

Jam Session

By Frances Killea



“Aren’t you a little old to be playing make-believe?”

I, myself, had given up on play-acting when I was nine. It was kid’s stuff, and I didn’t feel very much like a kid anymore. My mother, however, seemed to have absorbed everything about childhood that I’d left behind. Now she was dancing around the living room with the handle of the dust mop in her hand, held at an angle like a rock star’s microphone, singing.

When I said that, though, she stopped.

“Hey, Monica, you like movies, right? Some people make a living out of playing make-believe.”

She wasn’t wrong. I did like movies, and actors did make a living dressing up, and pretending they were someone else. The fact that mom was right annoyed me. I didn’t say anything, but picked up a stack of magazines that was on the kitchen floor, and put it on the table.

“Thanks, honey. I don’t think this dust mop could handle those.” Mom hummed a few lines of the music she had on.

I liked rock the best, and she liked musicals. But today was *West Side Story*, which I loved. I’d caught my mother in the middle of a very animated version of the song “Maria.”

“Also, Monica, we’re going blueberry picking after I finish the kitchen,” Mom said, without looking up from her pile of dust, which she was now sweeping into the dustpan.

“We’re WHAT?” I had just finished putting all of the books on my bedroom floor back on my bookshelves. Plus, I’d made my bed, and changed my hamster’s water and food bowls. I was tired. “What am I? Slave labor?”

“Far from it. You’re a lucky eleven-year-old girl who gets to be responsible for her very own bedroom in a safe house, in a safe neighborhood, in a free country. And you have the summer off, and a mom who is really good at making blueberry jam, but needs another set of hands.”

I was about to protest, but she interrupted. “And you have full use of those hands. You’re not sick or crippled—so be thankful for that. You are far, far from oppressed, my friend.”

Mom dumped a pan of crumbs and dust into the trash. I stared at her. She was pretty awesome, most days. I really did love her. Still...dancing in the kitchen, pretending to be a star? *Blueberry picking*? She was known to sing out loud a lot. The berry-picking thing was new.

“Why don’t we just go to the store?” I asked.

Mom threw a rag at me, and I automatically started wiping down the counters. “Because, number one, the berries there are shipped in from across the country, and they don’t taste as fresh or as flavorful as the ones we can pick ourselves. And number two...” she paused to slam a drawer full of silverware shut, which just about broke my eardrums with clashing forks. “...it’s fun.”

So that was that. I grumbled my way through putting the clean dishes away, and then grumbled my way into the car, staying silent as we drove out East. It felt like forever. I had looked at the car clock when we left the house, and when we rolled up to the blueberry farm, it had only been half an hour. It’s funny how quickly the scenery changed. We’d gone from our

little town and neighborhood—not a city, by any stretch, but at least *populated*—to the country, where a house seemed surrounded by a mile of corn on every side.

My mother pointed to a small barn. The big sliding door was open, and inside was an old man standing hunched over a cash register. Mom went to speak to him as I rounded the back of the building to explore. I found a wooden table full of white buckets, a few empty wooden crates stacked near a coil of hose and a dog bowl filled with water. A bumblebee was struggling in the water, and I picked up a stick to help it out.

“Monica, grab a couple of buckets. Those are what we’ll pick into.” Mom came around the corner, and I reached for a pail from the stacks on the table.

“They’re stuck,” I huffed, wrestling with two that didn’t want to come apart. “Help me!”

Mom grabbed the end of one, and I held the handle on the other; and we yanked. The buckets slid free, and I fell over from the force of the pull.

“Okay,” I said, dusting myself off and frowning. We started walking past rows of blueberry bushes, a lot of them taller than Mom. “How do we do this?”

“Well, just like how you’d think,” my mother replied. She ducked into the path between two rows of bushes, and I followed.

“Just go for the ones that are dark all around. Don’t pick anything with white or pink on it. Those aren’t ready yet, and they’re going to be sour.” Mom handed me an unripe berry.

“Duh, I know that, I’ve had blueberries before,” I said, and didn’t take it.

“Huh,” Mom looked at me. “Not as sour as you, though, I bet.” She turned away. “Let’s divide and conquer, shall we? I’ll pick here, and you can find your own row to work on, and we’ll meet somewhere in the middle.”

“Fine.” I stomped away.

The grass itched my ankles. I wanted to sit down, but the sun was hot, and the shade under the bushes helped a little. So I found my own row, and started picking a short way into the patch. Almost immediately, reaching into the branches for a particularly juicy-looking berry, a yellowjacket stung my finger.

“OUCH!” I yelled. “STUPID BEE!” I swallowed to keep from crying. I listened, but didn’t hear my mother reply to me.

She must not have heard. Or maybe she’s ignoring me, I thought. My face felt hot, and I could feel anger bubbling up from my stomach to my chest. I kicked the near-empty pail by my feet, and screamed in frustration.

All I could hear in response were birds. I sniffed and wiped my eyes. My finger hurt, and it looked puffy. I picked up my bucket, and ran back up to where I thought my mom had been working. She wasn’t there anymore. When I ran down the row calling out and looking for her, I saw no one, and heard nothing. I flipped the bucket upside down and sat on it, resting my face in my hands for a moment while I let a few tears slide down my nose.

There was nothing else to do but pick, I thought.

So I stood up, and walked a few rows back, parking myself next to a particularly tall blueberry shrub, making sure it was relatively bee-free. With both hands, I started yanking every ripe blueberry from the branches, fueled by anger. Gradually, though, I slowed down, feeling calmer as the sun shifted, and a breeze cooled off my shoulders.

“These are weird,” I said to myself, looking at a handful of berries.

They were dusty-looking, like they'd been frosted. However, the dust rubbed off when I wiped them against my shirt. I'd never picked blueberries before; I'd actually never picked any berries before, and being out there was annoyingly hot and full of bugs. But I was beginning to relax. I caught myself humming one of the songs from the soundtrack my mother had been listening to that morning, and made myself stop.

I moved to the next bush, and started on that one. Shortly after, I walked to another, and then another; picking a handful of fruit from each before looking for new territory. My bucket was only a third of-the-way full, and my finger was hot and red, but I had to admit, I was having fun.

I didn't hear my mother when she walked up. I had filled my bucket another third of-the-way to the top, and I was singing and dancing in place under the branches.

"Who's making-believe now?" My mom laughed.

I was embarrassed. "Yeah...but I'm eleven. I'm allowed to do this."

"Newsflash, honey: people never get too old to pretend."

"I got stung," I said, and suddenly needed a hug. I almost tipped over my harvest, but jumped over it before kicking the pail.

Mom set hers down and hugged me back. "Let's head home, shall we?"

We paid for our berries by weight. Mom got me a can of Coke from a rickety, old machine in the barn, which I put on my finger before I popped the tab. We shared it in the car on the way home.

When we got back, Mom gave me some first-aid cream for my sting, and I curled up on the living room couch with a book. I don't remember which song exactly, because I was drifting in and out of a nap, but I heard my mom singing along to *West Side Story* again. Only this time, it made me smile, and when I woke up, there were five jars of jam on the counter, and the house smelled like vanilla, sugar and fruit.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What activity do Monica and her mom go out to do in the country?

- A Monica and her mom go out to sing songs from *West Side Story* in the country.
- B Monica and her mom go out to clean houses in the country.
- C Monica and her mom go out to catch bees in the country.
- D Monica and her mom go out to pick blueberries in the country.

2. What is a turning point in the story?

- A Monica's mom dances around the living room with the dust mop.
- B Monica's mom slams shut a drawer full of silverware.
- C Monica gets stung by a yellowjacket.
- D Monica grumbles as she gets into the car.

3. While picking blueberries, Monica begins to relax. She catches herself humming a song. She dances in place under the branches.

What can be concluded from this evidence?

- A Monica enjoys picking blueberries.
- B Monica hates picking blueberries.
- C Monica wants to go back home.
- D Monica is hot and sweaty.

4. How does Monica's mood change between the beginning and end of the story?

- A She goes from being in a bad mood to being in a good mood.
- B She goes from being in a good mood to being in a bad mood.
- C She goes from being in a bad mood to being in a terrible mood.
- D She goes from being in a good mood to being in a great mood.

5. What is a theme of this story?

- A how boring blueberry picking can be
- B how beautiful the song "Maria" is
- C how awesome a mother can be
- D how easy cleaning a house is

6. Read the following sentence: "I **grumbled** my way through putting the clean dishes away, and then **grumbled** my way into the car, staying silent as we drove out East."

Why does the author use the word **grumbled** twice in this sentence?

- A to show how long the drive out East took
- B to show how excited the main character is about going for a drive
- C to show how many dishes there are in the main character's house
- D to show how grumpy the main character is feeling

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

Monica plays make-believe when picking blueberries _____ she felt like she was too old for make-believe at home.

- A in conclusion
- B although
- C for instance
- D above all

8. What does Monica ask her mother when she sees her singing and dancing to a *West Side Story* song at the beginning of the story?

9. When she hears her mother singing along to *West Side Story* at the end of the story, what does Monica do?

10. Why does Monica's response to her mother singing along to *West Side Story* change between the beginning and end of the story? Support your answer with evidence from the passage.

Teacher Guide & Answers

Passage Reading Level: Lexile 730

1. What activity do Monica and her mom go out to do in the country?

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Monica plays make-believe when picking blueberries _____ she felt like she was too old for make-believe at home.

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- B **although**
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- D above all

8. What does Monica ask her mother when she sees her singing and dancing to a *West Side Story* song at the beginning of the story?

Suggested answer: Monica asks, "'Aren't you a little old to be playing make-believe?'"

9. When she hears her mother singing along to *West Side Story* at the end of the story, what does Monica do?

Suggested answer: Monica smiles.

10. Why does Monica's response to her mother singing along to *West Side Story* change between the beginning and end of the story? Support your answer with evidence from the passage.

Suggested answer: Answers may vary, as long as they are supported by the story. Students may claim that Monica's response has changed because of her experience picking blueberries. Getting stung by a yellowjacket while on her own at the blueberry farm may have given Monica a new appreciation of her mother and the comfort her mother offers. Also, discovering the joy of singing and dancing herself under the blueberry branches may have made Monica more tolerant of such behavior in her mother.