

SYNTHESIS TEXT 2

INSTRUCTIONS: Read the following excerpt from “Be-ers and Doers,” and answer the multiple-choice questions. For each question, select the **best** answer and record your choice on the **Answer Sheet** provided.

The narrator of this story observes her family from when she was young until she herself is a mother.

adapted from **Be-ers and Doers**

by Budge Wilson

- 1 Mom was a little narrow wisp of a woman. You wouldn't have thought to look at her that she could move a card table; even for me it was sometimes hard to believe the ease with which she could shove around an entire family. Often I tried to explain her to myself. She had been brought up on the South Shore of Nova Scotia. I wondered sometimes if the scenery down there had rubbed off on her—all those granite rocks and fogs and screeching gulls, the slow, labouring springs, and the quick, grudging summers. And then the winters—greyer than doom, and endless.
- 2 I was the oldest. I was around that house for five years before my sister Maudie came along. They were peaceful, those five years, and even now it's easy to remember how everything seemed calm and simple. But now I know why. I was a conformist and malleable as early as three years old; I didn't buck the system. So there were very few battles at first, and no major wars.
- 3 Dad, now, he was peaceful just by nature. If a tornado had come whirling in the front door and lifted the roof clear off its hinges, he probably would have just scratched the back of his neck and said, with a kind of slow surprise, “Well! Oho! Just think o' that!” He had been born in the Annapolis Valley, where the hills are round and gentle, and the summers sunlit and very warm.
- 4 “Look at your father!” Mom would say to us later. “He thinks that all he's gotta do is *be*. Well, bein' ain't good enough. You gotta *do*, too. Me, I'm a doer.” All the time she was talking, she'd be knitting up a storm, or mixing dough, or pushing a mop—hands forever and ever on the move.
- 5 Although Mom was fond of pointing out to us the things our father didn't do, he must have been doing something. Our farm was in the most fertile part of the valley, and it's true that we had the kind of soil that seemed to make things grow all of their own accord. Those beets and carrots and potatoes just came pushing up into the sunshine with an effortless grace, and they kept us well fed, with plenty left over to sell. But there was weeding and harvesting to do, and all those ten cows to milk—not to mention the thirty apple trees in our orchard to be cared for. I think maybe he just did his work so slowly and quietly that she found it hard to believe he was doing anything at all. Besides, on the South Shore, nothing ever grew without a struggle. And when Dad was through all his chores, or in between times, he liked to just sit on our old porch swing and watch the spring unfold or the summer blossom.
- 6 Albert was the baby. I was eight years old when he was born, and I often felt like he was my own child. He was special to all of us, and when Mom saw him for the first time, I watched a slow soft

tenderness in her face that was a rare thing for any of us to see. Right away, I knew she was going to pour into Albert something that didn't reach the rest of us, except in part. As time went on, this scared me. I could see that she'd made up her mind that Albert was going to be a perfect son. That meant, among other things, that he was going to be a fast-moving doer. And even when he was three or four, it wasn't hard for me to know that this wasn't going to be easy. Because Albert was a be-er. *Born* that way.

- 7 Mom really loved my dad, even though he drove her nearly crazy. Lots more went on than just nagging and complaining. If you looked really hard, you could see that. If it hadn't been for Albert and wanting him to be a four-star son, she mightn't have bothered to make Dad look so useless. Even so, when they sat on the swing together at night, you could feel their closeness. They didn't hold hands or anything. Her hands were always too busy embroidering, crocheting, mending something, or just swatting mosquitoes. But they liked to be together. Personal chemistry, I thought as I grew older, is a mysterious and contrary thing.
- 8 One day, Albert brought his report card home from school, and Mom looked at it hard and anxious, eyebrows knotted. "'Albert seems a nice child,'" she read aloud to all of us, more loudly than necessary, "'but his marks could be better. He spends too much time looking out the window, dreaming.'" She paused. No one spoke.
- 9 "Leanin' on his hoe," continued Mom testily. "Albert!" she snapped at him. "You pull up your socks by Easter or you're gonna be in deep trouble."
- 10 Dad stirred uneasily in his chair. "Aw, Dorothy," he mumbled, "leave him be. He's a good kid."
- 11 "Or could be. *Maybe*," she threw back at him. "What he seems like is rock-bottom lazy. But I love him a lot," continued Mom. "If it's the last thing I do, I'm gonna light a fire under his feet."
- 12 Albert was twelve then, and the nagging began to accelerate in earnest.
- 13 "How come you got a low mark in your math test?"
- 14 "I don't like math. It seems like my head don't want it."
- 15 "But do you *work* at it?"
- 16 "Well, no. No. Not much. Can't see no sense in workin' hard at something I'll never use. I can add up our grocery bill. I pass. That's enough."
- 17 "Not for me, it ain't," she'd storm back at him. "No baseball practice for you until you get them sums perfect."
- 18 One thing Albert was good at, though, was English class. By the time he got to high school, he spent almost as much time reading as he did staring into space. His way of speaking changed. He stopped dropping his *g*'s. He said *isn't* instead of *ain't*. His tenses were all neated up. He wasn't putting on airs. I just think that all those people in his books started being more real to him than his own neighbours. He loved animals, too. He made friends with the calves and even the cows. Mutt and Jeff, our two grey cats, slept on his bed every night. Often you could see him out in the fields, talking to our dog, while he was working.
- 19 "Always messin' around with animals," complained Mom. "Sometimes I think he's three parts woman and one part child. He's fifteen years old, and last week I caught him bawlin' in the hayloft after we had to shoot that male calf. Couldn't understand why y' can't go on feedin' an animal that'll never produce milk."

- 20 “Nothing wrong with liking animals,” I argued.
- 21 “If you can’t see,” she said through the screen door, “why I don’t want Albert to end up exactly like your father, then you’ve got even less sense than I thought you had. I don’t want any son of mine goin’ through life just satisfied to *be*.” Then I could hear her banging around in the kitchen.
- 22 I looked off the verandah out at the front field where Dad and Albert were raking up hay for the cattle, slowly, with lots of pauses for talk. All of a sudden they stopped, and Albert pointed up to the sky. It was fall, and four long wedges of geese were flying far above us, casting down their strange muffled cry. The sky was cornflower blue, and the wind was sending white clouds scudding across it. My breath was caught with the beauty of it all, and as I looked at Dad and Albert, they threw away their rakes and lay down flat on their backs, right there in the front pasture, in order to drink in the sky. And after all the geese had passed over, they stayed like that for maybe twenty minutes more.

* * *

[*three years later*]

- 23 We were all home for Christmas the year Albert turned eighteen.
- 24 It was on December 26th that it happened. That was the day of the fire.
- 25 Albert had just put my baby back in her carriage when a giant spark flew out of the fireplace. It hit the old nylon carpet like an incendiary bomb, and the rug burst into flames. Mom started waving an old afghan¹ over it, as though she was blowing out a match, but all she was doing was fanning the fire.
- 26 While most of us stood there in immovable fear, Albert had already grabbed my baby, carriage and all, and rushed out to the barn with her. He was back in a flash.
- 27 “Those four buckets in the summer kitchen!” he yelled. “Start filling them!” He pointed to Mom and Dad, who obeyed him like he was a general and they were the privates. To my husband he roared, “Get out to th’ barn and keep that baby warm!”
- 28 “And you!” He pointed to me. “Call the fire department. It’s 825-3131.” In the meantime, the smoke was starting to fill the room and we were all coughing. Little spits of fire were crawling up the curtains.
- 29 Before Mom and Dad got back with the water, Albert was out in the back bedroom hauling up the carpet. Racing in with it over his shoulder, he bellowed, “Get out o’ the way!” and we moved. Then he slapped the carpet over the flames on the floor, and the fire just died without so much as a protest. Next he grabbed one of the big cushions off the sofa, and chased around after the little lapping flames on curtains and chairs and table runners, smothering them.
- 30 Then Albert was suddenly still, hands hanging at his sides with the fingers spread. He smiled shyly.
- 31 “It’s out,” he said.
- 32 Mom took a deep breath. “And *that*,” she went on, “is what I’ve been looking for, all of your life. Some sort of a sign that you were one hundred percent alive. And now we all know you are. Maybe even a lick more alive than the rest of us. So!” She folded her arms, and her eyes bored into him. “I’ll have no more excuses from you now. I’ll never, never rest until I see you educated and successful. Doin’ what you was meant to do. I’m just proud of you, Albert. So terrible proud!”

¹ afghan: *blanket*

- 33 Members of the fire department were starting to arrive at the front door, but Albert ignored them.
- 34 “You ain’t proud o’ me, Mom,” he whispered, all his beautiful grammar gone. “Yer jest proud o’ what you want me t’be. And I got some news for you. Things I shoulda tole you years gone by. *I ain’t gonna be what you want.*” His voice was starting to quaver now, and he was trembling all over. “*I’m gonna be me.*”
- 35 Then he shut his eyes and fainted right down onto the charred carpet. The firemen carted him off to the hospital, where he was treated for shock and second-degree burns. He was there for three weeks.
- 36 Albert left home as soon as he got out of the hospital. He worked as a stevedore² in Halifax for a number of years, and when he got enough money saved, he bought a little run-down house close to Digby, with a view of the Bay of Fundy. He’s got a small chunk of land that’s so black and rich that it doesn’t take any pushing at all to make the flowers and vegetables grow. He has a cow and a beagle and four cats—and about five hundred books. He fixes lawn mowers and boat engines for the people in his area, and he putters away at his funny little house. He writes pieces for the *Digby Courier* and the *Novascotian*, and last winter he confessed to me that he writes poetry. He’s childless and wifeless, but he has the time of day for any kid who comes around to hear stories or to have a broken toy fixed. He keeps an old rocker out on the edge of the cliff, where he can sit and watch the tides of Fundy rise and fall.

² stevedore: *dockworker*
