

Name: _____ Class: _____

Polly Sits Tight

By Ethel M. Caution
1921

Ethel M. Caution, also known as Ethel Caution-Davis (1880-1981), was an African American poet who produced a small but impactful body of work. She predominately wrote poetry that focused on the experiences of women and her work was known for its accessibility. In this short story, a young girl is afraid of being judged by her classmates. As you read, take notes on the development of Polly's feelings throughout the story.

- [1] Polly held her breath and sat rigid. For the third time the teacher had asked the question and the last time he had looked directly at her. She knew the answer too! It was an undisputed¹ fact in Room 11, that anytime there came a question no one else could answer, a little black girl with stubborn hair and a voice like a lilting² melody would be sure to know. Polly was the star scholar in the class and although she seemed unconscious³ of her brilliancy, her teacher and her classmates were not.



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So now that the question had been asked for the third time and Polly's hand had not been raised, all the boys and girls turned to look at her in genuine surprise.

And Polly's heart was beating a rapid tattoo⁴ within her because she did know the answer. She had worked until late and had gone to bed determined to rise early in the morning and tackle the problem again. But about two o'clock she found herself sitting bolt upright in bed saying to the darkness, "Of course that is the way it goes," and she lay back into untroubled sleep.

Now it happened that Polly's mother was painfully poor and also that shoes had an annoying habit of wearing out beyond repair. Today Polly had worn her mother's shoes and would probably have to wear them several days, perhaps weeks, until someone gave her a pair or until she could save up enough to buy her own. The latter way meant a long wait for there was food, rent, fuel, and insurance, and her mother's health was breaking so that Polly herself worked afternoons to help out.

- [5] Polly thought of her card and the row of I's;⁵ not that she had been a grind⁶ to make it so, but she had come to be proud of her record and of the pride her class had in her. She knew the solution but it meant going to the board to demonstrate. That would expose her shoes.

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1. **Undisputed (adjective):** not called into question; accepted
 2. **Lilting (adjective):** with energy and spirit; lively
 3. **Unconscious (adjective):** not aware
 4. a rhythmic tapping or drumming
 5. a reference to Polly's past grades
 6. **Grind (noun):** an excessively diligent student

The teacher was still looking at her expectantly. She dropped her eyes to her desk and her glance fell on her paper covered books much marked after the manner of school girls and boys. These words met her gaze: "Sit tight, little girl, sit tight." That was her motto. Her dad had given it to her unconsciously and it had always come to her rescue.

When she was a very little girl, she had been playing with some children in the barn. Tiring of the usual games, one boy had suggested riding horseback. As fate would have it the most restive horse appealed to them and Polly was victim. From frequent pulling against his strap it had weakened, and, frightened by the children boosting Polly to his back, the horse gave two or three vicious tugs and the strap broke.

Before anyone realized what was happening he backed out of the stall and out of the barn and started away on a brisk⁷ gallop. Polly's father was working in a field near by and sensing what had happened, cupped his hands and called through them:

"Sit tight, little girl, sit tight!"

[10] And Polly sat tight until her father on a swift horse overtook her and brought her back to safety. Polly remembered little else of her father. He died soon after. But that command hurled at her in time of danger had always stayed with her. It didn't take the tiniest fraction of a second for all these things to flash through her mind. False pride was galloping away with her. What was a pair of over-large shoes against the faith the twenty odd persons in that room had in her? And what of her mother's faith in her and her own? Would they laugh at her feet? Then let them! Like an electric flash her hand went up. The tension in the room was broken.

"All right, Polly. I knew you could. Come to the board, please."

And not one person saw her shoes! They just saw a black girl with beaming face, mouth tightly shut, head held high, go to the board and quietly, but quickly and thoroughly demonstrate the solution of the problem that had baffled them all.

But Polly saw her father trumpeting through his hands:

"Sit tight, little girl, sit tight."

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7. **Brisk (adjective):** active, fast, and energetic

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best identifies a theme of the text? [RL.2]
 - A. Children who are poor tend to work harder to succeed in school than their peers.
 - B. Stress causes people to hide their talents for fear of failure.
 - C. Parents are responsible for shaping the way their children react to danger.
 - D. People can stop their own progress because of their fear of public opinion.

2. PART B: Which detail from the story best supports the answer to Part A? [RL.1]
 - A. "Polly was the star scholar in the class and although she seemed unconscious of her brilliancy, her teacher and her classmates were not." (Paragraph 1)
 - B. "Polly's hand had not been raised, all the boys and girls turned to look at her in genuine surprise." (Paragraph 2)
 - C. "She knew the solution but it meant going to the board to demonstrate. That would expose her shoes." (Paragraph 5)
 - D. "'Sit tight, little girl, sit tight.' That was her motto. Her dad had given it to her unconsciously and it had always come to her rescue." (Paragraph 6)

3. What does paragraph 10 reveal about Polly's and her classmates' different points of view? [RL.6]

4. In the passage, how does the incident with the horse in paragraphs 7-10 impact the resolution of the plot? [RL.3]
 - A. Even though Polly's father rescued her from the horse, she knows that she needs to be brave because he is not able to rescue her anymore.
 - B. Polly remembers her father's words and decides to raise her hand and answer the teacher's question on the board.
 - C. When Polly remembers that she was afraid of the horse, she realizes that she is a weak person.
 - D. Polly stands up to the children in her class because she was not brave when they caused the horse to run wild.

5. Explain the meaning of “Sit tight, little girl, sit tight!” in paragraph 9, and its meaning [RL.4] in paragraph 14. Cite evidence from the story to support your answer.
