

## Plot Summary

"I remember back to two years ago," reminisces the narrator, when older brother Grover sat in his computer room at home, noisily cranking out assignments on his ImageWriter, waking her up in the wee hours. She remembers baking and serving him chocolate chip cookies, his "survival food" when he was writing papers. Now that Grover is away at college, she has attempted to "fix up" this once-lively room, redecorate and give it new life. But absent are the noise of the printer and the smell of the cookies, some of the sensory elements that brought the room to life. What made the room special, she suddenly realizes, was the warmth and laughter, now missed terribly, of a brother and sister who love each other very much.

## Interpreting the Story: Developing Characters

The following questions may help students interpret the story in more depth. Answers to the **Reader Response Log** assignment on the **Student's Page** may also become the basis for class discussion.

1. Do you assume that the narrator is a girl? Why? Is knowing who the narrator is important? Would it make a difference to you if the narrator were a boy?
2. The author repeats the words "I remember back to two years ago" at several points in the story. What is the purpose of this? How does this device affect you as you read?
3. How does the brother make the narrator feel when she delivers him fresh chocolate chip cookies? Does she feel special, needed, loved? Why is that important to her?

## Responding Creatively to the Story



1. **Write a classified ad** for the house you live in now. In twenty-five words or less, try to give the reader an accurate picture of your house.
2. **Draw a floor plan** for the room of your dreams (e.g., bedroom, family room, TV room, kitchen, workshop, etc.). Include room furnishings. What kind of feeling do you want this room to convey? How do you achieve that feeling?
3. **Choose one favorite food**, and write an essay entitled, "Why \_\_\_\_\_ (insert your food choice here) Should Be Adopted as the Official #1 Food of My School." Justify your selection with arguments from personal experience. Show at least three reasons why this food deserves this title.

## **Connecting with Cultural Values and Students' Lives**

These questions may guide your students to a deeper understanding of how the story relates to their own lives. The discussion of the story may also be used to foster the positive values of family love, independence, and adapting to change.

1. What do you envision high school study life to be like? Is the picture here of the brother staying up late, typing away furiously at his computer, eating "survival food," and disturbing his family's sleep accurate? Exaggerated? Not extreme enough? If you have a sibling in high school, how does he or she handle writing essays for English?
2. How is your mental picture of college different from the one of high school? What factors have influenced your impression of college? Family? Friends? TV? Movies? Books?
3. Do you think the strength (or weakness) of family plays a role in how siblings feel about each other after all have "grown up" and taken different paths (i.e., moving away, taking a job, getting married, etc.)? How so, or not so? Do you have examples in your own family with your own siblings or cousins? What kind of relationships do your parents have with their grown brothers and sisters?
4. If you have a brother or sister, how do you feel about being either a younger or older sibling? What are the advantages and the disadvantages to being older? Younger? If you do not have a sibling, would you choose to be an older or a younger brother/sister? What are the reasons for your choice?

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Before You Read



To get ready to read "Blank Disks," **write about one of the following topics** for a few minutes:

1. Who is your best friend? What do you do together? Is the relationship give-and-take, or is one of you the leader and the other a follower?
2. Do you share a room with a sibling? If so, what are the advantages and disadvantages? Are there times you wish you had your own room? Why? Are there times you are happy to have a companion? Why?
3. If you don't share a room with a sibling, do you have a special place in your house where you gather with family or friends? Where does your "quality time" with family or visiting friends occur? Describe the room or area and why it is special.
4. Do you have an older sibling who goes to college? How did you feel when he or she left home? On visits home was your relationship different? How?

## After You Read: Reader Response Log



When you finish reading, **try writing about aspects of the story that are important to you or raise questions for you.** If you need a prompt, you may write about one or two of the questions below:

1. What do you think the narrator misses most about her brother? Why?
2. Write the dialogue of Grover's first phone call home. What does his conversation with his sister sound like?
3. Write a short sequel to "Blank Disks." Base it on either the narrator or the brother and their respective reactions when they see each other on the first visit home.
4. Some people believe all change is good. Is the change (the brother's departure) in this story a good thing for the brother? For the narrator? How so, or not so?

## Connecting with Other Stories

In *Short Takes* other stories include **characters who face major, life-changing events.** For each person, life as he or she knew it will never be the same. The narrator searches for the mother who left him for adoption when he was born in "Without the Imagination." His picture of her is so idealized that when he finds out the truth—she is not perfect and she chose to abandon him because she wanted nothing to do with him—he loses all hope and purpose in his life. "Have I Told You Lately?" tells the story of a man who is dying and his wife who makes the decision to turn off his life-support systems. Their lifetime together, as seen through the comatose man's memories, has come to an end. Colleen, in "A List of 10 Things," must move and lose her best friend from childhood. The boy in "I Am Kwakkoli" receives his Indian name that links him to his ancestors who were strangers to him before.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Vocabulary from “Blank Disks”

**Directions:** Based on the way each word in bold below is used in the sentence, **write** what you think the word means. Then **look up** the same word in your dictionary and copy the definition that comes closest to the way the word is used in the sentence. Finally, **write a sentence** of your own using the word. Make sure the sentence shows what the word means. Use a separate sheet of paper.

**Example:** He sat there in the wooden chair, bonded to the Macintosh by the white **glare** of the screen reflected in his face. (p. 53)

**Definition based on context:** *reflection; shine*

**Dictionary definition:** *an intense and blinding light*

**Original sentence:** *When I was driving on the highway, the glare of the sun was so bright I had to wear my sunglasses.*

1. His fingers typed **furiously**, then slowed down. (p. 53)
2. His eyelids **sprinted** back, revealing life, exhilaration. (p. 53)
3. I see the **carriage** sliding across the paper . . . (p. 53)
4. I brought my brother Nestlé chocolate chip cookies, warm from the first batch that I had just baked from scratch—a studying high school student's **survival** food. (p. 53)
5. When he says everything, he means tapes, posters, compact disks, stereo system, and some **cologne** to attract the girls. (p. 54)
6. He has graduated from his senior European History class—no more midnight **essays** to write. (p. 54)
7. I have nothing to **distract** me but fond memories. (p. 54)
8. I have painted it, got a new floor, hung a picture of a beach scene, bought an **upholstered** chair, and even put in a new bookshelf with colorful books I don't read. (p. 54)
9. No friendly person with eyes full of thanks, no brother smiling and telling me he'll do anything that I want for the rest of my life and that I'll always be his **lifesaver**. (p. 55)

## Brainteasers for Critical Thinking

1. Why does the narrator bring her brother chocolate chip cookies?
2. What makes her hide her tears from her parents?
3. Why does she try to “fix up” Grover's room?
4. What made the room “special” for her before Grover went away?
5. What is the relationship between the image of the empty room and what the narrator is feeling?

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

### Reading Check for "Blank Disks"

Circle the letters of all the correct answers. Some questions have more than one correct answer.

- 1. At the beginning of the story, the narrator remembers her brother typing at the computer
  - a. six months ago
  - b. last year
  - c. when he was in college
  - d. two years ago
- 2. When he was studying, she brought him
  - a. hot chocolate
  - b. chocolate chip cookies
  - c. coffee and doughnuts
  - d. sandwiches and cola
- 3. Grover went away
  - a. for a job
  - b. to summer camp
  - c. to college
  - d. to join the Army
- 4. When he left, he took
  - a. his car
  - b. his high school yearbook
  - c. the Macintosh computer
  - d. the family dog
- 5. After he leaves, his sister
  - a. turns the empty room into her bedroom
  - b. buys a big-screen TV
  - c. realizes how much she misses him
  - d. is glad she is alone

### Language Study in Context: Repetition



The repetition of a phrase in a story places emphasis on that element. **Recall a time** when someone important to you went away for a short time or forever. Perhaps a friend moved away, an older sibling went to college, a parent went on a business trip, a grandparent died, a teacher took a job at a different school.

**Directions:** Write an "I remember" scene of the moment the person left. Include enough detail, and focus each memory enough to give one "snapshot" of this person. Capture one quick moment and recall the details. You may repeat "I remember" many times. Use an additional sheet of paper if needed.

**Example:** I remember my mom's first business trip. She had never been away from me before. I had never gone to sleep without her bedtime story, never woken up to breakfast without her. I remember Daddy held me tight as she walked toward the door to the plane, but I just kept crying. I remember she turned and walked backwards all the way down the hall, waving the whole time.

I remember \_\_\_\_\_

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