Oh Broom, Get to Work
by YOSHIKO UCHIDA (yō'shē-kō  ō-chē'dā)

Connect to Your Life

Houseguests This selection tells how a girl reacts to having too many visitors in her home. How would you deal with an unwanted guest?

Build Background

Immigrant Life Author Yoshiko Uchida and her sister, Keiko (kā'kō), grew up near San Francisco, California. Uchida’s parents were issei (ēs’sē’)—Japanese immigrants to the United States—who welcomed many household guests. They were eager to help Japanese students who had come to study in this country. Most of their visitors were students at the University of California or other area schools.

Focus Your Reading

LITERARY ANALYSIS POINT OF VIEW

A writer chooses a point of view as a way of presenting events. The narrator is the voice or character that tells about the events. Most stories and nonfiction works are told from either a first-person or a third-person point of view. In a work told from a first-person point of view, the narrator participates in the events that he or she describes. The narrator uses the pronouns I, me, and we, as in this passage from the selection you are about to read:

I knew if I looked at Keiko we would both explode. But I did. And we did.

As you read “Oh Broom, Get to Work,” consider how the use of a first-person point of view affects the presentation of the events.

ACTIVE READING CONNECTING

When you relate your reading to things you already know or to events in your own life, you are making connections. Connecting can help you understand the people that you read about.

READER’S NOTEBOOK As you read this selection, ask yourself, What does this remind me of? Jot down at least three ways in which you connect the selection with your own knowledge or experience.

WORDS TO KNOW

Vocabulary Preview

audacious indifferent
deprive intrusion
device laden
dispense pious

dread pompous
Oh Broom,
Get to Work
by Yoshiko Uchida

I was on my way home from school when I found it. A little dead sparrow. It lay still and stiff, its legs thrust in the air like two sticks. It was the first dead creature I had seen close up, and it filled me with both dread and fascination.

I knew what I would do. I would give the bird a nice funeral. Mama would find a piece of soft red silk for me from her bag of sewing scraps. I would wrap the bird in a silken shroud, put it in a candy box, and bury it beneath the peach tree. Maybe I would have Mama say a prayer for it, like the minister did at real funerals.

I picked up the bird carefully, cupping it in both hands, and ran home. I rushed through the kitchen and flung open the swinging door to the dining room.

“Look, Mama! I found a dead sparrow!”

But Mama was busy. She was sitting in the easy chair, knitting quietly. Sitting across from her on the sofa was a squat blob of a man—balding and gray—as silent as a mushroom.

The only sound was the soft ticking of the Chelsea clock on the mantel above the fireplace. I could see dust motes floating in the shaft of late afternoon sun that filtered in from the small west window.

Poor Mama was stuck with company again. She and the guest had both run out of things to say, but the visitor didn’t want to leave.

“Hello, Yo Chan,” my mother called. She seemed happy for the intrusion. “How was school today?”

But all I thought was, company again! It wasn’t the first time a visitor had deprived me of my mother’s time and attention, and I was tired of having them intrude into our lives uninvited. I stomped out of the living room without even a word of greeting to our guest, and knew I would have to bury the sparrow by myself.

Mama might have sung a Japanese hymn for me in her high, slightly off-key voice, and she certainly would have offered a better prayer than I could devise. But I did the best I could.


1. shroud (shroud): a cloth used to wrap a body for burial.

WORDS TO KNOW

- dread (dread) n. deep fear; terror
- intrusion (in-trū′zhan) n. an act of coming in rudely or inappropriately
- deprive (dī-prīv′) v. to take something away from
- devise (dī-viz′) v. to form or plan in the mind; think up
I buried the box beneath a mound of soft, loose dirt, picked a few nasturtiums to lay on top, and made a cross out of two small twigs.

The gray-blob mushroom was just another of the countless visitors, usually from Japan, who came to see my parents. They were both graduates of Doshisha, one of Japan’s leading Christian universities, and had close ties with many of its professors. This meant that many of our visitors were ministers or young men studying to become ministers at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley.

Once in a while, one of the visitors would be a pleasant surprise. Like the Reverend Kimura, who sang the books of the Bible to the tune of an old folk song.


I saw Mama’s eyes light up as she listened, and soon she joined in, clapping and singing and laughing at the pure joy of it.

Mama surprised me sometimes. She could be a lot of fun depending on whom she was with. It was too bad, I thought, that so much of the time she had to be serious and proper, while visiting ministers smothered her with their pious attitudes.

To me they were all achingly and endlessly boring. It was only once in a great while that a Reverend Kimura turned up, like a red jelly bean in a jar full of black licorice.

One pompous minister from Japan not only stayed overnight, which was bad enough, but left his dirty bathwater in the tub for Mama to wash out.

“WHAT NERVE!” Keiko fumed.
“I’LL SAY!” I echoed.

But Mama explained that in Japan everyone washed and rinsed outside the tub and got in just to soak. “That way the water in the tub stays clean, and you leave it for the next person.”

Mama got down on her knees to wash out the tub, saying, “We’re lucky he didn’t try to wash himself outside the tub and flood the bathroom.”

Some kind of luck, I thought.
I didn’t feel at all lucky about the seminary students who often dropped in, plunked themselves down on our sofa, and stayed until they were invited to have supper with us.

“Poor boys, they’re lonely and homesick,” Mama would say.

“They just need some of Mama’s kind heart and good cooking,” Papa would add. And if they needed some fatherly advice, he was more than willing to dispense plenty of that as well.

Both my parents had grown up poor, and they also knew what it was to be lonely. They cared deeply about other people and were always ready to lend a helping hand to anyone. Mama couldn’t bear to think of her children ever being less than kind and caring.

“Don’t ever be indifferent,” she would say to Keiko and me. “That’s the worst fault of all.”

It was a fault she certainly never had. She would even send vitamins or herbs to some ailing person she had just met at the dentist’s waiting room.

On holidays all the Japanese students from the Pacific School of Religion—sometimes as many as five or six—were invited to dinner. Keiko and I always complained shamelessly when they came.

“Awww, Mama . . . do you have to invite them?”

But we knew what we were expected to do. We flicked the dust cloth over the furniture, added extra boards to the dining room table so it filled up the entire room, and set it with Mama’s good linen tablecloth and the company china.

If it was to be a turkey dinner, we put out the large plates and good silverware. If it was a sukiyaki dinner, we put out the rice bowls, smaller dishes, and black lacquer chopsticks.

The men came in their best clothes, their squeaky shoes shined, their hair smelling of camellia hair oil. Papa didn’t cook much else, but he was an expert when it came to making sukiyaki, and cooked it right at the table with gas piped in from the kitchen stove. As the men arrived, he would start the fat sizzling in the small iron pan.

Soon Mama would bring out huge platters 
laden with thin slivers of beef, slices of bean curd cake, scallions, bamboo shoots, spinach, celery, and yam noodle threads. Then Papa would combine a little of everything in broth flavored with soy sauce, sugar, and wine, and the mouth-watering smells would drift through the entire house.

One evening in the middle of a sukiyaki dinner, one of the guests, Mr. Okada, suddenly rose from the table and hurried into the kitchen. We all stopped eating as the scholarly Mr. Okada vanished without explanation.

“Mama,” I began, “he’s going the wrong way if he has to . . .”

Mama stopped me with a firm hand on my knee. My sister and I looked at each other. What did he want in the kitchen anyway? More rice? Water? What?

It seemed a half hour before Mr. Okada finally reappeared. But he was smiling and seemed much happier.

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2. seminary (sém’-nèr’é): a school for the training of priests, ministers, or rabbis.

3. sukiyaki (sōō-kē-yā’kē): a Japanese dish of sliced meat, bean curd, and vegetables seasoned and fried together.

4. lacquer (lák’ær): a shiny substance used as a decorative coating on wooden objects.

5. bean curd: a food made from soybeans—also known as tofu.
“I’m sorry,” he murmured, “but it was so warm I had to remove my winter undershirt.” He wiped his face with a big handkerchief and added, “I feel much better now.”

I knew if I looked at Keiko we would both explode. But I did. And we did. We laughed so hard we had to leave the table and rush into the kitchen holding our sides. Keiko and I often got the giggles at company dinners, and the harder we tried to stop, the harder we laughed. The only solution was for us not ever to glance at each other if we felt the giggles coming on.

In spite of all our grumbling, Keiko and I often enjoyed ourselves at these dinners. Sometimes it was Papa who provided the laughs. He loved to talk, and everyone always liked listening to his stories. Sometimes he would tell a joke he had heard at the office:

A visitor from Japan looked up at the sky.
“Beautiful pigeons!” he says to a native San Franciscan.

“No, no,” answers the native. “Those aren’t pigeons, they’re gulls.”

The visitor replies, smiling, “Well, gulls or boys, they’re beautiful pigeons!”

Much laughter all around.

After dinner Papa liked to gather everyone around the piano. He had a good baritone voice, often sang solos at church, and even organized the church choir. Keiko played the piano, and we sang everything from “Old Black Joe” to “In the Good Old Summertime.”

Sometimes Keiko and I added to the entertainment by playing duets for our guests—a fairly audacious act since most of the time I hadn’t practiced all week. It never occurred to me then, but I suppose we were just as boring to them as they so often seemed to us.

I once thought I’d found the perfect solution for getting rid of unwanted guests. Mrs. Wasa, who was like an adopted grandmother, told me one day of an old Japanese superstition.

“If you want someone to leave,” she said, “just drape a cloth over the bristles of a broom and stand it upside down. It always works!”

I filed that wonderful bit of information inside my head, and the very next time Mama was trapped in the living room with another silent mushroom, I gave it a try. I did just as Mrs. Wasa instructed and stood the broom at the crack of the swinging door leading to the dining and living rooms.

“Oh, broom,” I murmured. “Get to work!”

I kept a watchful eye on our visitor, and before too long, he actually got up and left.

“Mama, it worked! It worked!” I shouted, dancing into the living room with the broom.

“He left! I got him to leave!”

But Mama was horrified.

“Mah, Yo Chan,” she said. “You put the broom at the doorway where he could see?”

I nodded. “I didn’t think he’d notice.”

Only then did I realize that our visitor had not only seen the broom, but had probably left because he knew a few Japanese superstitions himself.

I’d always thought the seminary on the hill was bent on endlessly churning out dull ministers to try my soul. But that afternoon I felt as though I’d evened the score just a little.

Connect to the Literature

1. What Do You Think? What is your opinion of young Yoshiko Uchida’s behavior?

Comprehension Check
• Who were the family’s visitors?
• In what ways did the visitors annoy Yoshiko?
• At the end of the selection, why did the visitor leave?

Think Critically

2. ACTIVE READING CONNECTING
With a group of classmates, discuss the connections that you recorded in your READER’S NOTEBOOK. Did you and your classmates relate to Yoshiko’s situation?

3. In your opinion, how well did Yoshiko cope with her family’s many visitors?

Think About:
• her descriptions of the visitors and the activities the family shared with them
• her feelings toward her family
• the expectations her parents had of her

4. Yoshiko’s mother used to say, “Don’t ever be indifferent. That’s the worst fault of all.” Why might being indifferent be such a terrible fault?

Extend Interpretations

5. The Writer’s Style Uchida uses sensory details, or imagery, to make her writing interesting. Phrases such as “hair smelling of camellia hair oil” appeal to the reader’s senses. Find other examples of sensory details in the selection and record them in a chart like the one shown. Note which sense or senses each detail uses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sensory Details</th>
<th>Sense(s) Used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>hair smelling of camellia hair oil</td>
<td>smell</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Connect to Life What is your idea of the perfect host and the perfect guest? Using ideas from the story and from your own experience, describe them.

Literary Analysis

POINT OF VIEW
When events are told from a first-person point of view, the narrator (the person or character who tells about them) is involved in the events. The narrator refers to himself or herself as I or me. Memoirs and autobiographies are usually told from a first-person point of view.

When events are told from a third-person point of view, the narrator describes the events but does not take part in them. A third-person narrator refers to all the people or characters in the story as he, she, or they. The story “All Summer in a Day” is told from a third-person point of view. In this sentence from that story, the narrator describes the actions of Margot and her classmates:

If they tagged her and ran, she stood blinking after them.

Biographies are usually told from a third-person point of view.

Group Activity With a group of classmates, choose a short (one- or two-paragraph) scene from “Oh Broom, Get to Work.” Write three retellings of the scene from different points of view. Try telling it from the mother’s point of view (first person), a visitor’s point of view (first person), or the point of view of a narrator not involved in the events (third person).
Writing
Personality Profile A profile is a description of a person’s most important traits and actions. Write a profile of young Yoshiko. What was she like? What were her good and not-so-good points? Use precise verbs, nouns, and adjectives to create a strong image of Yoshiko. Place the profile in your Working Portfolio.

Writing Handbook
See p. R34: Building Blocks of Good Writing.

Speaking & Listening
Monologue A monologue is a speech made by a character in a story. In a monologue, a character describes his or her thoughts and feelings. Choose a scene from this selection and rewrite it as a monologue delivered by one of the characters in the scene. Then practice performing the monologue, using gestures and facial expressions to help convey feelings. When you are ready, perform your monologue for the class.

Speaking and Listening Handbook

Research & Technology
What’s for Dinner? The Uchidas sometimes served their guests sukiyaki. What are some other Japanese dishes the Uchidas might have served? Using cookbooks and books about Japanese culture, create a menu for a Japanese dinner. Include a description of each dish on your menu.

Vocabulary
STANDARDIZED TEST PRACTICE
Choose the word or group of words that means the same, or nearly the same, as the underlined Word to Know.

1. A feeling of dread
   A daring
   C fear
   B hunger
   D pride

2. A sudden intrusion
   J invitation
   L accident
   K reward
   M attack

3. A pious minister
   A polite
   C humble
   B devout
   D stern

4. To devise a plan
   J form
   L dislike
   K execute
   M support

5. An indifferent audience
   A eager
   C uninterested
   B intelligent
   D unusual

6. To dispense medicine
   J practice
   L distribute
   K measure
   M swallow

7. A pompous public speaker
   A conceited
   B popular
   C humorous
   D shy

8. To deprive someone of happiness
   J cure
   L teach
   K rob
   M write

9. A pail laden with sand
   A sprinkled
   B white
   C ready
   D heavy

10. An audacious act
    A admirable
      K adventurous
      L unpleasant
      M unforgivable

Vocabulary Handbook
Grammar in Context: Action Verbs

Author Yoshiko Uchida uses action verbs to show a child’s energy and excitement in “Oh Broom, Get to Work.”

I rushed through the kitchen and flung open the swinging door.

Compare these sentences:

I felt in a big hurry.
I rushed through the kitchen.

The second sentence, which uses an action verb, is more forceful and vivid than the first.

Usage Tip: An action verb can show physical action, or an action of the mind:

They cared deeply about other people.

Writing Exercise

Rewrite each sentence using action verbs.

Example: Original Yo Chan seemed rude.
Rewritten Yo Chan fidgeted.

1. The sukiyaki was delicious.
2. The man seemed so dull.
3. Our conversation felt uncomfortable.
4. Mother’s song sounded sweet.

Connect to the Literature
Look back at the selection to find more examples of action verbs. Find two examples of verbs showing physical action, and two examples of verbs that show action of the mind.

Grammar Handbook

Yoshiko Uchida
1921–1992

“I write to celebrate our common humanity, for the basic elements of humanity are present in all our strivings.”

Leading Family
An author and educator, Yoshiko Uchida grew up in Berkeley, California. Her parents—leaders of Berkeley’s Japanese-American community—filled their home with homesick seminary students, ministers, and graduates of Doshisha University.

War Experiences
After the United States declared war on Japan in 1941, many Japanese Americans were arrested and placed in internment camps. The Uchidas were split up and sent to camps in Montana and Utah.

“Don’t Think in Terms of Labels”
Though Uchida’s parents taught their daughters Japanese customs, the family’s loyalty to the United States was strong. In 1984 Uchida said that she hoped that children could be “caring human beings who don’t think in terms of labels—foreigners or Asians or whatever—but think of people as human beings.”

Author Activity

Internment Camps
Yoshiko Uchida’s first successful writings were about her family’s experiences during World War II. Find a copy of her autobiography The Invisible Thread, from which “Oh Broom, Get to Work” is taken. Read about her experiences in an internment camp during the war, and write a paragraph describing what happened.