My Delicate Heart Condition

by Toni Cade Bambara

Harriet Watkins loves excitement as much as she loves scaring other kids with her spooky stories. She also loves watching the Fly family perform death-defying feats on the high wire at the circus. Nothing scares Harriet. Or does it?

LITERARY FOCUS: NARRATOR

• The title of this story, “My Delicate Heart Condition,” gives you a clue that the tale is told by a **first-person narrator**. The “I” in the story is Harriet Watkins. She is telling us about herself.

• Harriet “speaks” in a distinct, or special, **voice**. The words and sentences she uses are lively and friendly, as if she were talking to her classmates rather than “writing” a story. As you read, “listen” to the voice of Harriet, the storyteller.

• Part of your job as a reader is to decide how **credible**, or believable, the narrator is. Here are questions you can ask yourself to decide whether the narrator is believable:
  1. Does the narrator exaggerate, or say that something is bigger or more exciting than it probably is?
  2. Does she misunderstand what adults are saying?
  3. Does the narrator not know things that other characters and the reader may know?

READING SKILLS: DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

A **conclusion** is a judgment you make based on evidence, or important details. You probably **draw conclusions** about the world around you every day. For example, one rainy morning your friend arrives at your house, dripping wet and out of breath. You might conclude that he forgot his umbrella and that he has run to your house in an attempt to stay dry.

You also make judgments based on evidence when you read a story. You think about what the narrator tells you and what the story’s characters say and do. Then, using what you’ve learned from the story and from your own life experiences, you put those details together to form a conclusion. As you read, you check to see if your conclusions are correct.
VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

PREVIEW SELECTION VOCABULARY

The following words appear in “My Delicate Heart Condition.” Look them over before you begin the story.

**withstand** (with’stand’) v.: resist; not give in.

Harriet’s courage and inner strength help her withstand fear.

**vacant** (vā’kant) adj.: empty; suggesting lack of attention.

His vacant look made me think he wasn’t paying attention.

**suspended** (sa-spənd’d) v. used as adj.: hanging by a support from above.

The acrobat hung in the air, suspended by only a thin rope.

**proportions** (prə-pŏr’shanz) n.: size; dimensions.

His hands were small, but his feet had the proportions of a giant’s.

LITERAL AND FIGURATIVE MEANING

The literal meaning of a word is its dictionary definition. For example, if you say, “The computer is broken,” you are using the word broken in a literal sense: The computer doesn’t work. However, if you say, “My heart is broken,” you are using the word broken in a figurative, or imaginative, sense. Your heart is still pumping blood—it is “working” in the literal sense. What you really mean by “My heart is broken” is that you are feeling deep sorrow or hurt. You feel as if your heart is broken into pieces.

Figurative language is based on a comparison between two unlike things. We use figurative language all the time. Writers use figurative language in unusual or interesting ways to create vivid pictures and striking comparisons. When you read a story, be alert to the writer’s use of figurative language.
My cousin Joanne has not been allowed to hang out with me for some time because she went and told Aunt Hazel that I scare her to death whenever she sleeps over at our house or I spend the weekend at hers. The truth is I sometimes like to tell stories about bloodthirsty vampires or ugly monsters that lurk in clothes closets or giant beetles that eat their way through the shower curtain, like I used to do at camp to entertain the kids in my bunk. But Joanne always cries and that makes the stories even weirder, like background music her crying. And too—I’m not going to lie about it—I get spookier on purpose until all the little crybabies are stuffing themselves under their pillows and throwing their sneakers at me and making such a racket that Mary the counselor has to come in and shine her flashlight around the bunkhouse. I play like I’m asleep. The rest of them are too busy blubbing and finding their way out from under the blankets to tell Mary that it’s me. Besides, once they get a load of her standing against the moonlight in that long white
robe of hers looking like a ghost, they just start up again and pretty soon the whole camp is awake. Anyway, that’s what I do for fun. So Joanne hasn’t been around. And this year I’ll have to go to the circus by myself and to camp without her. My mother said on the phone to Aunt Hazel—“Good, keep Jo over there and maybe Harriet’ll behave herself if she’s got no one to show off to.” For all the years my mother’s known me, she still doesn’t understand that my behaving has got nothing to do with who I hang out with. A private thing between me and me or maybe between me and the Fly family since they were the ones that first got me to sit through monster movies and withstand all the terror I could take.

For four summers now, me and the Fly family have had this thing going. A battle of nerves, you might say. Each year they raise the rope closer and closer to the very top of the tent—I hear they’re going to perform outdoors this year and be even higher—and they stretch the rope further across the rings where the clowns and the pony riders perform. Each year they get bolder and more daring with their rope dancing and the swinging by the legs and flinging themselves into empty space making everyone throw up their hands and gasp for air until Mr. Fly at the very last possible second swings out on his bar to catch them up by the tips of their heels. Everyone just dies and clutches at their hearts. Everybody but me. I sit there calmly. I’ve trained myself. Joanne used to die and duck her head under the benches and stay there till it was all over.

Last summer they really got bold. On the final performance just before the fair closed, and some revival-type tent show comes in and all the kids go off to camp, the Fly family performed without a net. I figured they’d be up to something so I made sure my stomach was like steel. I did ten push-ups before breakfast, twenty sit-ups before lunch, skipped dinner altogether. My brother Teddy kidded me all day—“Harriet’s trying out for the Olympics.” I passed up the ice man on the corner and the pizza and sausage stand by the schoolyard and the cotton candy...
and jelly-apple lady and the pickle and penny-candy boy, in fact I passed up all the stands that lead from the street down the little roadway to the fair grounds that used to be a swamp when we first moved from Baltimore to Jamaica, Long Island. It wasn’t easy, I’m not going to lie, but I was taking no chances. Between the balloon man and the wheel of fortune was the usual clump of ladies from church who came night after night to try to win the giant punch bowl set on the top shelf above the wheel, but had to settle night after night for a jar of gumdrops or salt-and-pepper shakers or some other little thing from the bottom shelf. And from the wheel of fortune to the tent was at least a million stands selling B.B. bats and jawbreakers and gingerbread and sweet potato pie and frozen custard and—like I said it wasn’t easy. A million ways to tempt you, to unsettle your stomach, and make you lose the battle to the Fly family.

I sat there almost enjoying the silly clowns who came tumbling out of a steamer trunk no bigger than the one we have in the basement where my mother keeps my old report cards and photographs and letters and things. And I almost enjoyed the fire-eater and the knife-thrower, but I was so close up I could see how there wasn’t any real thrill. I almost enjoyed the fat-leg girls who rode the ponies two at a time and standing up, but their costumes weren’t very pretty—just an ordinary polo shirt like you get if you run in the PAL meets and short skirts you can wear on either side like the big girls wear at the roller rink. And I almost enjoyed the jugglers except that my Uncle Bubba can juggle the dinner plates better any day of the week so long as Aunt Hazel isn’t there to stop him. I was impatient and started yawning. Finally all the clowns hitched up their baggy pants and tumbled over each other out of the ring and into the dark, the jugglers caught all the things that were up in the air and yawning just like me went off to the side. The pony girls brought their horses to a sudden stop that raised a lot of dust, then jumped down into the dirt and bowed. Then the ringmaster stepped into the circle of light and tipped his hat which was a little raggedy
from where I was sitting and said—“And now, Ladieez and Gentlemen, what you’ve all been waiting forrr, the Main aTTRACtion, the FLY FAMILEEE.” And everyone jumped up to shout like crazy as they came running out on their toes to stand in the light and then climb the ropes. I took a deep breath and folded my arms over my chest and a kid next to me went into hiding, acting like she was going to tie her shoelaces.

There used to be four of them—the father, a big guy with a bald head and bushy mustache and shoulders and arms like King Kong; a tall lanky mother whom you’d never guess could even climb into a highchair or catch anything heavier than a Ping-Pong ball to look at her; the oldest son who looked like his father except he had hair on his head but none on his face and a big face it was, so that no matter how high up he got, you could always tell whether he was smiling or frowning or counting; the younger boy about thirteen, maybe, had a vacant stare like he was a million miles away feeding his turtles or something, anything but walking along a tightrope or flying through the air with his family. I had always liked to watch him because he was as cool as I was. But last summer the little girl got into the act. My grandmother says she’s probably a midget cause no self-respecting mother would allow her child to be up there acting like a bird. “Just a baby,” she’d say. “Can’t be more than six years old. Should be home in bed. Must be a midget.” My grandfather would give me a look when she started in and we’d smile at her together.

They almost got to me that last performance, dodging around with new routines and two at a time so that you didn’t know which one Mr. Fly was going to save at the last minute. But he’d fly out and catch the little boy and swing over to the opposite stand where the big boy was flying out to catch them both by the wrists and the poor woman would be left kind of dangling there, suspended, then she’d do this double flip which would kill off everyone in the tent except me, of course, and swing out on the very bar she was on in the first place. And then
they’d mess around two or three flying at once just to confuse you until the big drum roll started and out steps the little girl in a party dress and huge blindfold wrapped around her little head and a pink umbrella like they sell down in Chinatown. And I almost—I won’t lie about it—I almost let my heart thump me off the bench. I almost thought I too had to tie my shoelaces. But I sat there. Stubborn. And the kid starts bouncing up and down on the rope like she was about to take off and tear through the canvas roof. Then out swings her little brother and before you know it, Fly Jr. like a great eagle with his arms flapping grabs up the kid, her eyeband in his teeth and swoops her off to the bar that’s already got Mrs. Mr. and Big Bro on it and surely there’s no room for him. And everyone’s standing on their feet clutching at their faces. Everyone but me. Cause I know from the getgo that Mr. and Mrs. are going to leave the bar to give Jr. room and fly over to the other side. Which is exactly what they do. The lady in front of me, Mrs. Perez, who does all the sewing in our neighborhood, gets up and starts shaking her hands like ladies do to get the fingernail polish dry and she says
to me with her eyes jammed shut “I must go finish the wedding
gowns. Tell me later who died.” And she scoots through the aisle,
falling all over everybody with her eyes still shut and never looks
up. And Mrs. Caine taps me on the back and leans over and says,
“Some people just can’t take it.” And I smile at her and at her
twins who’re sitting there with their mouths open. I fold my
arms over my chest and just dare the Fly family to do their very
worst.

The minute I got to camp, I ran up to the main house where all
the counselors gather to say hello to the parents and talk with
the directors. I had to tell Mary the latest doings with the Fly
family. But she put a finger to her mouth like she sometimes
does to shush me. “Let’s not have any scary stuff this summer,
Harriet,” she said, looking over my shoulder at a new kid. This
new kid, Willie, was from my old neighborhood in Baltimore so
we got friendly right off. Then he told me that he had a roman-
tic heart so I quite naturally took him under my wing and
decided not to give him a heart attack with any ghost tales. Mary
said he meant “rheumatic” heart, but I don’t see any difference.
So I told Mary to move him out of George’s tent and give him a
nicer counselor who’d respect his romantic heart. George used
to be my play boyfriend when I first came to camp as a little kid
and didn’t know any better. But he’s not a nice person. He makes
up funny nicknames for people which aren’t funny at all. Like
calling Eddie Michaels the Watermelon Kid or David Farmer
Charcoal Plenty which I really do not appreciate and especially
from a counselor. And once he asked Joanne, who was the table
monitor, to go and fetch a pail of milk from the kitchen. And the
minute she got up, he started hatching a plot, trying to get the
kids to hide her peanut butter sandwich and put spiders in her
soup. I had to remind everyone at the table that Joanne was my
first cousin by blood, and that I would be forced to waste the
first bum that laid a hand on her plate. And ole George says, “Oh
don’t be a dumbhead, Harriet. Jo’s so stupid she won’t even
notice.” And I told him right then and there that I was not his
play girlfriend anymore and would rather marry the wolfman
than grow up and be his wife. And just in case he didn’t get the
message, that night around campfire when we were all playing
Little Sally Walker sittin’ in a saucer and it was my turn to shake
it to the east and to shake it to the west and to shake it to the
very one that I loved the best—I shook straight for Mr. Nelson
the lifeguard, who was not only the ugliest person in camp but
the arch enemy of ole George.

And that very first day of camp last summer when Willie
came running up to me to get in line for lunch, here comes
George talking some simple stuff about “What a beautiful head
you have, Willie. A long, smooth, streamlined head. A sure sign of
superior gifts. Definitely genius proportions.” And poor Willie
goes for it, grinning and carrying on and touching his head,
which if you want to know the truth is a bullet head and that’s all
there is to it. And he’s turning to me every which way, like he’s
modeling his head in a fashion show. And the minute his back is
turned, ole George makes a face about Willie’s head and all the
kids in the line bust out laughing. So I had to beat up a few right
then and there and finish off the rest later in the shower for being
so stupid, laughing at a kid with a romantic heart.

One night in the last week of August when the big campfire
party is held, it was very dark and the moon was all smoky, and
I just couldn’t help myself and started in with a story about the
great caterpillar who was going to prowl through the tents and
nibble off everybody’s toes. And Willie started this whimpering
in the back of his throat so I had to switch the story real quick
to something cheerful. But before I could do that, ole George
picked up my story and added a wicked witch who put spells on
city kids who come to camp, and a hunchback dwarf that
chopped up tents and bunk beds, and a one-eyed phantom giant
who gobbled up the hearts of underprivileged kids. And every
time he got to the part where the phantom ripped out a heart,
poor Willie would get louder and louder until finally he started
rolling around in the grass and screaming and all the kids went
crazy and scattered behind the rocks almost kicking the fire
completely out as they dashed off into the darkness yelling
bloody murder. And the counselors could hardly round us all
up—me, too, I’m not going to lie about it. Their little circles of
flashlight bobbing in and out of the bushes along the patches of
pine, bumping into each other as they scrambled for us kids.
And poor Willie rolling around something awful, so they took
him to the infirmary.

I was sneaking some gingersnaps in to him later that night when
I heard Mary and another senior counselor fussing at ole George
in the hallway.

“You’ve been picking on that kid ever since he got here,
George. But tonight was the limit—”

“I wasn’t picking on him, I was just trying to tell a story—”

“All that talk about hearts, gobblin’ up hearts, and
underpriv—”

“Yeh, you were directing it all at the little kid. You
should be—”

“I wasn’t talking about him. They’re all underprivileged
kids, after all. I mean all the kids are underprivileged.”

I huddled back into the shadows and almost banged into
Willie’s iron bed. I was hoping he’d open his eyes and wink at
me and tell me he was just fooling. That it wasn’t so bad to have
an underprivileged heart. But he just slept. “I’m an underprivi-
leged kid too,” I thought to myself. I knew it was a special camp,
but I’d never realized. No wonder Aunt Hazel screamed so about
my scary stories and my mother flicked off the TV when the
monsters came on and Mary was always shushing me. We all
had bad hearts. I crawled into the supply cabinet to wait for
Willie to wake up so I could ask him about it all. I ate all the
gingersnaps but I didn’t feel any better. You have a romantic heart, I whispered to myself settling down among the bandages. You will have to be very careful.

It didn’t make any difference to Aunt Hazel that I had changed, that I no longer told scary stories or dragged my schoolmates to the latest creature movie, or raced my friends to the edge of the roof, or held my breath, or ran under the train rail when the train was already in sight. As far as she was concerned, I was still the same ole spooky kid I’d always been. So Joanne was kept at home. My mother noticed the difference, but she said over the phone to my grandmother, “She’s acting very ladylike these days, growing up.” I didn’t tell her about my secret, that I knew about my heart. And I was kind of glad Joanne wasn’t around ’cause I would have blabbed it all to her and scared her to death. When school starts again, I decided, I’ll ask my teacher how to outgrow my underprivileged heart. I’ll train myself, just like I did with the Fly family.

“Well, I guess you’ll want some change to go to the fair again, hunh?” my mother said coming into my room dumping things in her pocketbook.

“No,” I said. “I’m too grown up for circuses.”

She put the money on the dresser anyway. I was lying, of course. I was thinking what a terrible strain it would be for Mrs. Perez and everybody else if while sitting there, with the Fly family zooming around in the open air a million miles above the ground, little Harriet Watkins should drop dead with a fatal heart attack behind them.

“I lost,” I said out loud.

“Lost what?”

“The battle with the Fly family.”

She just stood there a long time looking at me, trying to figure me out, the way mothers are always doing but should know better. Then she kissed me goodbye and left for work.
**My Delicate Heart Condition**

**Narrator Profile**  To fully understand characters in a story, you take note of what they say and what they do, and you draw conclusions about them. Fill in the following chart with the conclusions you draw about Harriet, this story’s narrator. Base your conclusions on her words and actions, which are cited in the left-hand column.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Harriet’s Words and Actions</th>
<th>My Conclusions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“The truth is I sometimes like to tell stories about bloodthirsty vampires or ugly monsters that lurk in clothes closets or giant beetles that eat their way through the shower curtain. . . .”</td>
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Complete the sample test item below. Then, read the explanation at right.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Test Item</th>
<th>Explanation of the Correct Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who is telling the story?</td>
<td>The correct answer is D. Harriet tells the story, using the words <em>I</em> and <em>me</em> to refer to herself. A is not correct because we know who the narrator is. Joanne (B) and Mary (C) are story characters, but neither one tells the story.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DIRECTIONS: Circle the letter of each correct response.

1. Which of the following is *not* true about Harriet?
   A. She is a first-person narrator.
   B. She tells us what Willie is thinking.
   C. She tells us what she is feeling.
   D. She refers to herself as *I* and *me*.

2. Which of the following passages indicates that Harriet is not always a credible narrator?
   F. “For four summers now, me and the Fly family have had this thing going.”
   G. “And I almost—I won’t lie about it—I almost let my heart thump me off the bench.”
   H. “Then he told me that he had a romantic heart so I quite naturally took him under my wing...”
   J. “I ate all the gingersnaps but I didn’t feel any better.”

3. At the end of the story, Harriet doesn’t want to go to the circus because—
   A. her mother is forcing her to go
   B. she wants to be more ladylike
   C. circuses have become too expensive
   D. she knows that she cannot always overcome her fear

4. Harriet’s choice of words and her descriptions give the story its special—
   F. plot
   G. voice
   H. ending
   J. sadness
 literal and Figurative Meaning

DIRECTIONS: Circle the letter of each correct response.

1. The phrase “a battle of nerves”—
   A means that nerve cells are fighting
   B has nothing to do with nerves
   C suggests a mental and not a physical conflict
   D means that people are scared

2. Which of these passages does not contain figurative language?
   F “Then she’d do this double flip which would kill off everyone in the tent. . . .”
   G “I almost let my heart thump me off the bench. . . .”
   H “Before you know it, Fly Jr. like a great eagle with his arms flapping grabs up the kid. . . .”
   J “And I smile at her and at her twins. . . .”

3. When Harriet says she hopes to outgrow her “underprivileged heart,” she is using figurative language to suggest that—
   A her heart is too small for her body
   B she wants to be brave and self-confident again
   C she needs money for an operation
   D she may need a heart transplant

Vocabulary in Context

DIRECTIONS: Complete the paragraph below by writing each word from the box in the correct numbered blank.

Word Box
suspended
withstand
proportions
vacant

I’m trying to learn how to (1) ________________ the disappointments of life. Recently I went into a dress shop. (2) ________________ from the ceiling were hundreds of lights, casting a glow on the clothes below. I wanted to buy everything, but my budget doesn’t have the (3) ________________ of a millionaire’s bank account. Next time I pass the shop, I’ll put on a (4) ________________ expression, and my thoughts will be far, far away.
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by Toni Cade Bambara

Harriet Watkins loves excitement as much as she loves scaring other kids with her spooky stories. She also loves watching the Fly family perform death-defying feats on the high wire at the circus. Nothing scares Harriet. Or does it?

LITERARY FOCUS: NARRATOR
• The title of the story “My Delicate Heart Condition,” gives you a clue that the tale is told by a first-person narrator. The “I” in the story is Harriet Watkins. She is telling us about herself.
• Harriet “speaks” in a distinct, or special, voice. The words and sentences she uses are lively and friendly, as if she were talking to her classmates rather than “writing” a story. As you read, “listen” to the voice of Harriet, the storyteller.
• Part of your job as a reader is to decide how credible, or believable, the narrator is. Here are questions you can ask yourself to decide whether the narrator is believable:
  1. Does the narrator exaggerate, or say that something is bigger or more exciting than it probably is?
  2. Does she misunderstand what adults are saying?
  3. Does the narrator not know things that other characters and the reader may know?

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A conclusion is a judgment you make based on evidence, or important details. You probably draw conclusions about the world around you every day. For example, one rainy morning your friend arrives at your house, dripping wet and out of breath. You might conclude that he forgot his umbrella and that he has run to your house in an attempt to stay dry.

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The following words appear in “My Delicate Heart Condition.” Look them over before you begin the story.

\[ \text{withstand (wi·stand\textsuperscript{v}) \textbf{v.}: resist; not give in.} \]
\[ \text{vacant (vå·kånt\textsuperscript{adj.}: empty; suggesting lack of attention.} \]
\[ \text{suspended (så·spen\textsuperscript{adj.}: hanging by a support from above.} \]
\[ \text{proportions (pro·pôr\textsuperscript{adj.}: size; dimensions.} \]

LITERAL AND FIGURATIVE MEANING
The literal meaning of a word is its dictionary definition. For example, if you say “The computer is broken,” you are using the word ‘broken’ in a literal sense: The computer doesn’t work. However, if you say “My heart is broken,” you are using the word ‘broken’ in a figurative, or imaginative, sense. Your heart is still pumping blood—it is “working” in the literal sense. What you really mean by “My heart is broken” is that you are feeling deep sorrow or hurt. You feel as if your heart is broken into pieces.

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Collection 3: Narrator and Voice

Part 1

My cousin Joanne has not been allowed to hang out with me for some time because she went and told Aunt Hazel that I scare her to death whenever she sleeps over at our house or I spend the weekend at hers. The truth is I sometimes like to tell stories about bloodthirsty vampires or ugly monsters that lurk in closets or giant beetles that eat their way through the shower curtain, like I used to do at camp to entertain the kids in my bunk. But Joanne always cries and that makes the stories even weirder, like background music her crying. And too—I'm not going to lie about it—I get spookier on purpose until all the little crybabies are stuffing themselves under their pillows and throwing their sneakers at me and making such a racket that Mary the counselor has to come in and shine her flashlight around the bunkhouse. I play like I'm asleep. The rest of them are too busy blubbering and finding their way out from under the blankets to tell Mary that it's me. Besides, once they get a load of her standing against the moonlight in that long white robe of hers looking like a ghost, they just start up again and pretty soon the whole camp is awake. Anyway, that's what I do for fun. So Joanne hasn't been around. And this year I'll have to go to the circus by myself and to camp without her. My mother said on the phone to Aunt Hazel—

"Good, keep Jo over there and maybe Harriet'll behave herself if she's got no one to show off to."

For all the years my mother's known me, she...

...and maybe Harriet'll behave herself if she's got no one to show off to. For all the years my mother's known me, she still doesn't understand that my behavior has got nothing to do with who I hang out with. In a private thing between me and me or maybe between me and the Fly family since they were the ones that first got me to do it through monster movies and withstand all the terror I could take.

For four summers now, me and the Fly family have had this thing going. A battle of nerves, you might say. Each year they raise the rope closer and closer to the very top of the tent—

...and maybe Harriet'll behave herself if she's got no one to show off to. For all the years my mother's known me, she still doesn't understand that my behavior has got nothing to do with who I hang out with. In a private thing between me and me or maybe between me and the Fly family since they were the ones that first got me to do it through monster movies and withstand all the terror I could take.

Each year they get bolder and more daring with their rope dancing and the swing—

...and maybe Harriet'll behave herself if she's got no one to show off to. For all the years my mother's known me, she still doesn't understand that my behavior has got nothing to do with who I hang out with. In a private thing between me and me or maybe between me and the Fly family since they were the ones that first got me to do it through monster movies and withstand all the terror I could take.

The Fly family performs high-wire tricks in a circus; they are acrobats.

Last summer they really got bold. On the final performance just before the fair closed, and all the kids go off to camp, the Fly family performed without a net. I figured they'd be up to something so I made sure my stomach was like steel. I did ten push-ups before breakfast, twenty sit-ups before lunch, skipped dinner altogether. My brother Teddy kidded me all day—

"Harriet's trying out for the Olympics."

I passed up the ice man on the corner and the pizza and sausage stand by the schoolyard and the cotton candy...

...and maybe Harriet'll behave herself if she's got no one to show off to. For all the years my mother's known me, she still doesn't understand that my behavior has got nothing to do with who I hang out with. In a private thing between me and me or maybe between me and the Fly family since they were the ones that first got me to do it through monster movies and withstand all the terror I could take.

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She has trained herself to overcome her fears.
...ladiees and fellas, what you've all been waiting for, the Main Attraction, the Fly Family. And everyone jumped up to shout like crazy as they came running out on their toes to stand in the light and then climb the ropes. I took a deep breath and folded my arms over my chest and a kid next to me went into hiding, acting like she was going to tie her shoelaces.

...easy. I'm not going to lie, but I was taking no chances. Between the balloon man and the wheel of fortune was the usual clump of ladies from church who came night after night to try to win the giant punch bowl set on the top shelf above the wheel, but had to settle for a jar of gumdrops or salt-and-pepper shakers or some other little thing from the bottom shelf. And from the wheel of fortune to the tent was at least a million feet.

There used to be four of them—the father, a big guy with a bald head and bushy mustache and shoulders and arms like King Kong; a tall lanky mother whom you'd never guess could even climb into a highchair or catch anything heavier than a Ping-Pong ball to look at her; the oldest son who looked like his father except he had hair on his head but none on his face and a big face it was, so that no matter how high up he got, you could almost tell whether he was smiling or frowning or counting; the younger boy about thirteen, maybe, had a vacant stare like he was a million miles away feeding his turtles or something, anything but walking along a tightrope or flying through the air with his family. I had always liked to watch him because he was as cool as I was. But last summer the little girl got into the act. My grandmother says she's probably a midget cause no self-respecting mother would allow her child to be up there acting like a bird. "Just a baby," she'd say. "Can't be more than six years old. Should be home in bed. Must be a midget." My grandfather would give me a look when she started in and we'd smile at her and Hazel isn't there to stop him. I was impatient and started yawning. Finally all the clowns hitched up their baggy pants and tumbled over each other out of the ring and into the dark, the jugglers caught all the things that were up in the air and yawning...
they’d mess around two or three flying at once just to confuse you until the big drum roll started and out steps the little girl in a party dress and huge blindfold wrapped around her little head and a pink umbrella like they sell down in Chinatown. And I almost—I would not like it—I almost let my heart thump me off the bench. I almost thought I too had to tie my shoelaces. But I sat there. Stubborn. And the kid starts bouncing up and down on the rope like she was about to take off and tear through the canvas roof. Then out swings her little brother and before you know it, Fly Jr., like a great eagle with his arms flapping, grabs up the kid, her eyehand in his teeth and swoops her off to the bar that’s already got Mrs. Mr. and Big Bro on it and surely there’s no room for him. And everyone’s standing on their feet clapping at their faces. Everyone but me. Crap, I know from the getgo that Mr. and Mrs. are going to leave the bar to give It room and fly over to the other side. Which is exactly what they do. The lady in front of me, Mrs. Perez, who does all the sewing in our neighborhood, gets up and starts shaking her hands like ladies do to get the fingernail polish dry and she says to me with her eyes jammed shut “I must go finish the wedding gowns. Tell me later who died.” And she scoots through the aisle, falling all over everybody with her eyes still shut and never looks up. And Mrs. Caine taps me on the back and leans over and says, “Some people just can’t take it.” And I smile at her and at her twins who’re sitting there with their mouths open. I fold my arms over my chest and just dare the Fly family to do their very worst.

The minute I got to camp, I ran up to the main house where all the counselors gather to say hello to the parents and talk with the directors. I had to tell Mary the latest doings with the Fly family. But she puts a finger to her mouth like she sometimes does to shush me. “Let’s not have any scary stuff this summer, Harriet,” she said, looking over my shoulder at a new kid. This new kid, Willie, was from my old neighborhood in Baltimore so we got friendly right off. Then he told me that he had a romantic heart so I quite naturally took him under my wing and decided not to give him a heart attack with any ghost tales. Mary said he meant “rheumatic” heart, but I don’t see any difference. So I told Mary to move him out of George’s tent and give him a counselor who’s not so romantic. George used to be my playboyfriend when I first came to camp as a little kid and didn’t know any better. But he’s not a nice person. He makes up funny nicknames for people which aren’t funny at all. Like calling Eddie Michaels the Watermelon Kid or David Farmer Charcoal Plenty which I really do not appreciate and especially from a counselor. And once he asked Joanne, who was the table monitor, to go and fetch a pill of milk from the kitchen. And the minute she got up, he started catching a plot, trying to get the kids to hide her peanut butter sandwich and put spiders in her soup. I had to remind everyone at the table that Joanne was my first cousin by blood, and that I would be forced to waste the

In the phrase “took him under my wing” (line 158), the narrator is using language in a figurative way. Why can’t the phrase be read in a literal way? What does the phrase mean?

In lines 157–162, Willie and Harriet confuse the words romantic and rheumatic. Romantic means “full of thoughts and feelings about romance or love.” A rheumatic heart is a heart that has been damaged by rheumatic fever, a childhood illness. Underline the words that tell what the narrator does to help protect Willie’s damaged heart.
first burn that laid a hand on her plate. And ole George says, "Oh, don't be a dumbhead, Harriet. It's so stupid you won't even notice." And I told him right then and there that I was not his play girlfriend anymore and would rather watch the wolfman than grow up and be his wife. And just in case he didn't get the message, that night around campfire when we were all playing Little Sally Walker arrin' in a saucer and it was my turn to shake it to the east and to shake it to the west and to shake it to the very one that I loved the best—I shook straight for Mr. Nelson the lifeguard, who was not only the ugliest person in camp but the arch enemy of ole George.

And that very first day of camp last summer when Willie came running up to me to get in line for lunch, here comes George talking some simple stuff about "What a beautiful head you have, Willie. A long, smooth, streamlined head. A sure sign of superior gifts. Definitely genius proportions." And poor Willie went for it, grinning and carrying on and touching his head, which if you want to know the truth is a bullet head and that's all there is to it. And he's turning to me every which way, like he's modeling his head in a fashion show. And the minute his back is turned, ole George makes a face about Willie's head and all the kids in the line bust out laughing. So I had to beat up a few right then and there and finish off the rest later in the shower for being so stupid, laughing at a kid with a romantic heart.

One night in the last week of August when the big campfire party is held, it was very dark and the moon was all smoky, and I just couldn't help myself and started in with a story about the great caterpillar who was going to prowl through the tents and nibble off everybody's toes. And Willie started this whimpering in the back of his throat so I had to switch the story real quick to something cheerful. But before I could do that, ole George picked up my story and added a wicked witch who put spells on city kids who come to camp, and a hunchback dwarf that chopped up tents and bunk beds, and a one-eyed phantom giant who gobbled up the hearts of underprivileged kids. And every time he got to the part where the phantom ripped out a heart, poor Willie would get louder and louder until finally he started rolling around in the grass and screaming and all the kids went crazy and scattered behind the rocks almost kicking the fire completely out as they dashed off into the darkness yelling bloody murder. And the counselors could hardly round us all up—me, too. I'm not going to lie about it. Their little circles of flashlight bobbing in and out of the bushes along the patches of pine, bumping into each other as they scrambled for us kids. And poor Willie rolling around something awful, so they took him to the infirmary.

I was sneaking some gingersnaps in to him later that night when I heard Mary and another senior counselor fussing at ole George in the hallway.

"You've been picking on that kid ever since he got here, George. But tonight was the limit."—

"I wasn't picking on him, I was just trying to tell a story—"

"All that talk about hearts, gobblin' up hearts, and underprivileged—"

"Yeh, you were directing it all at the little kid. You should be—"

"I wasn't talking about them. They're all underprivileged kids, after all. I mean all the kids are underprivileged."—

I huddled back into the shadows and almost banged into Willie's iron bed. I was hoping he'd open his eyes and wink at me and tell me he was just fooling. That it wasn't so bad to have an underprivileged heart. But he just slept. "I'm an underprivileged kid too," I thought to myself. I knew it was a special camp, but I'd never realized. No wonder Aunt Hazel screamed so loudly. I've picked up my story and added a wicked witch who put spells on city kids who come to camp, and a hunchback dwarf that chopped up tents and bunk beds, and a one-eyed phantom giant who gobbled up the hearts of underprivileged kids. And every time he got to the part where thephantom ripped out a heart, poor Willie would get louder and louder until finally he started rolling around in the grass and screaming and all the kids went crazy and scattered behind the rocks almost kicking the fire completely out as they dashed off into the darkness yelling bloody murder. And the counselors could hardly round us all up—me, too. I'm not going to lie about it. Their little circles of flashlight bobbing in and out of the bushes along the patches of pine, bumping into each other as they scrambled for us kids. And poor Willie rolling around something awful, so they took him to the infirmary.

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My Delicate Heart Condition

Harriet's Words and Actions | My Conclusions
--- | ---
"The truth is I sometimes like to tell stories about bloodthirsty vampires or ugly monsters that lurk in clothes closets or giant beetles that eat their way through the shower curtain..." | Harriet has a wild imagination; she likes to scare kids with horror stories. Maybe she likes attention.

"And from the wheel of fortune to the tent was at least a million stands selling B.B. bats and jawbreakers and gingerbread and sweet potato pie and frozen custard..." | Harriet exaggerates; Harriet sounds like she is young. She takes note of the sweets for sale at the circus.

"I had to remind everyone at the table that Joanne was my first cousin by blood, and that I would be forced to waste the first bum that laid a hand on her plate." | Harriet feels close ties with her family; Harriet must watch a lot of thrillers or police shows because her language sounds as if it came from a TV show or movie.

"I had to remind everyone at the table that Joanne was my first cousin by blood, and that I would be forced to waste the first bum that laid a hand on her plate."

"The battle with the Fly family"

"Well, I guess you'll want some change to go to the fair again, hunh?" my mother said coming into my room dumping things in her pocketbook.

"No," I said. "I'm too grown up for circuses."

She put the money on the dresser anyway. I was lying, of course. I was thinking what a terrible strain it would be for Mrs. Perez and everybody else if while sitting there, with the Fly family zooming around in the open air a million miles above the ground, little Harriet Watkins should drop dead with a fatal heart attack behind them.

"Lost," I said out loud.

"Lost what?"

"The battle with the Fly family"

She just stood there a long time looking at me, trying to figure me out, the way mothers are always doing but should know better. Then she kissed me goodbye and left for work.
My Delicate Heart Condition

Skills Review

Literal and Figurative Meaning

DIRECTIONS: Circle the letter of each correct response.

1. The phrase "a battle of nerves"—
   A. means that nerve cells are fighting
   B. has nothing to do with nerves
   C. suggests a mental and not a physical conflict
   D. means that people are scared

2. Which of these passages does not contain figurative language?
   F. "Then she'd do this double flip which would kill off everyone in the tent...."
   G. "I almost let my heart thump me off the bench...."
   H. "Before you know it, Fly Jr. like a great eagle with his arms flapping grabs up the kid...."
   J. "I almost let my heart thump me off the bench...."

3. When Harriet says she hopes to outgrow her "underprivileged heart," she is using figurative language to suggest that—
   A. her heart is too small for her body
   B. she wants to be brave and self-confident again
   C. she needs money for an operation
   D. she may need a heart transplant

Vocabulary in Context

DIRECTIONS: Complete the paragraph below by writing each word from the box in the correct numbered blank.

Word Box
suspended withstand proportions vacant

I'm trying to learn how to (1) ________ the disappointments of life. Recently I went into a dress shop. (2) ________ suspended from the ceiling were hundreds of lights, casting a glow on the clothes below. I wanted to buy everything, but my budget doesn't have the (3) ________ of a millionaire's bank account. Next time I pass the shop, I'll put on a (4) ________ expression, and my thoughts will be far, far away.