REFLECTIONS:
A Play About Aging

An Honors Thesis
by
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Synopsis of *Reflections*

The play *Reflections* is written from a seventy-nine year old woman's perspective. Constance Mary Downing, the woman, doesn't appreciate her life nor her accomplishments. In the play, Constance is interviewed by a student, Shannon, studying aging issues. Constance comes to terms with her past and realizes what she has accomplished in her life during the telling of her experiences to the young Shannon. Helping Constance tell her story are two shadows, or reflections of herself. One shadow, Connie, is Constance when she was a young woman. Connie is bright vibrant and loving life. The other shadow, or reflection, is Mary. Mary is Constance when she was in her late thirties. Mary is harder and more down to earth than Connie. Constance comes to term with these characters as well by the end of the play.

I based the characters of Constance, Connie and Mary off of three women that I interviewed at Rosewood Retirement Community in Muncie. The three women were Gladys Tanner, a ninety year old from Muncie; Gladys Story, a seventy year old from Anderson; and Francis Tanner, a sixty-six year old now living in Muncie. I don't know where Francis is originally from because she suffered an aneurysm three years ago and her memory was severely affected. I spent about an hour with each woman, interviewing her and recording it. I was surprised at the honesty and openness I received from the three women. I was treated very well. The interviews were set up for me by the activities director of Rosewood Manor, Eva. I never learned her last name. To prepare for writing a play such as this I read *Overtones* by Alice Gerstenberg and Lorin Howard. Not only did this play help with the writing style used for a manuscript, it also gave me
great ideas for blending the reflections in with the main characters.

I wanted to do a project like this one because I am fascinated by the wisdom elderly people posses. I love to sit and listen to stories that elderly people have to tell. I am also interested in what how one's perception of aging changes as one gets older and closer to what is deemed to be "old age" by society. I specifically chose to talk to women because I am highly interested in women's issues and aging is an issues women tend to be very concerned with. I found that how one perceives oneself is the determining factor in how the rest of the world perceives that person.
Methodology for Writing Reflections

The characters of Constance, Connie and Mary are based on three women I interviewed at Rosewood Retirement Community in Muncie. I chose Rosewood simply because that facility seemed the most eager. I called several retirement communities listed in the phone book and Rosewood called me back within an hour. The activities director had three names for me and an appointment set up for the following week.

When I arrived, Eva introduced me to Francis Catherine Jackman. Francis is a former concert pianist who played Carnegie Hall. She also worked for the Pentagon and spoke five languages. Unfortunately, Francis had an aneurysm a few years ago and her memory is very sporadic. She could not remember playing the piano or working for the government. Nor could she remember which languages she used to speak since English itself was such a struggle for her. Francis could remember the name of her aunt's dog and by the end of the interview, she told me her favorite composer was Beethoven.

The next woman I interviewed was Gladys Story. Gladys grew up in Anderson and moved to Muncie when she was a teenager. Gladys was the main inspiration for Connie's marriage. Gladys's husband was sterile throughout their marriage, a fact he knew before they were married, and he placed the blamed for their inability to have children on Gladys.

The last woman was perhaps the most fascinating. Her name is Gladys Tanner and she is ninety years old. Gladys had been married four times and had three children. Most of what
happened to her, happened to Mary in the play. Gladys is a strong woman who always seemed to stand her ground. I left the interview with the feeling that Gladys was not proud nor was she happy with her past.

All of these women touched my heart. Their honesty and frankness was much appreciated. When I was reflecting back on the interviews, I realized how much each woman had been through and how much strength it must have taken to talk with a perfect stranger about their lives. I thank these women from the bottom of my heart and I dedicate this play to them.
A play by: Erinn A. McKee
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Cast of Characters

Constance Mary Downing, an elderly woman in her 70's

Sylvia, activity director of Rustic Acres

Connie, Constance in her mid-twenties

Mary, Constance in her late-fifties

Shannon, a high school student

SCENES

Act I: Rustic Acres, a nursing home

Act II: Rustic Acres, the next day

The stage is set as a small bedroom. There is a small double bed, a card table with two folding chairs across from the bed, and a small bedstand. Picture frames cover the bedstand.
ACT I

Scene: Constance is sitting on the bed reading a book. Every so often she glances up at the pictures sitting on the bedstand. The bed is center stage and the table is down stage right.

Soft gospel music can be heard floating into the room. There is a soft knock heard.

Constance: Who is it?

Sylvia: It's me, Constance. May I come in?

Constance: (smiling) Sylvia, certainly, come in.

Sylvia: (enters upstage R) Hello! How are you feeling today?

Constance: (pushing herself farther up on the pillows) I am feeling all right. It is so cold! Honestly, I am chilled to the bone. I hope my son brings those sweaters I asked for this weekend. I need them badly. Have you seen what is for dinner tonight? I hope it is not the terrible casserole we had for dinner last Tuesday.

Sylvia: (smiling and sitting on the bed with Constance) I am sorry you are so cold, Constance. I'll see if I can't get the heat turned up a bit more. I didn't know your son was coming this weekend. Would you like to call and remind him to..........

Constance: (interrupting) No, I don't want to bother him. He has his own life, he doesn't want his old mother bothering him. I'm sure he is very busy. He's a teacher, you know.

Sylvia: I know he is a teacher, Constance. I'm sure he is never too busy for you. As for

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dinner, I believe we are having chicken. I am certain it is not the casserole. You are not the only one who didn't care for it. *(Looks around the room before she changes the subject)*

Constance, I want to ask you a favor. If you don't feel up to it, I understand. There is a student from the local high school who wants to come over and talk to some of the residents here. She is learning about aging in her health class and she wants to talk to some older women who can give her a better perspective. I would like her to talk to you. You are one of our most interesting ladies; you have lived quite a life.

*Constance* *(indignantly)* My life is no different from anyone else's! Isn't there anyone else she can talk to? I am not so sure I want to do this.

*Sylvia* *(soothing)* Constance, you do not have to speak to her if you do not want to. She is coming tomorrow and I thought you would be the perfect person. She is a very nice girl and I promise she will not pry into anything you do not want to talk about. *(standing)* Why don't you think about it tonight and we will talk about it again tomorrow morning.

*Constance:* What is she going to want to talk about? Why would she want to talk to an old lady like me, anyway? What do I have to say that is so interesting?

*Sylvia:* She just wants to learn about an older woman's life. Remember, she is only eighteen, she has no concept of growing older. She wants to learn about it firsthand, not from a textbook. She just looked in the phone book and called us. That shows some initiative. She is not required to do this, it is entirely on her own. The least we can do is help match her up with a woman who has been around for a while and can teach her what life can be like.

*Constance:* I will think about it. I don't know, Sylvia. I don't have any idea what to talk
about with young people.

*Sylvia:* OK! Now it is time for dinner and I am hungry.

*Sylvia helps Constance off of the bed and they exit stage R. together. Fade to Black*
SCENE 2

Scene: The setting is back in Constance's room. The lights are dim and the light on the table is illuminating the room. Constance is pulling her robe on and sitting down at the card table with a deck of cards. Two silhouettes can be seen in the shadows stage left.

Constance: (dealing the cards for solitaire) What am I going to do about that girl tomorrow? Sylvia thinks I, of all people, should talk to her. What if she asks me things I don't want to talk about? (begins playing the game) I don't know what it "feels like" to be old. I don't remember how I felt about getting old when I was young. Can I even remember being young? One of the shadows, Mary, begins to walk towards Constance. She walks up behind her and places her hand on Constance's shoulder. Mary is wearing a drab, brown dress with tan "sensible shoes". She has on no noticeable make-up and she appears tired. Constance continues playing the game as Mary talks.

Mary: Of course you can talk to this girl! What could she ask that would be so painful? We have been through much worse than a few questions. No one can break your shell, honey. Just give the girl the answers she needs and she'll be on her way. Just don't be very specific. She doesn't need to know about everything. Sylvia said she wasn't going to pry. Just keep your head about you and you'll be fine.

Constance: (looking up from her game) I suppose it wouldn't be so bad. She is, after all, only a girl. (sighing) I just don't know.
Now the other shadow, Connie, emerges and stands on the opposite side of Constance. She is much younger than both women and is wearing a tight suit from the early forties and bright red lipstick. Connie walks with a swing in her hips and smiles broadly.

Connie: (looking pointedly at Mary) Darling, of course you must talk to this girl. Tell her of the wonderful men and parties in your life. Tell her of your handsome husbands! You don't need to be short with her. Let her get to know you, she's just a kid. She wants to know what it is like to get old. Tell her about how you felt about old people when you were my age. Be nice to her. Sylvia wouldn't set us up with a brat. It'll be painless.

Mary: Don't let the girl get too close. We don't have much luck with strangers. Remember the neighbor boy in the River St. house? He was a stranger. Be careful!

Constance: (her game of solitaire over, she rises and heads toward the bed) I think I will talk to the girl tomorrow. I haven't had any company for a very long time, other than my son. It might be nice to talk with someone new. Anything is better than some of these old ladies they have in here. We'll see what tomorrow brings. (Constance turns out her light and goes to bed)

Mary: (heading back towards the shadows in the rear of the room) There. I hope this girl is civilized and knows how to treat her elders. She better not be too nosy.

Connie: (retreating behind Mary) Finally! I hope the girl is nice and talkative! I hope she has lots of questions and stays all afternoon. We have plenty to tell her.

Mary: HA!

THE CURTAIN FALLS

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ACT II

Scene: In Constance's room, Constance is seated at the card table looking anxiously at her watch. Mary and Connie are each standing behind and on either side of Constance. They are both looking over Constance's shoulder at her watch.

Constance: (a bit nervously) I thought the girl was supposed to be here at ten. It is five after, what is keeping her? (just then there is a knock at the door) Who is it?

Sylvia: Constance it is me! I've brought the young lady to meet you. May we come in?

Constance: (adjusts her sweater) Yes, please. I have been expecting you.

In walk Sylvia and Shannon from stage right. Shannon is a pleasant looking girl with long, brown hair wearing jeans and a sweater. She smiles at Constance as she enters the room.

Mary: She looks OK. She is certainly wearing too much make-up for such a young girl.

Connie: I like her. I think she looks tops! She has a beautiful smile.

Sylvia: Good morning, Constance! How are you today? Are you still a bit chilly?

Constance: (looking hard at Shannon) No, I'm fine. How about you?

Sylvia: I'm well. Constance, this is Shannon. The girl I told you about.


Shannon: Hello, Mrs.... (embarrassed). I'm sorry, I don't know your last name.

Mary: She's not nosy, she is an idiot, our name is on the outside of the door!

Connie: Hush, Mary. Give the girl a chance. She might be nervous.

Constance: Forgive me. My name is Constance Mary Downing.
Sylvia: I'm sorry, Shannon, I thought I told you her name. I'll leave you two to get to know each other. Enjoy your chat. Well, I need to get the Bingo game started. If I am not there on time, Mrs. Liebowitz starts yelling down the hall and banging her walker. Bye!(exits stage R)

Constance: Well, Shannon, why don't you sit down and tell me exactly why you are here. Sylvia told me a little, but I am not so sure I understand exactly.

Connie: Careful! You don't want to scare the kid away.

Mary: She's doing just fine. If the girl wants some answers, she is going to have speak up first.

Shannon: Well, Mrs. Downing, I am here to ask you some questions if you don't mind. I am learning about aging in my health class and I wanted to talk to a woman first hand to find out about her reflections of getting older. I would like to ask you about your life and what sort of feelings you had as you grew older.

Constance: Don't you have a Grandma? Why didn't you ask her?

Shannon: That is a very good question. I do have one Grandmother remaining, but we are not on good terms.

Mary: (under her breath) Probably because she is too impish.

Connie glares at Mary and puts her finger up to her mouth to silence her.

Constance: Why? Did you get into an argument?

Connie: You're testing her to see if she will open up about herself! That isn't fair! She came here to find out about us.

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Mary: She better pass the test or we are not telling her anything.

Shannon: No, ma'am, we didn't get into an argument. The problem is really between my Mother and her mother, my Grandmother. The conflict has recently escalated and now it includes the whole family.

Connie: She passed!

Constance: I am sorry to hear that.

Shannon: Those things sometimes happen between families. So, Mrs. Downing......

Constance,(interrupting) Please call me Constance.

Shannon: If you say so, Constance. Did anyone ever call you Connie?(Connie smiles and straightens up. She prims a bit when her name is mentioned)

Constance: Only when I was a young girl. I suppose people stopped calling me that when I was around thirty. I thought it sounded too girlish. It seems silly when I think of it now. A name doesn't make a person young or old, does it?

Shannon: No, I don't think so. Could you tell me about when you were young?

Constance,(laughing) I would think you are an expert on youth. I am an old woman now. Things were very different when I was a young girl.

Shannon,(smiling) I would like to hear about your childhood and when you were around my age.

Mary steps into the shadows and Connie steps forward. When Constance begins to speak, Connie stands directly behind her.

Constance,(looking off into the distance) My childhood......well, I was born here, in
Lafayette. My mother had me when she and Dad had only been married a year. That was in 1916. We didn't have much money; but we got by. When the Depression hit in 1929, I was 13. That was old enough to help earn money for the family. By then I had two brothers and two sisters. I was the oldest and it was my job to keep track of the younger ones. I also had to help Mom with the sewing she did for the townswomen to earn an fifty cents a week. (Constance becomes lost in her thoughts)

Connie: Come on, don't stop now. You were doing so well! Tell her about the neighborhood and the other kids!

Constance (blushing) I'm sorry, I haven't thought about those days in a very long time. Anyway, we lived in a old house right on the edge of town. My Aunt and Uncle lived down the street from us and we would play with their dog often. What was that dog's name?

Connie (eagerly) It was Chester!

Constance (as if she heard Connie) Chester, that was the name. He was the ugliest dog you ever did see, but he loved all of us kids. We would play chase games and Chester would play right along with us. It always seemed that Chester knew when someone would fall down and need to be licked clean. He never left us alone. I often wonder what happened to Chester. Funny the things you remember when you think about it. . . . (Gradually, Connie moves closer and closer to Constance she begins telling the story in unison with Constance. Constance still mouths the words, but it is Connie who is speaking.)

Connie: There were four boys down the street and every one of them was smaller than me. If any of them bothered my sisters or brothers, they had to deal with me. My two sisters
were called Carrie and Rose, my brothers were Steven and Carl. I was the oldest, then Steven, Carrie, Carl and the baby was Rose. Rose died in 1933 of pneumonia. We couldn't afford a doctor and little Rose just wasn't strong enough to pull out of it. It was a sad time for the whole family. Two years later, Steve went into the Army. We all missed both of them so much.

When I was eighteen, I met my husband, Bill. Oh! He was so handsome! He drove the bus into the city and I had never seen a man so smart looking. He asked me to marry him at least a dozen times. I turned him down every time. I didn't really want to get married then. I liked flirting and having boys wink at me. I knew I needed to get married soon, but I just wasn't ready. Finally, one night, I got on the bus to go home after working in the factory and Bill told me we were getting married the next day. Can you imagine my surprise? Well I tell you, the very next day he showed up at my parents house and took me into town to get married. He had asked my parents the week before. They knew about it before me! We were married for 15 years. (sadly) He drank too much and he was so jealous. I could not even say hello to another man on the street without Bill getting very angry. We never had any children. We tried for years! I wanted a baby so much! Bill told me it was my fault. I always felt bad about that. I didn't feel like a real woman..... (Connie fades back into the shadows and Constance begins talking again.)

Constance: (thoughtfully) Bill died when I was thirty-three. He was nine years older than I was and he drank. He had a heart attack while eating lunch at work and died at the hospital. We had a house in Lafayette and I continued living there.

Shannon: Did you remarry, Constance? Sylvia told me you had a son. You said you
didn't have any children with Bill.

Constance: I do have a son. Robert. I had Robert by my second husband, Benjamin.

Men are funny people. All those years, Bill blamed me for not being able to have a baby.

When he died of a heart-attack, his mother told me the real reason I had not had a child. Bill had gotten something from a girl he dated before me. It had made him sterile. It was his fault, not mine, and I had to bear the burden all those years.

Shannon (cautiously) Did you ever think about getting older when you were married to Bill?

Constance: (slowly) I thought about not wanting to be alone all of my life. I wanted so desperately to have a child to grow older with. Bill and I were not really friends and I didn't have friends outside of the girls at the factory. I wanted a child to do things with and to love. I was kind of afraid of getting old because I didn't want to become unattractive. I was afraid of what Bill would do if I wasn't pretty anymore. Living with Bill was hard, but I knew that if he left, it would be much harder. I wanted to stay young and pretty for my own security.

Shannon: Would you like to tell me about your second husband?

Mary comes out of the shadows. She takes her place behind Constance and a small smile comes over her face.

Constance: Benjamin was handsome as well. All the ladies in our neighborhood thought he was just the bee's knees. That means he was very good looking, the tops. He began calling on me not long after Bill died. He had a reputation with the ladies, but I thought he had grown out of that. (Mary begins to pick up the conversation where Constance left off. Constance
Mary: Benjamin was so charming. He used to call me Mary because he didn't want to call me anything another man had. He asked me to marry him about a year after Bill died. He was so charming and I was so lonely. I was also not making enough money to make the house note payments. We moved from the large house on Main to a smaller two bedroom house on River Street. This was not the best neighborhood, but it was a fairly nice house so I thought it would be OK. Not long after we married, I got pregnant with Robert. This surprised Ben, he didn't think I could have children. I think having a child scared him. I began hearing rumors of him running around with other women when Robert was about six months old. Ben would stay out at the taverns later and later and soon began not coming home at all. He left me when Robert was two. Then and there, I decided I would have nothing to do with men ever again. I stopped getting dressed up and stopped wearing make-up. I stopped flirting and men stopped winking. If a man approached me I was cold. I never gave another man the time of day much less a date. The neighborhood started getting worse and worse. My sister, Carrie sat with Robert while I was at work. Eventually, she began sitting him at her house because our neighborhood scared her. One evening when Robert stayed the night at Carrie's, one of the neighbor boys broke into the house and attacked me. I know it was a colored boy, but I never got a good look at him because it was so dark. The next day, I put my house up for sale and moved in with Carrie and her husband Jack. I never found out who it was that did it. I told my sister Carrie and we decided not to tell anyone. Nothing was ever done or said about it again. Eventually, we sold the house and Robert and I moved into an apartment in the city. I worked
the seven to three-thirty shift, so I was home by the time Robert was home from school. I never let anyone call me Mary again. By then I was going by my full name, Constance.......

Constance begins speaking again and Mary fades back into the shadows.

_Constance_: I never did marry or even date again. I raised my son. He went off to college and he is a teacher at the high school in Anderson. He comes and visits me often enough. I miss him though. He has a very nice wife and they have a son of their own.

_Shannon_: Constance, what was it like for you, being a single mother before it became so commonplace?

_Constance_: If you want to learn about getting older, try to be a single mother. I did everything for my boy. If I wasn't making enough money at the factory, I might have married again. I would have hated it but I would have done it to support my son. I aged twenty years in those few years right after Benjamin left and I was raped. I know I said attacked earlier, but it was rape. I never considered myself a young woman from then on. I looked and acted old. Being an old woman didn't frighten me anymore as it had when I was younger. I took it as a normal part of life and I figured it was inevitable. I didn't try to run away from it with fancy clothes or make-up. I was my own woman for the first time in my life. I knew what my responsibilities were and worked to make sure everything was taken care of. I never wanted my son to be without food on the table or clothes on his back. He was my baby boy and I did my best for him. I was not easy on him, but I think he understood.

_Shannon_: If you could give yourself advice when you were younger; something that you know now that you didn't know then; what would it be?
Constance: (sitting up straighter in her chair) I don't know......let me think.

Mary and Connie come out of the shadows and lean toward Constance to hear the advice.

Connie: (almost pleading) What would you tell me, Constance? How could I have done better for us?

Mary: (almost begging) What do I need to know, Constance? What would have made things easier?

Constance: (resolutely) Shannon, there is nothing I know now that I would not have known without my life being the way it was. Bill had to deceive me for all those years so I would learn not to be so trusting of every person that comes along. Ben had to leave me so I could prove that I am a strong woman and I deserve respect. The rape I could have done without, but it is in the past and I try not to think about it much. I would have reminded myself that I am several different reflections, all of which are parts of me. These reflections would not have been possible without all that I went through. No matter what anyone else thought of those reflections, the only opinion that matters is mine. (looking directly at Shannon) Have I helped you get a better perspective on growing older? It is not something to be afraid of. It is a time to look forward to. When you are older, the reflections of yourself you remember are treasures in your mind.

Connie and Mary move in behind Constance, each placing a hand on her shoulder. Both are smiling.

Shannon: (rising to leave) Constance, you have been a better help than you can imagine. I appreciate you being so honest with me and allowing me to spend the morning with you.
Thank you so much. *(she hugs Constance and exits stage R.)*

*Constance: (calling after her)* Thank you, Shannon. Thank you.* (to herself)* I think I have finally realized how many treasures I have within my reflections. I think I will go and see if the Bingo game is still going on. * (smiling to herself, she exits stage R.)*

*Mary:* I liked that girl. I think she was good for us. I AM a good reflection of Constance. We accomplished a lot together.

*Connie:* And you with your doubts! I am so glad Constance is finally happy and not bitter about my reflection. Come on, let's go play Bingo.

*Both Mary and Connie walk arm in arm into the shadows.*

CURTAIN FALLS