

After You, My Dear Alphonse

Shirley Jackson

Mrs. Wilson was just taking the gingerbread out of the oven when she heard Johnny outside talking to someone. "Johnny," she called, "you're late. Come in and get your lunch."

"Just a minute, Mother," Johnny said. "After you, my dear Alphonse."

"After *you*, my dear Alphonse," another voice said.

"No, after *you*, my dear Alphonse," Johnny said.

Mrs. Wilson opened the door. "Johnny," she said, "you come in this minute and get your lunch. You can play after you've eaten."

Johnny came in after her, slowly. "Mother," he said, "I brought Boyd home for lunch with me.

"Boyd?" Mrs. Wilson thought for a moment. "I don't believe I've met Boyd. Bring him in, dear, since you've invited him. Lunch is ready."

"Boyd!" Johnny yelled. "Hey, Boyd, come on.

"I'm coming. Just got to unload this stuff."

"Well, hurry, or my mother'll be sore."

"Johnny, that's not very polite to either your friend or your mother," Mrs. Wilson said. "Come sit down, Boyd."

As she turned to show Boyd where to sit, she saw he was a Negro boy, smaller than Johnny but about the same age. His arms were loaded with split kindling wood. "Where'll I put this stuff, Johnny?" he asked.

Mrs. Wilson turned to Johnny. "Johnny," she said, "what is that wood?"

"Dead Japanese," Johnny said mildly. "We stand them in the ground and run over them with tanks."

"How do you do, Mrs. Wilson?" Boyd said. "How do you do, Boyd? You shouldn't let Johnny make you carry all that wood. Sit down now and eat lunch, both of you.

"Why shouldn't he carry the wood, Mother? It's his wood. We got it at his place."

"Johnny," Mrs. Wilson said, "go on and eat your lunch."

"Sure," Johnny said. He held out the dish of scrambled eggs to Boyd. "After you, my dear

Alphonse.”

“After *you*, my dear Alphonse,” Boyd said. “After *you*, my dear Alphonse,” Johnny said. They began to giggle.

“Are you hungry, Boyd?” Mrs. Wilson asked.

“Yes, Mrs. Wilson.”

“Well, don’t you let Johnny stop you. He always fusses about eating, so you just see that you get a good lunch. There’s plenty of food here for you to have all you want.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Wilson.”

“Come on, Alphonse,” Johnny said. He pushed half the scrambled eggs on to Boyd’s plate. Boyd watched while Mrs. Wilson put a dish of stewed tomatoes beside his plate.

“Boyd don’t eat tomatoes, do you, Boyd?” Johnny said.

“*Doesn’t* eat tomatoes, Johnny. And just because you don’t like them, don’t say that about Boyd. Boyd will eat *anything*.”

“Bet he won’t,” Johnny said, attacking his scrambled eggs.

“Boyd wants to grow up and be a big strong man so he can work hard,” Mrs. Wilson said. “I’ll bet Boyd’s father eats stewed tomatoes.”

“My father eats anything he wants to,” Boyd said.

“So does mine,” Johnny said. “Sometimes he doesn’t eat hardly anything. He’s a little guy, though. Wouldn’t hurt a flea.”

“Mine’s a little guy, too,” Boyd said.

“I’ll bet he’s strong, though,” Mrs. Wilson said. She hesitated. “Does he . . . work?”

“Sure,” Johnny said. “Boyd’s father works in a factory.”

“There, you see?” Mrs. Wilson said. “And he certainly has to be strong to do that—all that lifting and carrying at a factory.”

“Boyd’s father doesn’t have to,” Johnny said. “He’s a foreman.”

Mrs. Wilson felt defeated. “What does your mother do, Boyd?”

“My mother?” Boyd was surprised. “She takes care of us kids.”

“Oh. She doesn’t work, then?”

“Why should she?” Johnny said through a mouthful of eggs. “You don’t work.”

“You really don’t want any stewed tomatoes, Boyd?”

“No, thank you, Mrs. Wilson,” Boyd said.

“No, thank you, Mrs. Wilson, no, thank you, Mrs. Wilson, no, thank you, Mrs. Wilson,” Johnny said. “Boyd’s sister’s going to work, though. She’s going to be a teacher.”

“That’s a very fine attitude for her to have, Boyd.” Mrs. Wilson restrained an impulse to pat Boyd on the head. “I imagine you’re all very proud of her?”

“I guess so,” Boyd said.

“What about all your other brothers and sisters? I guess all of you want to make just as much of yourselves as you can.

“There’s only me and Jean,” Boyd said. “I don’t know yet what I want to be when I grow up.

“We’re going to be tank drivers, Boyd and me,” Johnny said. “Zoom.” Mrs. Wilson caught Boyd’s glass of milk as Johnny’s napkin ring, suddenly transformed into a tank, plowed heavily across the table.

“Look, Johnny,” Boyd said. “Here’s a foxhole. I’m shooting at you.”

Mrs. Wilson, with the speed born of long experience, took the gingerbread off the shelf and placed it carefully between the tank and the foxhole.

“Now eat as much as you want to, Boyd,” she said. “I want to see you get filled up.”

“Boyd eats a lot, but not as much as I do,” Johnny said. “I’m bigger than he is.”

“You’re not much bigger,” Boyd said. “I can beat you running.”

Mrs. Wilson took a deep breath. “Boyd,” she said. Both boys turned to her. “Boyd, Johnny has some suits that are a little too small for him, and a winter coat. It’s not new, of course, but there’s lots of wear in it still. And I have a few dresses that your mother or sister could probably use. Your mother can make them over into lots of things for all of you, and I’d be very happy to give them to you. Suppose before you leave I make up a big bundle and then you and Johnny can take it over to your mother right away.

Her voice trailed off as she saw Boyd’s puzzled expression. “But I have plenty of clothes, thank you,” he said. “And I don’t think my mother knows how to sew very well, and anyway I guess we buy about everything we need. Thank you very much though.”

“We don’t have time to carry that old stuff around, Mother,” Johnny said. “We got to play tanks with the kids today.”

Mrs. Wilson lifted the plate of gingerbread off the table as Boyd was about to take another piece. “There are many little boys like you, Boyd, who would be grateful for the clothes someone was kind enough to give them.”

“Boyd will take them if you want him to, Mother,” Johnny said.

“I didn’t mean to make you mad, Mrs. Wilson,” Boyd said.

“Don’t think I’m angry, Boyd. I’m just disappointed in you, that’s all. Now let’s not say anything more about it.”

She began clearing the plates off the table, and Johnny took Boyd’s hand and pulled him to the door. “Bye, Mother,” Johnny said. Boyd stood for a minute, staring at Mrs. Wilson’s back.

“After you, my dear Alphonse,” Johnny said, holding the door open.

“Is your mother still mad?” Mrs. Wilson heard Boyd ask in a low voice.

“I don’t know,” Johnny said. “She’s screwy sometimes.”

“So’s mine,” Boyd said. He hesitated. “After you, my dear Alphonse.”