Mother Fletcher’s Gift

by Walter Dean Myers
illustrated by William Low

Realistic fiction includes stories about imaginary people and events that could happen in real life. Look for realistic actions and events as you read.
It was rumored that Mother Fletcher was well over ninety years old. She had become a legend on 145th Street. If anybody wanted to know what the neighborhood looked like in the twenties, where Jack Johnson had lived, perhaps, or where James Baldwin’s father had preached, Mother Fletcher could tell you. Patrolman William Michael O’Brien had heard about her shortly after his assignment to the precinct, but it wasn’t until nearly three months later that he actually met the old woman.

He was on foot patrol and had stopped to pass a few words with one of the local shopkeepers when a young black girl came running up to him and told him that Mother Fletcher was sick and needed an ambulance. O’Brien knew that in this neighborhood it was nearly impossible to get a doctor who would make house calls. But he had also been told that sometimes the people used ambulances just to go downtown.

He followed the girl into one of the buildings and into a first-floor apartment. The place was small but spotless. The floor was covered with a linoleum rug that was worn through in several spots. The porcelain in the kitchen sink was discolored but the brass fixtures were shining brightly. “She’s in here,” the girl said, and went into the adjoining room.
Mother Fletcher sat upright in the white-sheeted bed, her pale green housecoat pinned at the neck. O’Brien had never seen as black a person in his entire life. Her skin was a dull ebony that seemed almost purple in the light of the lamp by her bed.

Her gray hair, still streaked with wisps of black and thinner on the sides than on the top, framed her face and, catching the light, made her look like a black version of a painted medieval saint. She was a small person, in the delicate way that a child is small, but with the quiet grace of her years. But what stood out most on the old woman were her eyes.

They were, if it was possible, even darker than her skin. Black shiny eyes that darted brightly about, checking the room for anything that might have been out of place.

“Didn’t my great-great-grandchild tell you I was sick?” Mother Fletcher shot a glance in the direction of the girl. “I gave her a dime to tell you.”

“I mean,” O’Brien said, “what exactly is the matter?”

“How do I know? I’m not a doctor.” Mother Fletcher pulled the housecoat tighter around her thin shoulders.

“What’s your name, please?”

“Mother Fletcher.”

“What’s your first name?”

“I’m Mother Fletcher, that’s all. Now, are you going to get me an ambulance or do I have to send that child out for another officer?”

“We can’t just call an ambulance any time someone says to call one,” O’Brien said.

“Boy, I am not someone,” the old woman said. “I am Mother Fletcher and you can call for an ambulance. You know how to use that radio you got.”

“What is your age?” O’Brien flipped out his radio and called the emergency network.

“Full-grown,” came the flat reply.

O’Brien stepped into the next room and told the operator what he had. The ambulance arrived some fifteen minutes later. Two slim attendants carried the old woman out. O’Brien wrote up the incident in his book and promptly put it out of his mind.

A week later he was called into one of the precinct offices, where a lieutenant and two patrolmen were waiting for him.
“O’Brien,” Lt. Stanton rolled a cigar from one side of his mouth to the other. “What's this I hear about you taking graft?”

“I don't know what you're talking about,” O'Brien answered.

“Well, this package just came in from someone on your beat and it's addressed to your shield number.” The lieutenant was enjoying this. “Looks like graft to me, O'Brien. Open it up.”

O'Brien looked at the childish scrawl on the top of the box. To Officer 4566. There was no return address. He flipped open the flimsy box and took out the contents. It was a knitted green cardigan. Instead of a brand name on the label it simply repeated his badge number, 4566. O'Brien tried it on and was surprised to discover that it fit even his long arms.

“I wonder who it's from?”

“Mother Fletcher,” the lieutenant said. “You do anything for her?”

“Mother Fletcher? Oh, yes, the old black lady. I called an ambulance for her. No big thing.”

“She probably started making that sweater for you on the way to the hospital,” Lt. Stanton said. “We had another guy here about two years ago that straightened out a hassle she had with her landlord. She made him a sweater too. Then she decided that the landlord was right after all and she made him a sweater. I guess it makes her feel good. You can put a couple of bucks in the precinct fund to make up for the sweater. And don’t forget to go around and thank Mother Fletcher. It's good for community P.R.”

O'Brien got around to thanking the old woman a few days later, telling her how his wife had been jealous of such a fine sweater. Three weeks later another package arrived at the station house. It was a sweater for his wife. When he went over to thank Mother Fletcher for the second sweater he was careful not to mention that he had a six-year-old daughter.

Over the next months O'Brien learned more about Mother Fletcher from people on his beat. Some stories were a bit far-fetched, but they were all told in a way that said that people loved the old woman. She did her own shopping, always carrying the same blue cloth shopping bag, and always walking on the sunny side of the street “to keep the bones warm.” Once O'Brien met her on the corner of 147th Street and asked how she was feeling.

“I'm feeling just fine. I'm not cutting the rug,” she said, “but I'm not lying on it, either.”

O'Brien talked to her now and again when he saw her on the street, and started writing down everything she said, trying to piece together enough information to determine her true age. In truth, Mother Fletcher was the only one in his precinct that he thought of during his off-duty hours. The struggle and hassles of Harlem were not what he wanted to bring home with him. It didn’t take O’Brien long to subscribe to the precinct motto—Eight and Straight. Eight hours on the job and straight out of the neighborhood.

To O'Brien, “out of the neighborhood” meant home to a ranch-style house in suburban Staten Island. He looked forward to the day when his wife, Kathy, could quit her job with the utility company and stay home with their daughter, Meaghan. He had told Kathy about Mother Fletcher and they had gone over his notes in the evenings trying to figure her age. Beyond this O'Brien was careful to keep his job apart from his family. At least he was until just before Christmas.
“Hi, honey,” Bill called out as he ducked in from the light snow.
“Dinner’s almost ready,” Kathy answered as she came from
the kitchen. “Did you ask Mother Fletcher if she remembered when
Woodrow Wilson was elected President?”

“Yep.”
“Well, what did she say?” Kathy wiped her hands on her apron.
“She said she remembered it.”
“Did she remember how old she was then?”
“Nope, unless you can figure how old ‘bout half grown’ is,” Bill
said. He tousled his daughter’s hair and sat on the couch.
“What else did she say?” Kathy folded one leg under herself
and sat on it.
“Not much. I think she knows that I’m trying to figure out her age,
and she’s playing with me.” Bill glanced toward the kitchen and sniffed
the air. “Is that roast beef?”

“Chicken,” Kathy answered. “So that’s all she said today?”
“No, she complained about how loud the teenagers play their
radios and, oh, yes, she invited us to Christmas dinner.”

“Who invited us to dinner?” Meaghan looked up from her book.
“A lady Daddy knows in Harlem, sweetheart.”

“Can we take presents over?”
“We won’t be going over,” Bill said.

“Why, Daddy?”
“We have other plans. We’re going to ... what are
we doing for Christmas, Kathy?”

“Nothing.”
“Then we can go!” Meaghan said.
“Kathy, will you deal with your daughter?” Bill smiled
as he reached for the paper. “She’s too much for me.”

“No, I won’t.” Kathy got up. “I’m going to
start serving dinner. And Meaghan has a right
to ask a question.”

“Hey, let’s not make an issue of
this,” Bill said.

“She just asked for a simple explanation, Bill.” Kathy was
annoyed.
“The lady is a little different, that’s all.” Bill spoke to his
daughter. “The place she lives in isn’t very nice, and Daddy would
rather not spend his Christmas in that kind of a neighborhood.”

“Is she a poor lady?”
“Yes, she’s a poor lady.”

“Then we can take her a present because poor people
like presents.”
“We’ll send her a present if you want, Meaghan.” Bill rose from
the couch and went into the living room, snapping on the television
before sitting down. Kathy followed him in.

“I don’t like the idea of being made out to be a bad guy, Kathy,”
Bill said without looking away from the six o’clock news. “One
word from you could have helped that little situation in there.”

“Why didn’t you just give her the same answer you gave Mother
Fletcher? What did you tell her?”

“There are times, Kathy, when you don’t give direct answers to
questions. It’s a way of dealing with people. You don’t reject them,
and you don’t get yourself involved in a whole scene. Like this one,
I might add.”
“Would you mind giving me a direct answer? What did you tell her?”

“I told her yes, we’d come. But they know we don’t come into that neighborhood when we’re off duty,” Bill answered. “And they’re not that anxious to have us come, either.”

“You said yes? That you’d come?” Kathy pulled her glasses from the top of her head and put them on. “That’s your way of not answering a question directly?”

“I’ll send her a present.”

“That’s awfully sweet of you, Mr. O’Brien.” Kathy went back to the kitchen.

Bill turned up the television and watched as some senator complained about the military budget. If his wife had chosen this occasion to have one of her special “I simply don’t understand” periods he wasn’t going to fight her.

He also heard snatches of the conversation drifting from the kitchen. Meaghan was talking about getting a kitten and was trying to decide between a calico and a tabby. At any rate she seemed to have forgotten Mother Fletcher. He only hoped that Kathy would too.

And apparently she had. For that was the last O’Brien heard about visiting the old woman. That is, it was the last thing until just after eleven on Christmas morning. He was sitting in his favorite armchair, feeling especially regal in the smoking jacket that Kathy had given him, watching a college football game, when Kathy and Meaghan came into the room with their coats on.

“Going for a walk?” Bill asked, hoping he wouldn’t be expected to leave his comfortable spot.

“We’re going to Mother Fletcher’s for dinner,” Meaghan said brightly.

“You’re not going to Mother Fletcher’s, Kathy. And that’s that!”

“Well, then I suggest you arrest me, Mr. O’Brien.” The sunlight through the window caught the flare in Kathy’s eyes. “Because that will be the only way you’re going to prevent our going.”

“I brought her a scarf.” Meaghan held a small square package.

“What is this all about?” Bill felt his face getting red. “You don’t even know this woman. Why do you have to drag Meaghan all the way to Harlem?”

“I’m not dragging her anywhere. I’m giving her the present of a visit to an old lady that even you like. Now, from what you say, all I have to do is go over to the neighborhood and ask anyone where she lives because they all know, right? Or would you like to drop us off?”

The silence of the long drive was broken only by an occasional observation from Meaghan. O’Brien took his wife slowly, carefully, through the worst streets he could find until he finally pulled up in front of Mother Fletcher’s place.
“Well, well, well!” Mother Fletcher was wearing an ankle-length green dress with a white lace collar. She wore a red and gold pin shaped like a tree. “I thought I was going to be having Christmas dinner by myself this year.” Bill shot a glance in Kathy’s direction as they entered the small apartment. The smell of the ham in the oven filled the room.

“Mother Fletcher, this is my wife, Kathy, and this is Meaghan.”

“Well, ain’t she the prettiest little thing. Look just like her mama too. Sit on down in here while I see if I can’t get something together for dinner. Did I wish you a Merry Christmas yet? Merry Christmas, children.”

“Merry Christmas, and here’s a present.” Meaghan gave Mother Fletcher the package.

“Thank you, child,” Mother Fletcher said.

“Daddy didn’t want to come,” Meaghan said, pulling off her coat.

“I just didn’t want to put you out,” Bill said quickly.

“Child, I don’t blame you one bit,” Mother Fletcher said. “You working here all week and then coming back on a holiday. But it’s good for you to see we have holidays here too. You see the people in the street all wishing each other a Merry Christmas and dressed up in their churchgoing clothes. You see them in this frame and you get a different picture of them. Don’t you think so, Officer?”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” Bill answered.

“You can take your coat off,” Mother Fletcher said. “I’ll put it in a safe place.”

“Those plates are so lovely!” Kathy went to the kitchen table where three plates were set out. “Are they antiques?”

“Everything in this house is an antique, including me,” Mother Fletcher said as she took another plate from the cabinet.

“It’s a lovely setting and there sure are a lot of pots on the stove for you not to be expecting anyone.”
"Well, honey, let me tell you something. You don't survive, and that's what I been doing all these years, you don't survive sitting around expecting folks to act right." She opened the oven door, poked a fork in the ham and watched the clear juices run down its side, and then closed it. "Cause the more you expect the more you get your heart broke up. But you got to be ready when they do act right because that's what makes the surviving worth surviving. That make any sense to you, honey?"

"It makes quite a bit of sense."

"That child of yours eat sweet potatoes?"

"Yes, she loves them," Kathy said. "Can I help you with anything?"

"You can help me with anything you have a mind to," Mother Fletcher said. "'Bout time you asked me too, old as I am."

"You're not as old as Santa Claus," volunteered Meaghan.

"Santa Claus?" Mother Fletcher put down the dish towel and turned her head to one side. "Child, I knew Santa Claus when he wasn't nothing but a little fellow. Let's see now. He wasn't any bigger than you when I knew him. Me and him used to play catch down near the schoolyard."

And Mother Fletcher went off into telling stories to Meaghan about how long she had known Santa Claus and how she used to have to lend him her handkerchief because his nose was always running.

And the Christmas dinner wasn't the best that the O'Briens would ever have but it was far from being the worst. But then, that's not what this story is about. This story is about how a policeman's young family brought a few hours of happiness to an old woman. Or perhaps it's about how an old woman taught a young family something about sharing. Or maybe, just maybe, it is about how a six-year-old girl found the only person in the world who played catch with Santa Claus when he was a little boy, even though she was a lot older than he was.
Think Critically

1. Think about people you know who may be alone on holidays. Would you consider visiting them or inviting them to visit you on a holiday? Explain your answer. Text to Self

2. Mother Fletcher is a fictional character, but the author describes her in a way that makes her seem real. Find details from the story that bring her to life for the reader. Think Like an Author

3. The author reveals Officer O’Brien’s character through the things he does. Find three examples of Officer O’Brien’s actions that show his character, and explain how they do so. Literary Elements

4. Why did Mother Fletcher tell her stories about Santa Claus to Meaghan? What do you think Meaghan thought about the stories? Inferring

5. Look Back and Write At first, Officer O’Brien doesn’t want to go to Mother Fletcher’s for Christmas dinner. Write a paragraph from Officer O’Brien’s point of view explaining how he feels after having dinner with his family at Mother Fletcher’s house. Provide evidence to support your answer.

TEST PRACTICE Extended Response