mattie's reaction to her accident believable? Why or why not?

B **CHARACTER TRAITS**

What words would you use to describe Mattie's boss?

C **CONNECT**

Recall a time when you did something to distract yourself from painful thoughts. Why might a restaurant job be a good distraction for Mattie?

2. *pronto* (prŏn'tō): promptly.

with cheese, she'd asked the waitress, "Do you like working here?" It was a cozy environment. Large, abstract paintings, mismatched chairs, real flowers in ceramic vases on each table. Ceiling fans, soft jazz playing.

The waitress sighed and shrugged.

Mattie asked, "Do you get to eat for free?"

"Sure. But who needs food? I'm not hungry. You get sick of food when you haul it around all day." She whispered, "Anyway, I'm too in love to think about food."

"With who?" (Mattie wondered why, when someone else whispered, you
70 whispered back.)

"The guy who washes dishes. Augie. If you go to the restroom, you can see him through the doorway. He has long blond hair and an earring."

Who didn't have an earring, these days? Even men who looked like Mattie's father had an earring.

So she walked back to the restroom just to see the love interest of a person she didn't even know, to distract herself from her own thoughts. The dishwasher looked bubbly and clean in his white apron. As if he washed himself between dishes. Slicked up and soapy. He grinned at Mattie when he caught her glance.

80 "He's cute," Mattie whispered to the waitress, upon her return. She ordered a bowl of fresh peach cobbler. She'd barely eaten in days.

"The problem with working here right now," the waitress said, "is—we're so short-handed. Johnny's the main cook, but his grandpa died in Alabama, and he went over to help his grandma out two weeks ago. Plus, our boss Riyad was called to Beirut suddenly for his father's funeral—everyone is dying! Riyad's great, he helps out in the kitchen when he's here. But without them both, it's a nightmare! Riyad thought we needed an extra cook even before everybody left. Do you know anybody who'd like to be a cook?"

Fueled by her cobbler, Mattie was a danger to society. Plus, if everyone was
90 bereaved in this place, she'd fit right in. "I would."

"Do you have experience?"

"Of course!" Who didn't? She'd been inventing sandwiches and slicing elegant strips of celery for years. She made quick stir-frys for her parents and super-French-toast on the weekends. She'd often made her mother's sack lunches as well as her own—her mother had taught at a Montessori school where she had to heat up twenty little orange containers in the microwave at lunchtime every day. None of her students ate peanut butter anymore, she said—they ate curries, casseroles, and tortilla soup.

Mattie even read cookbooks for relaxation sometimes. While her mother
100 was dying, she couldn't concentrate very well on novels and found herself fixating on women's magazine recipes describing how to make cakes in the shapes of baby lambs and chicks.

"How do I apply?" The waitress dragged Sergio, temporary cook-in-command, to Mattie's table. He had a frantic glaze in his eyes, but asked a few questions and wrote her phone number down. Then he told her to show up

to work the next day. That was it. No application form, no interview. Mattie did not say, “I want to cook here because my mother just died.” By the next day she’d applied for a health card, her backpack was stashed under the cash register, and her own white apron was tied around her neck.

110 Augie, the dishwasher, came out wiping his hands to welcome her.

Examining the menu closely from her new perspective, Mattie tried to memorize it on the spot, while Sergio juggled salad-making with the spreading of mayonnaise on homemade bread. His large hands looked awkward sprinkling wispy curls of carrot among lettuce and arugula leaves in the line-up of bowls.

Looking down onto the top of Mattie’s head, he said, “Would you wash those flats of strawberries and mushrooms that just arrived—if we don’t get this mushroom soup on for dinner soon . . . ” which was how Mattie became his goon.

120 She wasn’t sure “goon” was the right word, but that’s what she felt like.

Do this, do that. He never said “please.” He gave her the most tedious jobs and quoted Johnny as if Johnny were the god of cuisine.



ANALYZE VISUALS
Which of Mattie’s childhood experiences does this photograph remind you of?

Sergio didn't know the easiest way to peel raw tomatoes—dunk them into boiling water for three minutes, then pluck them out. That was one of the million little things she'd learned from her mother. Would she be remembering them forever? She could hear her mother's voice steering her among the giant spoons and chopping blocks—a hum of kindness, a *you-can-do-it* familiar tone.

Here in this place her mother had never been, it seemed easier to think about her. Easier than at home where every curtain, dusty corner, and wilting
130 plant seemed lonesome right now. The shoes poking out from her mother's side of the bed. The calendar with its blank squares for the last two months. "You know," her mother had said, when there were just a few days left in her life, "this is the last thing in the world I ever wanted to do to you." It was easier right now to be in a madly swirling kitchen her mother had never seen.

"Well, I don't *know* Johnny, okay?" Mattie said to Sergio on the fifth day of heavy labor, after she'd just chopped a line of cucumbers for the daily *gazpacho*.³ "So he's not such a big deal to me, okay?"

"He will be when he gets back," Sergio said.

He was mixing fresh herb dressings. Mattie had snipped the basil up for
140 him with shiny shears. She peeled fifty cloves of garlic in a row. Even her bed at home would smell like garlic soon. She'd fallen immediately in love with the giant shiny pans, families of knives, containers of grated cheese and chopped scallions lined up to top the splendid House Vegetarian Chili. ①

And she liked the view through the kitchen window into the dining room. She started guessing what a customer would order before the order had been turned in.

Every day the same young woman with short dark hair came in, sat alone under a cosmic painting (blue planets spinning in outer space), and ordered a vegeburger and a Healthy Waldorf Salad on the side. She wore dangling
150 earrings made of polished stones and glass. By the end of each meal she was patting her teary cheeks with a napkin.

Was it something she was reading?

Mattie had noticed her as she stood next to Sergio mixing up their Date/Nut/Cream Cheese Delight in a huge bowl. It didn't take many brains to do that. So she could observe their crowd of eaters—bodybuilders, marathon-runners, practitioners of yoga, religion professors, and students.

"Do you know that girl?" She poked Sergio's side so he almost cut himself.

"Watch it! Who?"

"The crying one."

160 "Huh?"

Men didn't notice anything.

"The beautiful one who comes in here every day, orders exactly the same thing, and starts crying."

① CHARACTER TRAITS
What impression do you get of Mattie's character from reading lines 135–143?

3. *gazpacho* (gə-spä'chō): a Spanish vegetable soup served cold.

He stared disinterestedly through the window. "Actually she does look vaguely familiar."

Mattie speculated, "Maybe she hates our food, but she's obsessive-compulsive and can't go to any other restaurant. Maybe she's in love with Augie, too."

Mattie asked Riyad if she could ring the crying customer out.

170 "Sure. Do you know how to use the cash register?"

"No."

He showed her. That was the greatest thing about Riyad—he never made anyone feel stupid for not knowing something.

Mattie took the girl's bill and rang it up, whispering, "Is there anything we can do to make you feel better?"

The girl looked shocked. "Who *are* you?" she asked.

"I'm the person who puts dressing on your salad and makes your sandwich. I've noticed you through the window. Right there—see that little window we have? I started working here a few weeks ago. And you seem—upset. I

180 wondered if you could use—someone to talk to or anything." **E**

The girl looked suspicious. "Do you know Johnny? The cook who runs this place?"

Him again. Mattie said, "He's on a trip. I've never seen his face."

"Just wait," the girl whispered. "It's the most amazing face you'll ever see." She shook her head "God! He drives me crazy."

"Me, too," Mattie said. She stepped away from the cash register so Riyad could ring up someone else.

The girl looked confused "But I thought you said . . ."

"I was just kidding, sorry. I don't know him. Is he your boyfriend?"

190 "Well, we were dating before he went to help his grandma. But right before he left, he said we were finished—well, he didn't say that *word* exactly, because I don't think he believes in beginnings and endings, but he said—we needed to follow different paths. God, I love him! I guess that's why I've been coming in so often. I'm hoping he'll be back and will have changed his mind." Her eyes filled up again.

Mattie handed her a Kleenex. "Has he called you since he's been gone? Has he written you at all?"

200 "Nothing. I've called him maybe four times. His grandma always answers and says Johnny's not there. She must be lying! But you see, Johnny hates to talk on the phone. He doesn't believe in it. It makes him feel—disembodied. So I don't know if he's really not there or if he's simply—sticking to his principles."

"Sorry, but he sounds like a nutcase. How old is he, by the way?" **E**

Her face sobered. "Twenty-one," she said. "But he says he's ageless."

Sergio suddenly stood behind Mattie with a ladle in one hand and a wire whisk in the other. "Are you taking a vacation? Or is this a coffee break I wasn't told about? If you're going to work here, you'll have to carry your weight."

It was his favorite dopey phrase.

Johnny returned the next day.

E CHARACTER TRAITS
What do Mattie's words and actions toward the girl reveal about Mattie? Cite specific words or phrases to support your answer.

E COMPARE AND CONTRAST
How does Mattie's impression of Johnny compare with the girl's description of him?

Sergio was sick and didn't come in.

210 Riyadh had to take his wife and babies to the doctor, too. Even with the *Good for You Restaurant's* wholesome cuisine bolstering them, they'd all managed to get the flu.

So it was Johnny and Mattie on their own, with one lovesick waitress, another waitress with a sprained ankle, and Augie poking his sudsy head around the corner now and then to see if they needed plates.

Amazing face? Mattie couldn't see it. She thought he had an exaggerated square jaw, like Popeye⁴ in a cartoon. Huge muscles under rolled-up white shirtsleeves. Deep, dangerous tan. Hadn't he heard about skin cancer?

Explosive brown curls circled his head. He had great hair, yes. He also wore an
220 incredibly tight pair of faded jeans. Mattie couldn't imagine he felt very good inside them. ©

"I'm sorry about your grandpa," she said.

Johnny stared at her hard. "I didn't realize you knew him."

That was mean. No way she would mention her mama when he was as mean as that. She hadn't even told Riyadh or Sergio about her mother yet. Immediately Johnny started moving everything around. All the implements and condiments she'd rearranged to make them more available in a rush, all the innovative new placements of towels, tubs, cinnamon—*whoosh!*—he wanted to put things back exactly where they had been when he left.

230 And he was muttering. *Rub, rub, rub*, how dare anyone juggle the balance of his precious sphere? "Here!" he roared, lion-like, as he pulled a giant knife out from the lower shelf where Mattie had hidden it, finding it too large to be very useful. "Here is the sword of the goddess! My favorite sweet saber! And what is this pie on the Specials Board that I've never heard of in my life—*Shoofly?* Where did that come from?"

"Well, first from the Amish⁵ communities in Pennsylvania. *Americana*,⁶ you know? And now, from me." Mattie had suggested the recipe her second week, since it happened to be her personal favorite pie, and they'd sold out of it every day.

240 "You?"

He could make the simplest word sound like an insult. You didn't even want to be "you" anymore. "And who *are* you?"

She brandished her blender cap. "I'm the new—chef."

"Chef? I'm the chef around here. You're the cook, okay? Do you know the difference between the words?"

"I know the difference between lots of words. Between RUDE and NICE, for example." She stalked back to the dishwashing closet.

"Augie, break a plate over his head, will you?"

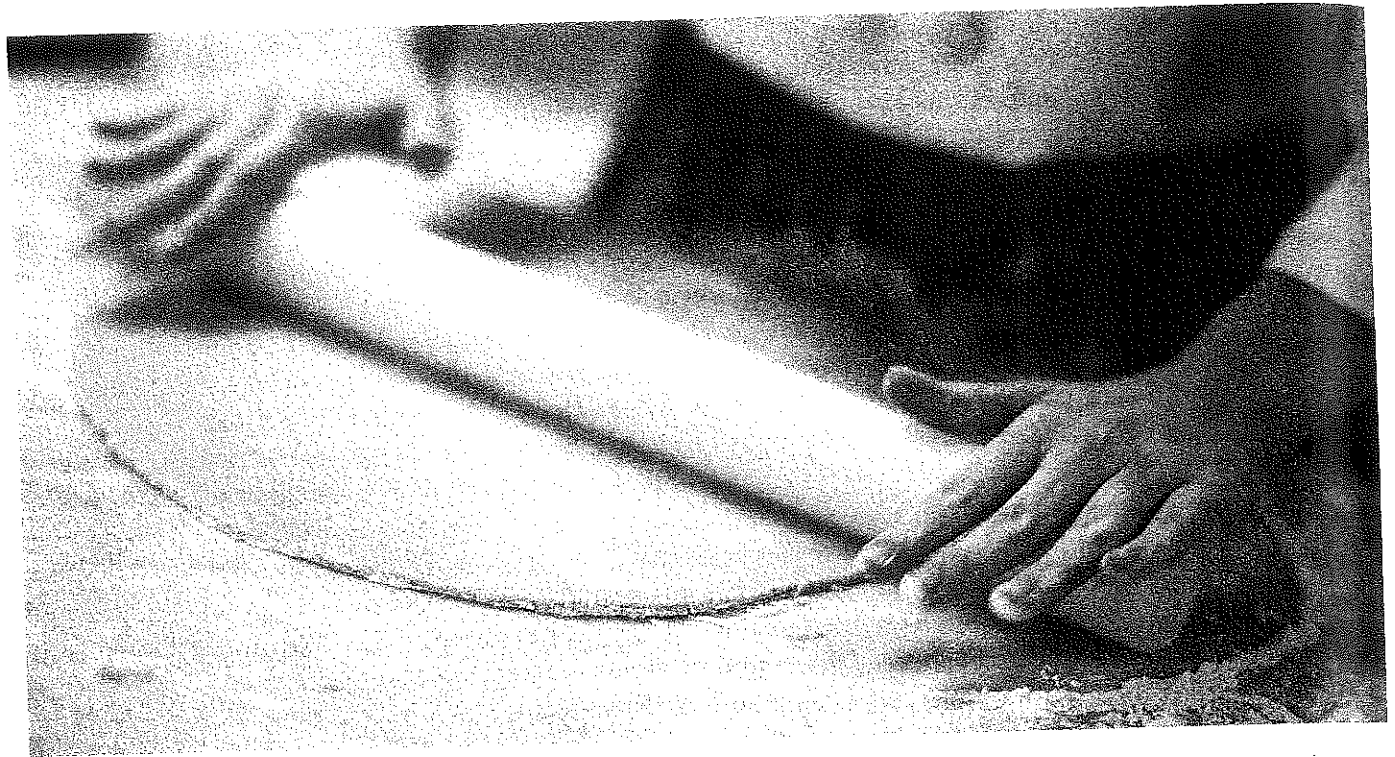
250 Augie looked shocked. "Johnny? Johnny's like—the mastermind! He knows—everything! Did you know he even built the tables in this place?"

© CHARACTER TRAITS
What personality traits are suggested by this description of Johnny's appearance?

4. *Popeye*: a cartoon character with a prominent jaw.

5. *Amish*: a religious group valuing humility, family, and the simple life.

6. *Americana*: things distinctly American.



"I don't care. He doesn't know *me*." ❏

She served nine pieces of Shoofly Pie that day. Arranging generous slices over the rich and creamy molasses interiors. Her mother used to love this pie.

That day no one ordered buttermilk pie, which apparently had been Johnny's specialty before he went away. His pie was still languishing in its full dish when Mattie wiped the counter at three P.M.

"What's *in* that pie of yours?" he asked her.

"Niceness."

260 During the lunch rush, Johnny had ordered Mattie around more rudely than Sergio ever did. But now she knew where Sergio learned it. Johnny snapped commands. "*Sauté! Stir!*" He kept insisting there were granules of raw sugar on the floor under his feet and making Mattie sweep when he had food all laid out.

"That's very unsanitary, Johnny, to sweep in the presence of food. Didn't your mama ever tell you?" Her words seemed to throw him into a funk.

When his weepy ex-girlfriend materialized, pressing her face up close to the kitchen window for what she hoped might be a welcome-home kiss, he tapped her forehead with his fingertips and busied himself. "Any chance we could
270 spend some time together?" she asked wistfully.

"Sharon, you know what I told you."

Tears welled up in her syrupy eyes.

She said, "Johnny, I think I can make you happy," as he slapped dill sauce around a grilled portabello mushroom on polenta. Ouch.

❏ **CHARACTER TRAITS**
What traits does Mattie reveal in this incident?

The waitress and Augie had been found wrapped in a bubbly embrace in the broom closet that morning when Mattie whipped open the door looking for the mop.

Sergio now had a crush on a buff bodybuilder who came in every morning for a peach smoothie, dressed in a leopard-printed tank top. Even the Hell's
280 Angel who appeared only on Saturdays had slipped Mattie a note that said, "Good muffin, baby," drawn inside a heart.

Only Riyadh, dear Riyadh, seemed able to focus on food and the work right in front of him. One day after work Mattie had told him about her own Syrian heritage and her mom's death coinciding with his dad's. Did she only imagine it, or did tears well up in his eyes, too?

After that they both threw Arabic words into their talk. "Yallah!" Speed it up. "Khallas!" Enough already.

Some days Riyadh refilled the bins of flour and apricots and sunflower seeds in the grocery section with careful attention. Some days he polished the front
290 window glass till it glittered. Lots of bosses might never lift a finger. One day Mattie found him down on his knees on a prayer rug in the cooler chanting in Arabic. She respected his devotion to service. He told her he had dreamed of owning a restaurant ever since he was a little boy who loved to eat, wandering the streets of Beirut. Only the ten-year war had made him leave his country. Mattie admitted she had trouble with Johnny's attitude. Riyadh whispered, "Listen to this: When he first came to work here, he was our baker, not our chef. He asked me, 'Do I get paid while the bread's rising?'"

"Have you been in the service or what?" Mattie asked Johnny, on her forty-fourth day at work. It was truly summer now, each day swelled full of ninety-
300 eight-degree heat. Midsummer in Texas, people forget what a cool breeze ever felt like.

"Why do you ask?"

"You act like a general. I think you'd like me to salute you."

"Well, you're full of it, too." ❶

He was furious that she had started revising the soup list. Today she was making a spicy peanut stew from Eritrea⁷ with green beans and sweet potatoes.

"Where is Eritrea?" he asked her. "And what makes you think our customers will know of it if I don't?"

"East Africa. The whole world is tired of your black bean soup, Commander.
310 It's time to BRANCH OUT."

Johnny always stared at her as if he needed an interpreter.

Riyadh went wild when he smelled that peanut stew cooking. "I want some! When will it be done?"

Mattie told Johnny the customers were also tired of his boring bouquet of alfalfa sprouts on top of his little salads, too. "Let's try lentil sprouts for a change.

❶ CHARACTER TRAITS
What trait is Johnny suggesting that Mattie possesses?

7. Eritrea (ě'Ī-trě'e): a country in northeast Africa.

Or nasturtiums.⁸ Come on.” Basically she was weary of watering them. She wanted to witness some different curls of life sprouting in the jars under the counters. Anyhow, an East Indian professor on the other side of town had just gotten *E. coli*⁹ that was traced to alfalfa sprouts, and she felt nervous about them.

320 An anonymous food critic from the newspaper had eaten at the restaurant recently and written a glowing review. “Happy to say the *Good for You* menu offers new sparkle and a delectable, mysterious dessert called Shoofly Pie. Not to be missed.” Mattie made three extras that day and they all sold out. A lady bought a whole one for her book club.

On the tenth of August, Johnny asked Mattie to sit down after work for a cup of mint tea with him.

“You think you’re really clever, don’t you?” he said, tapping his spoon on his cup.

330 “Not at all,” she said, startled. “I certainly don’t. In fact, I usually think I’m pretty dumb. It’s just that you were used to making all the decisions around here and it’s been really hard for you to share them. I don’t know why. I certainly wouldn’t want to make all the decisions.”

“You wouldn’t?”

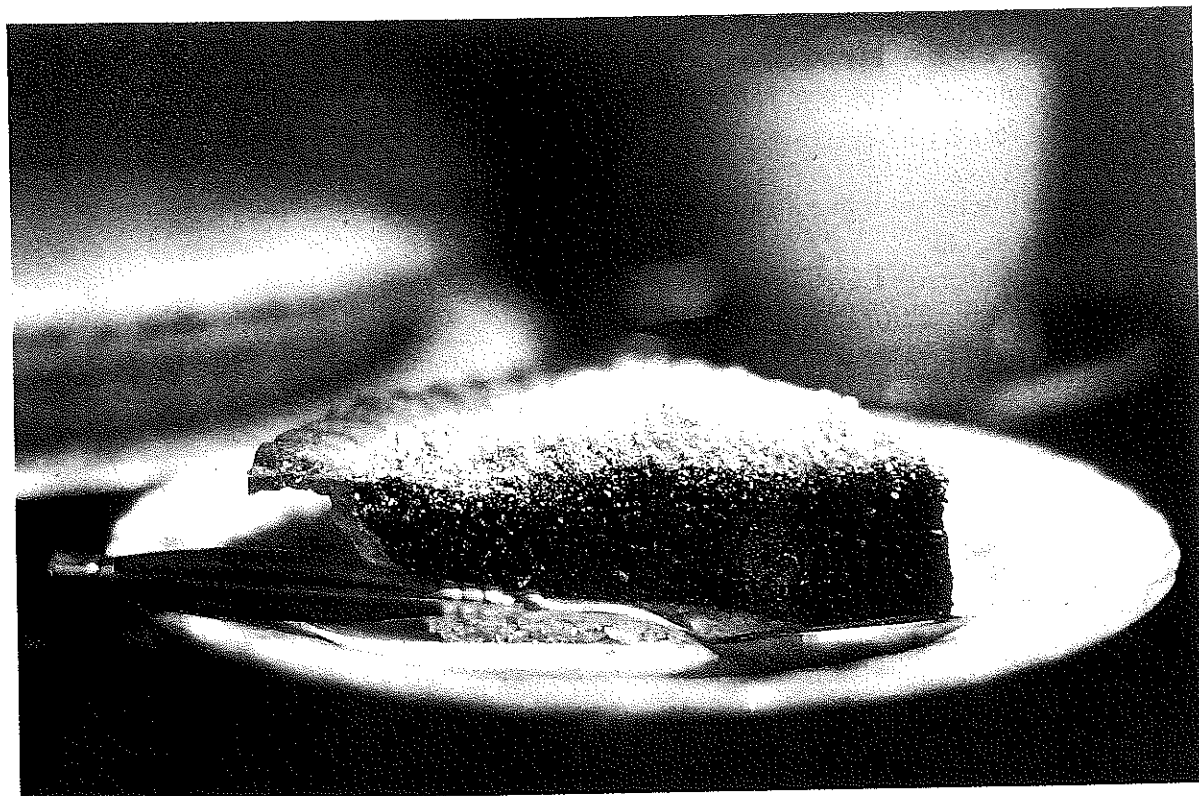
“No way. I think sharing them is better.”

“You do, do you?”

He was staring at the top of her head as if she had two horns erupting.

8. **nasturtiums** (na-stŭr’shemz): a kind of edible flower.

9. **E. coli** (ē kŏ’lī): bacteria, certain strains of which can cause sickness.



Then he said, "Would you like to go to a movie with me?" and she almost fell over backwards out of her chair. Late afternoon sunlight had suspended in the air. She could smell the warm sweetness of molasses from the pies just out of the oven. ♦

340 "Um—I'm sorry—I can't. It's not a good idea to mix business—and pleasure." She really wasn't much of a dater—now and then she went out with friends in groups, like migrating monarch butterflies, or ducks—but she simply could not imagine going around with this troublesome—chef.

He looked thunderstruck. "Are you serious?"

"Very."

He shrugged. "It was a good movie, too."

"Which one?"

350 "I'll never tell." Then he hissed, "What—do you just stick around home with your mama after work and learn new recipes?"

Tears rose up in Mattie's eyes. He stared at her.

"My mother," she said, "died right before I started working here. For your information."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You weren't here. Plus, when you got back, you weren't very friendly."

One thing about loss—you decided whom to share it with. You could go around day after day and never give anyone a clue about what had been taken from you. You could hold it inside, a precious nugget of pain. Or you could say it out loud. When you trusted enough. When you felt like it. ❏

360 "I didn't feel like it."

You could place it on the table.

Johnny spoke softly now. "I'm sorry. But didn't you know I'd just been at my grandpa's funeral myself?"

"Yes."

"And he was like a daddy to me? He raised me when my own daddy took off? And my mama was already gone?"

Now tears shone in Johnny's eyes. It was a restaurant where every single person ended up crying at one time or another. "Well, I didn't know that," Mattie said. "That must have been really—hard."

370 She found herself with her hand on his arm.

"I'm sorry, too," she said. "I know you really loved your grandpa a lot."

He looked up sharply. "You do? How do you know that?"

"Trust me."

So many times during the days he'd mentioned little things his grandpa used to tell him. How to sharpen a knife. How to "swab the decks"—what Johnny called cleaning a counter.

380 Now he said, "Let me tell you about my grandpa's favorite corn bread," and he described it so deliciously, with raw pieces of fresh corn tucked into it, that Mattie had the idea they should concoct a meal based on beautiful things his grandpa used to cook for him when he was growing up. Greens, corn bread, quick-fried okra, sweet potato casserole, vinegar coleslaw, pecan pie, and, since

♦ GRAMMAR AND STYLE

Reread lines 337–340.

Note how Nye chooses **adjectives** and **verbs** that appeal to the senses of sight, smell, and touch.

❏ CONNECT

Think about the times when you shared grief with others. Why would Mattie only want to share grief with someone she trusts?

their restaurant didn't serve meat, a special vegeburger seasoned with sage, his grandpa's favorite spice. They could do it In Memoriam (privately), but on the board they'd just call it "From Johnny's Grandpa's Special Recipes." ❶

They could even put white daisies on every table because they were his grandpa's favorite flowers.

The menu was so popular, they kept it up there three whole days. As customers were paying, they said, "Johnny, tell your grandpa we loved his food." No one told them he was dead.

390 Then Mattie said, "Okay, Riyadh, what did YOUR daddy eat? Your turn."

For three days they served lentil soup, *baba-ghanouj*,¹⁰ okra with rice, and falafel¹¹ sandwiches.

They played Arabic music in the restaurant.

Riyad seemed deeply emotional about it. He placed his father's dashing young photograph on the register. He gave Johnny and Mattie raises.

Sergio had left them by that time. He'd gone to sell boring used cars over on San Pedro, because he could make three times as much money over there. "But it won't taste as good," Mattie told him. They'd hired a grandmother, Lucy, to take his place. Lucy loved their new recipes as well as their old ones. She said,
400 "Did you know the name 'Shoofly' came about because the Amish people would shoo away the flies that came to land on their cooling pies when they took them out of the oven?"

Johnny said, "We don't have any flies in here. Mattie catches them in her fists the minute she sees them."

Then they did Mattie's mother's recipes. Mattie had a very hard time deciding which ones to do. Her mother had been a great cook, once upon a time, way back in the other world where things were still normal.

The menu board featured a special green salad with oranges and pecans, fragrant vegetable cous-cous with raisins, buttermilk biscuits, and of course,
410 Shoofly Pie for dessert. "I think your mother had a sweet tooth," Riyadh said, staring dreamily at the full plates lined up on the counter.

"That she did," said Mattie, swallowing hard. Her mother had had everything: the best singing voice, the kindest heart, the kookiest wardrobe—she never felt shy about combining checks and stripes and wild colors.

Mattie brought in a tape of her mother's favorite blues singer, Lonnie Johnson, to play while they served her food. Mattie's father came over from his office to eat with them.

"This is kind of like that Anne Tyler book, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*," he said. Mattie sat with him. He put his hand over her hand.
420 "What a rough summer, baby."

Mattie said, "It's also like our own private Days of the Dead." On November 2, people in South Texas made shrines to their beloved deceased family members or friends, arranging offerings of their favorite foods among the lit candles and incense.

❷ CONNECT

Think of a favorite dish that a relative or friend has prepared for you. Why might Johnny have chosen to describe his grandfather's corn bread to Mattie at this moment?

10. *baba-ghanouj* (bā'bə gə-nōōsh'): Middle Eastern eggplant appetizer.

11. *falafel* (fə-lā'fəl): a Middle Eastern dish of fried, pureed chickpeas.

"So who's homesick for Shoofly Pie?" asked a diner seated at the next table.

"It's great!"

"Everybody," Mattie said. "Everybody who never lived a simple life." In some ways, you could choose what you remembered and what you did with it. Memories you chose to treasure would never fly away. They were like an adhesive stuck to the underside of your heart. Maybe they kept your heart in your body.

Riyad had an idea that they could offer their In Memoriam menus to the general public, too—letting people bring in groups of recipes belonging to someone they had loved who was gone now, and the *Good for You* staff would revise the recipes to become healthier, then serve special meals designated "Camille's Favorite Ratatouille Feast" or "Jim's Special Birthday Dinner" . . . what a thought.

"Is it creepy?" Johnny wondered out loud. "Will people feel like they eat here, then they die?"

"No," Mattie and Riyad said at once. "It's comforting. TRUST US."

"How do you think an omelette looks better, folded over or simply flipped? Should we slice the small strawberries in the fruit bowls or leave them whole?" Suddenly Johnny was so full of questions, Mattie could barely answer them all. He seemed to have softened somehow, like beans left to soak. **M**

Sometimes when Mattie came in to work, she'd stop for a moment inside the door of the restaurant as if she were frozen. She'd stare all around the room—the tables, the chairs, the paintings, the vege-salt shakers—trying to remember how the place had looked to her before she'd known it from the inside out.

Now she had the recipes memorized, the arrangements of provisions on silver shelves inside the cooler, the little tubs the blueberries lived in. Even in the dreams she could hear the steady *clip-clip* of their best silver knife against the cutting board.

One day she told Johnny she admired his speed when he had ten things to do at once. He grinned at her so he *almost* looked handsome. He said, "Do you ever think how we'll all remember different things when we're old? When this restaurant feels like a far-away shadowy den we once inhabited together—I might remember the glint of the soup tureen in the afternoon light or the scent of comino, and you might remember—the gleam of my ravishing hair?"

"You wish." But she liked him now. She had to admit it. She really liked him.

One day Riyad said, "Everything is changing!" He gave Mattie a poem by Rumi¹² that read, "The mountains are trembling. Their map and compass are the lines in your palm." The first cold norther had swept down from the skies and everyone was wearing sweaters.

M CHARACTER TRAITS

How has Johnny's character softened? Cite details.


12. Rumi (rōō'mē): a 13th-century Persian mystic and poet.



That was the day she resigned. She had too much work to do at school now to keep on working here. Plus, she was feeling steadier. The restaurant had been Good for Her in all the ways it needed to be, and she could move on. She could cook better dinners for her father at home, with all her new experience. She could have dinner parties for his friends.

470 It shocked her how Johnny responded to the news of her departure. He shook his head and said, “No, no, no, baby,” as if she were a little dog at his feet. **N**

“What do you mean, no no no? Yes yes yes! I have homework piling up on me. I have a major paper to do that I haven’t even started! My dad and I haven’t even cleaned our house since my mom died. I’ll miss this place terribly, but hey, I’ll still come in and eat! And maybe you’ll go to another movie someday and let me tag along, what do you say?”

Johnny stared at her. He’d been making Shoofly Pie on his own lately—good thing, because everyone still ordered it. Riyadh and his wife presented Mattie with a mixed bunch of happy-looking flowers and a card: “This is your
480 home now, too!!! We love and appreciate you—free lunch any time!” Johnny kissed her, first time ever, on the top of her right ear. Her mother used to kiss her there. 

N **STATIC AND DYNAMIC CHARACTERS**
Dynamic characters undergo some sort of change as a story unfolds. In what ways has Johnny changed over the course of the story? Cite specific words or details to show this change.