Charlotte Brontë's

JANE EYRE

A retelling by

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Barrington Stoke

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Passing for White

One Shot

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To Isaac and Jack, in the hope that they will finally read Jane Eyre



1.

I was not loved.

I was not wanted.

I did not belong.

I lived with my aunt and cousins, but I was not welcome in their house. My parents had died when I was a baby, and my uncle took me in. He didn't live much longer than they had. I don't remember any of them.

My strange story starts on a wet winter's day. There was no chance of taking a walk, and I was glad of it. I never liked being out with my cousins. They had rosy cheeks, golden hair, and brimmed with the kind of confidence only money can buy. They would stride ahead as we walked, and I'd be stomping along in their shadows. I was small, shabby, and the nursemaid nagged me at every step. The chilly air bit deep into my bones, but what bit even deeper was knowing I was disliked. That clamped its teeth right down into my soul.

The wind blew so hard that wet winter's day the rain fell sideways. No one dared set foot outdoors. My cousins were in the drawing room, clustered around their dear mama. She lay on the sofa, basking in the fire's warmth like a well-fed pig.

I'd been told to go away. I was banished from their company for some sin or other, I don't know what. I asked my aunt what I'd done wrong, but that just made things worse. Children were not meant to question their elders, my aunt said. It was unnatural. Odd. Children were meant to be cheerful and charming. And if they could not be cheerful and charming, they should at least be silent.

Very well, I thought. I walked into the next room and shut the door behind me. I took a book from the shelf, climbed on to the window seat and pulled the curtains across so I was hidden from sight.

I was all right until my cousin John came looking for me.

John was fourteen years old. He'd been kept home from school these last few weeks because his mother feared he'd been exhausting himself. My aunt adored her son John: he was an angel fallen to earth in her eyes. A genius with the soul of a poet

and the heart of a saint. Never has a mother been so mistaken.

John was a selfish bully who cared little for his mother and less for his sisters. I was his one passion. He hated me. John attacked me not two or three times a week, or once or twice a day, but continually. I was four years younger and half his size. Every nerve in my body feared him. Every inch of my flesh shrank whenever he came near.

I heard the door open and I froze. John was not intelligent or observant. He wouldn't have seen me at all if one of his sisters hadn't pointed out my hiding place. He came in, ordered me from the window seat and demanded, "What were you doing?"

"Reading," I replied.

"Show me the book."

I placed it in his hands.

"You've no right to take our books!" John said. "You're an orphan, a beggar! You've no money. You should be on the streets, not living here at Gateshead, eating our food, wearing clothes my mother has paid for. I'll teach you your place. Go and stand over there, by the door."

I did what I was told. There was no one to turn to for help. The servants could not afford to notice,

and my aunt became blind and deaf whenever John raised a hand against me.

He hurled the book. I dodged but too late. The big heavy volume hit me, and I fell, striking my head on the door. The cut bled, and along with the pain I felt a sudden, overwhelming rage. I'd suffered John for nearly ten years. But now I'd had enough!

I'll not say what I called him. It wasn't polite. For a moment John stood gawping. He couldn't believe I'd dared to stand up to him. He was so shocked!

And then he ran at me. His hands grasped my hair, tugging so hard I thought he'd rip my scalp off. Blood ran down my neck, and I truly feared John was going to kill me. I lashed out, grabbing the only part of him I could reach. Digging in my nails I squeezed his soft flesh with all my might.

I didn't know what I'd done. I couldn't even see with my head pulled back. John squealed like a pig, and that brought both my aunt and the maids running.

John and I were dragged apart. I was called a wildcat. A demon. A fiend. And then my aunt told the maids, "Take her to the red room. Lock her in."