

*In 1793, after the death of her father, Matilda Cook and her mother, Lucille, run a coffeehouse in Philadelphia. In this excerpt, they visit Lucille's friend Pernilla Ogilvie and her two daughters. During this time, a dangerous disease, yellow fever, is infecting and killing many people. Read the excerpt and answer the questions that follow.*

*from* **Fever 1793**  
by Laurie Halse Anderson

1 **I** had to breathe in short puffs as we waited at the front door of the Ogilvie mansion. The stays<sup>1</sup> bit into my stomach and my shift<sup>2</sup> was already sweat-soaked. If this was how the upper class felt all the time, no wonder they were all so cross.

2 Mother tugged at my bodice to straighten it.

3 “Try not to look so pained,” she said. “We won’t stay long. Knowing your grandfather, he’ll be giving away the silver on the street corner when we return.”

4 She licked her thumb and wiped a smudge of dirt off my cheek. “You might turn out to be a beauty after all,” she said. “You’ve grown so quickly. I want the best for you.”

5 I looked at her closely, unaccustomed to the gentle tone of her voice. Mother bent down suddenly to brush off the bottom of her gown.

6 “Look at this dust,” she exclaimed. “When I was young, my family had a lovely carriage, and we always rode to tea. We arrived fresh and clean.”

7 She turned around and swatted the hem of my skirt. The door opened and an Ogilvie maid stared at the backside of my grumbling mother.

8 “Ma’am?” she asked.

9 Mother stood up hastily.

10 “Mrs. William Cook Junior and Miss Matilda Cook are here for tea with Mrs. Ogilvie,” she told the maid. “The invitation arrived this morning.”

11 The maid showed us into a drawing room as large as the entire first floor of the coffee shop. The long windows were covered with shimmering damask curtains. A crystal chandelier hung over a gleaming mahogany table, around which were clustered a half-dozen Chippendale chairs. Very expensive.

12 “Lucille, my dear Lucille, how wonderful to see you!” exclaimed Pernilla Ogilvie. She sailed across the room like a man-of-war, showing the brocaded tips of her shoes and layers of lace-trimmed, starched petticoats. Her overpowdered hair left a trail behind her that settled like smoke on the carpet.

13 Mother’s face sagged as she took in Pernilla’s gown of gunpowder gray silk, striped with white and blue. Her hand strayed to a stubborn coffee stain just over her hip.

14 “I’m so glad you could come,” Pernilla continued. “I’m about to die from lack of company!”

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<sup>1</sup> *stays* — strips of bone, plastic, or metal used to stiffen a dress

<sup>2</sup> *shift* — a woman’s undergarment

15 “Good afternoon, Pernilla. It was very kind of you to invite us. Allow me to present my  
daughter, Matilda.”

16 I curtsied slightly, conscious of the few threads barely holding me together.

17 “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Ma’am,” I said.

18 “Oh, poor little Matilda. I recall your father well. He was such a handsome man, would  
have gone far if he had been educated. But it won’t do to think about tiresome things today.  
I declare this has been the worst summer of my life, and I’m counting on you both to lighten  
my mood.”

19 She squeezed Mother’s arm. Mother gritted her teeth.

20 “I’m parched. Let’s have tea and I’ll tell you all about this wonderful house that Robert  
built for me.” Mrs. Ogilvie rang a tiny bell on the sideboard. “Girls?”

21 The Ogilvie daughters, Colette and Jeannine, swept into the room, dressed in matching pink  
and yellow bombazine gowns, wearing their curled hair piled on top of their heads. I should  
have let Eliza curl my hair. Dash it all.

22 Colette was the oldest. Her skin was as pale as clean ice, and dark circles ringed her eyes.  
Jeannine’s head only came up to my shoulder, but she looked sixteen, at least. Her cheeks shone  
pink and chubby as a baby pig’s. Jeannine whispered something into Colette’s ear. Colette closed  
her eyes briefly, then snapped them open again. I wondered why she was so tired. No doubt  
exhausted from being waited on hand and foot.

23 The mothers sat down first, then Colette and Jeannine flopped carelessly onto the Chippendale  
chairs. I sat carefully so as not to pop any stitches. After two servants brought in silver trays  
of rolls and bite-sized frosted cakes, Mrs. Ogilvie poured the tea.

24 “Colette and Jeannine have just finished lessons with their French tutor,” Mrs. Ogilvie said.  
“Are you studying French, Matilda?”

25 Mother jumped in before I could open my mouth. “You know how old-fashioned my father-  
in-law is, Pernilla. He prohibits French, no matter how much I implore him. You are so fortunate  
to have an understanding husband. Do your sons study French as well?”

26 “Of course. We’ve had the French ambassador here to dine any number of times.”

27 While Mrs. Ogilvie recounted what she thought was a hilarious story about “Monsieur  
L’Ambassadeur,” I tried to reach the cake plate. My fingers fell just short. If I stretched all  
the way across the table, the seam under my arm would split open. Jeannine saw my dilemma,  
picked up the plate, and passed it in the opposite direction to her mother.

28 “Why, thank you, dear, how kind,” said Mrs. Ogilvie. She chose three cakes and handed the  
plate to Mother, who took two. As Mother handed the plate to Colette, it tilted and the cakes  
slid to the floor. A tiny dog with a red ribbon between its ears rushed in and gobbled the fallen  
cakes. My stomach rumbled.

29 “So tell me, Lucille, what have you been doing for company this tedious August?”  
Pernilla asked. “Everyone, simply everyone, has rushed out to their country retreats. It is most  
annoying.”

30 I struggled to keep a straight face as I pictured Mother amidst the weeds, horseflies, and  
dead mice in our garden.

31 Mrs. Ogilvie prattled on.

32 “President Washington and Martha will soon leave for Virginia, of course, the Nortons  
and Hepstrudels are in Germantown, and my own sister took her family to New York. Did  
you know that I planned a gala ball and only two families responded? The rest of society  
has vanished!”

33 Jeannine unfolded a silk fan and waved it, blowing a cloud of curls off her forehead.  
Shielding her mouth from her mother with the fan, she stuck her tongue out at me. Her wretched  
dog nipped at my shoe under the table.

34 “The only people left in Philadelphia seem to be shopkeepers and wharf rats. Robert has  
an appointment with the mayor this very day to insist that he put an end to the rumors of  
yellow fever.”

35 “I heard a man died of the fever in the middle of the street, and three black crows flew out  
of his mouth,” said Jeannine.

36 “Don’t be vile, Jeannine,” snapped her mother. “Those filthy refugees and creatures who live  
in the crowded hovels by the river, they’re always sick with something. But it is a gross injustice  
that my gala should suffer because the lower class falls ill. Don’t you agree, Lucille?”

37 Mother struggled to keep the smile on her face as she changed the subject.

38 “Are your sons still in town, Pernilla?” she asked.

39 Jeannine’s eyebrows went up and her mouth opened. Why did Mother have to be so obvious  
in her intent? Why not just hang a signboard around my neck: AVAILABLE—FOUL-MOUTHED  
DAUGHTER?

40 “All of my brothers are away at school, Mrs. Cook,” Jeannine answered quickly. “It’s a  
shame they aren’t here to meet you, Matilda. I’m sure you would amuse one of them.”

41 I flinched.

42 “Colette has recently become engaged to Lord Garthing’s son,” Jeannine continued. “The  
gala was to have celebrated the engagement. Have you been courted yet, Matilda?”

43 “Matilda is a bit young for suitors,” interjected Mother. “But I must congratulate you on  
your good fortune, Colette. When is the wedding to be held?”

44 Colette dabbed her napkin on her forehead. “Mama, it is rather warm in here.”

45 “Colette always flushes when we discuss the wedding. She is such a delicate creature.  
Sensitive nerves.” Mrs. Ogilvie had icing on the end of her nose.

46 “Colette tried to avoid our lesson this morning by complaining of a mysterious illness,”  
tattled Jeannine. “She just wants to lie about and read dreadful novels.”

47 “Has any of your sons found a bride?” asked Mother, determined not to let her subject  
slip away.

48 Mrs. Ogilvie poured out another cup of tea. “We have many discussions, as you might  
imagine. My children are a blessing, to be sure, but it requires a great effort to secure the  
future of each one.”

49 Jeannine picked up the last cake on her plate, slowly bit into it, and licked the icing off  
her fingers.

50 “Mother,” I said through my teeth. We did not belong here. I did not belong here. Mother  
may have grown up with carriages and gowns, but I had not. I had to clasp my hands in my  
lap to keep from slapping Jeannine or shaking the life out of her mangy dog.

51 Mother ignored me and plowed ahead.

52 “Has any of your sons shown an interest in business?”

53 Colette brought her tea cup to her lips, but spilled the tea into her lap. Mrs. Ogilvie didn't notice.

54 "Trade?" she replied. "Robert thinks that our sons should go into law or banking. Trade is hardly suitable for someone of our background."

55 Jeannine threw her fan down on the table. "Oh, Mama, must you be so thick-headed? Mrs. Cook is asking if you might consider Miss Cook as a wife for one of our brothers. And I imagine their filthy little tavern is part of the deal."

56 I stood so quickly that the seams under my arms ripped open with a snarl. The dog barked shrilly.

57 "It's not a tavern, it's a coffeehouse!" I said.

58 "Grog shop," taunted Jeannine.

59 At that insult my mother rose. A grog shop was where criminals and the other dregs of society gathered to drink whiskey and fight.

60 "A coffeehouse," Mother explained. "With respectable customers who mind their manners far better than you."

61 "Oh, girls, ladies," fluttered Mrs. Ogilvie.

62 Colette grasped the edge of the table and pulled herself to her feet, knocking over the cream pitcher.

63 "I fear," she said, panting heavily.

64 We all turned to stare at her.

65 "Sit down, Colette," said Jeannine.

66 "I fear," Colette tried again.

67 "Pernilla, that girl does not look well," said Mother.

68 "I'm burning," whispered Colette. She crumpled to the flowered carpet in a faint.

69 While Mrs. Ogilvie shrieked, Mother knelt down and laid the back of her hand against Colette's forehead. "The fever!"