

# LANGSTON Hughes

## Early Autumn: A Short Short Story About Early Love

WHEN HE was very young, they had been in love. Many nights they had spent walking, or talking, together. But something not very important had come between them. Then she had married a man she thought she loved. And the boy went away, bitter about women.

Yesterday (fifteen years gone by) walking across Washington Square, she saw him.

"Hello, Bill Walker," she said.

He stopped. But at first he did not recognize her, to him she looked so old.

"Mary! Where did you come from?"

She lifted her face as though wanting a kiss, but he held out his hand. She took it.

"I live here now," she said, "in New York."

"Oh," smiling politely. Then a little frown came quickly between his eyes.

"Always wondered what happened to you, Bill."

"I'm a lawyer. Nice firm. Downtown."

"Married yet?"

"Sure. Two kids."

"Oh," she said.

A great many people went by them through the park. People they didn't know. It was late afternoon. Nearly sunset and cold.

"And your husband?" he asked.

We have three children. I'm working in the busar's office at Columbia."

"You're looking very . . ." (he wanted to say old) . . . "well," he said.

But she understood. Under the trees in Washington Square, desperately she found herself

reaching back into the past. She had been older than he then in Ohio. Now, she was not young any longer at all. Not young! Not young! But Bill was still young.

"We live on Central Park West," she said. "Come and see me sometime."

"Sure," he replied. "And you and your husband have dinner with us some night. Any night. Lucille and I'd love to have you."

The leaves fell slowly from the trees in the Square. Fell without wind. Autumn dusk. She felt a little sick.

"We'd love it, too," she answered.

"You ought to see my kids," he grinned.

Suddenly the lights came on—up the whole length of Fifth Avenue, double chains of brilliance in the blue air.

"I must go," she said. "There's my bus."

He held out his hand, "Goodbye."

"When—," she wanted to say, but the busman was ready to pull off. The lights on the Avenue twinkled, blurred, twinkled and blurred. And she was afraid to open her mouth. Afraid it would be impossible to utter a single word.

"Goodbye!" she shrieked very loudly, but the door had closed.

The bus started. People were between them, people crossing the street, people they didn't know. Space and people. She lost sight of Bill.

Then she remembered she had forgotten to give him her address; or to ask him for his; or to tell him that her youngest boy was named Bill, too.