



Ron Carlson Writes a Story



*From the first
glimmer of
an idea to the
final sentence*

Ron Carlson

the big boat

THIS IS THE STORY OF A STORY. Shortly after writing "The Governor's Ball," I gave a lecture in Park City about how I thought I had written it. I didn't really think of it as a lecture at the time but as an honest tracing of my writing day, a simple narrative of the actual process of how I survived the writing of that story. In refining my notes on that talk, and in speaking to thousands of writers in classrooms and conferences, I have come to see that the way I wrote "The Governor's Ball" was not some reflexive quirk, an anomaly, but rather a clear example of the way my writing process works. It has become a process I trust.

This is a change. When I went off to teach English and writing over twenty-five years ago, I had the notion that if I covered the elements of craft with my students I could send them off into writing fiction, and that would be that. I taught with a brilliant guy who emphasized the personal heart in his class. Instead of building upward from craft, they were guided by their powerful personal visions, their dreams. Most students, of course, used both in trying to write stories about accidents and trips and sometimes the family pet. I taught craft because it was teachable. There were examples everywhere of dialogue and scene and character and imagery and point of view, etc. Vision, of course, is not teachable. Dreams are not teachable. What a person chooses to write about is not teachable. The passion a writer brings to the page is not teachable. Can writing ever be taught? The best answer to that was given obliquely by the rock musician

David Lee Roth. When asked if money could buy happiness, he said, no, but with money you could buy the big boat and go right up to where the people were happy. With a teacher you can go right up to where the writing is done; the leap is made alone with vision, subject, passion, and instinct. So a writer comes to the page with vision in her heart and craft in her hands and a sense of what a story might be in her head. How do the three come together? My thesis is the old one: they merge in the physical writing—inside the act of writing, not from the outside. The process is the teacher. Craft is part of it, and I'm going to discuss elements/approaches to craft as we go along, but there is something else.

And that is process. The process of writing a story, as opposed to writing a letter, or a research paper, or even a novel, is a process involving radical, substance-changing discovery. If you let the process of writing a research paper on *Romeo and Juliet* change the advice the Friar gives to those young people, you're headed for trouble. If you let the process of writing a story inform and change the advice an uncle gives his niece, you're probably moving closer to the truth. I've also become convinced that a writer's confidence in his/her process is as important as any accumulated craft dexterity or writing "skill."

Sometimes this can be a hard sell to beginning writers because it feels like a mystery. They see things: articles full of how-to advice or books full of finished stories accompanied by study questions. But between the nuts and bolts of prose construction, character work, dialogue strategies, and the sweep of the short masterpieces of Western literature, there may be other notes useful for the writer.

There are a lot of books about writing, and there is good

information in many of them. Years ago when I was looking for books that might be helpful, I could only find the standard anthologies, some ultrabasic primers that only went two or three steps beyond grammar, and a kind of long personal aesthetic that was many times more metaphoric than mechanical. ("Writing my book was like flying an airplane, meeting a strange woman in a labyrinth, swimming in a cold river at night"—and I'll use a lot of metaphors in this volume!) I saw all those books in the library, but I had no idea how they got there. Just their bindings seemed to make it clear that the act of writing was beyond me.

Yet I felt I had what it took. I wanted to write, and the times that I'd applied myself to it, the results had been good. But how could I get better? All those people in the library had the ticket, I felt; how could I get it? I knew grammar. I'd read the two hundred great stories of all time, eternity, the twelfth of never, and so on. So, now?

The mistake I'd made in that thinking, I see now, was confusing reading fiction and writing fiction as being similar activities. They are *related* in important ways, but *not as activities*. You have to do one in order to do the other (guess which?), and they meet in the book, that rare and beautiful object, but they are not conducted with the same posture or instruments. One is reactive and the other creative. They are as different as walking through a strange city and folding a map correctly, as timing a swim meet and swimming in a cold river at night, as flying a plane and meeting a strange woman in an airplane. A writer goes into a story with a dream/vision that is the North Star, and an understanding of craft that is the footing, and instinct/passion that is the driving force.

these guys were hammering on my house

THIS IS THE STORY OF a day some years ago when I was living in Salt Lake City, Utah, a lovely city really, my old hometown. After ten years of being Mr. Carlson, an English teacher and coach in a prep school in Connecticut, I was doing that thing that is best phrased as “facing the void.” I had somehow written two novels that had been nicely published by W.W. Norton, and now I had let go of the teaching and was “trying to write.” Of course, it’s one thing to knock off a couple of novels while you’re holding down a job, writing them a page a day in the forty minutes between classes and hockey practice, and it’s entirely another to be unemployed, unoccupied, with nothing to do all the livelong day but write. I turned to the next project, and it seemed—since I had already written—that the way should be paved, or smooth, or that there should at least be a way. But to me it just looked dark. The whole day can be a hard lesson, and it taught me some things that year that I’m still parsing. In the morning, I took my coffee cup into the room, turned a sheet of paper into the typewriter (some notes in this old story will be honestly retro), and I immediately remembered that the living room hadn’t been vacuumed for eight, maybe ten hours. So, this little book is about how I migrated from the vacuum and all my home appliances (many of the same ones you have) toward my writing room, that typewriter, and the stories I had to write. There, of course, were other pressures. There are always other pressures.

The old house demanded attention. The roof was weak, the windows were ancient, it all needed work. The poignant feature of such projects is that they involved so much money, money I didn’t have. The call was to get up and become a general contractor or sit in a drafty, unpainted room and write a story.

I made plans for the things I could do, scheduling the work for after 4:00 p.m., and I hired a good handyman to commence on the rest. While he and his assistant and another guy, a big guy they’d hired from the day-labor pool at minimum wage, worked on our house, I sat in my little room with my typewriter and I typed. It was during this period that I wrote “The Governor’s Ball.” I wrote the draft in one day knowing that the big day laborer made more money each time he walked by my window with a plank than I would receive if I finished my story well. But even knowing that the best return might be a letter from some editor, two copies of a journal with the story in it, and a check for \$34.50, I kept typing. How’d I do that? I mean these guys were hammering on my house. How’d I stay in there? That’s the story I want to tell.

I’ve intended this little book to be a companion for beginning writers, all those people I’ve been meeting fifteen at a time across the country who are somewhere in their first five stories. And I mean for it to be actually helpful in its discussion of art and craft, but my main intention is just to keep you company for a few days, tell a little story, rant and rave about what I’ve been doing, and give you something to do after 4:00 p.m.

A day and another day and the day before, and the library with the big boys in the shelves, old Dreiser, old Mencken, all the boys down there, and I went to see them, Hya Dreiser, Hya Mencken, Hya, hya: there's a place for me, too, and it begins with B, in the B shelf, Arturo Bandini, make way for Arturo Bandini, his slot for his book, and I sat at the table and just looked at the place where my book would be, right there close to Arnold Bennett; not much that Arnold Bennett, but I'd be there to sort of bolster up the B's, old Arturo Bandini . . .

John Fante, *Ask the Dust*

the idea of the story idea

PEOPLE ASK A WRITER: *Where* do you get your ideas? The question has several purposes. They're not really asking *where* so that they could go out *there* and get a few, because the fact is, everyone I've ever met is already brimming with story ideas, inklings, notions, formulas, etc. They're checking to see if you (the writer) have some wacky quirks, strange interior wiring, or a secret method for locating story ideas. Also, there is often a genuine curiosity about how a writer works (how strange are you?); how did an otherwise ordinary person commence writing a story? They also sometimes want to know about a specific story they've read: Did you drop a mattress from a truck, ever play baseball, see a UFO? People ask if a story is based on your own personal experience. It's a better question than it seems because its aim is to try to determine where "real life" was so that we can measure, consider the distance to fiction. (And then think: Can I do that, cover that ground?)

But most importantly, when beginning writers ask where ideas come from they really want to know: *Are my ideas as good as your ideas?* Do they come from anywhere near the same region? Do they have the same intent? Am I even in the ballpark thinking that writing about my aunt who wouldn't get out of the bathtub, or my summer job pouring concrete, or an all-night discussion I had with my husband, or my gambling addiction, or a moment I had on the Grand Tetons when I thought I was going to fall—are any of these

legitimate “ideas” that could be approached, treated, and explored in a story?

The short true answer to that question is: if it matters to you, then it is absolutely worth writing. Many times your feeling for your “idea” is as important as the so-called “quality” of the idea itself.

When people ask me the personal-experience question, my response is that I write from my personal experiences, whether I’ve had them or not. At first, this sounds like a joke and people laugh, but I’m not joking. Regardless of where I got the experience (or the story “idea”), I treat it personally; if it’s not personal, I don’t want to be involved. If it is solely intellectual, some concept or puzzle I’m tempted by (What if there were a baseball player who had killed fans with foul balls? What if Bigfoot stole my wife?), I will explore it until I find the personal element and something sparks. Having a feeling for my material means sending myself on each journey, whether I’ve actually been there or not, and it involves the powerful act of the imagination that good writing requires: empathy.

Writers are told to write what they know, which on the surface is good advice. It’s good in that teachers started saying it to warn their students off rehashed, paper-thin science fiction (the time warp on Planet Dwindgore had us all confused) and television stories (Come on out, Rocky, we’ve got the place surrounded!), from which no one learned anything. They wanted their students to come closer to home, to begin to use language to grapple with challenging stories from their lives. And I’ll stand with Write what you know, but I’ll add: How can you know what you know until you write it? What can the process of the story teach you? Do

you know everything at the moment before commencing a story? “Writing what you know” too often becomes controlling the elements of your story, and that prevents the writer from reaching beyond the facts, and those things closely related to the facts, to a place closer to the truth of her story. I want to put the advice this way: write *toward* what you know, building an inventory, and carefully using the imagination as the powerful sensing instrument it can be.

Generally, story “ideas” are garnered from three sources: a writer’s own experiences, experiences the writer has heard or read about, or experiences and notions that the writer “makes up.” These categories are loose, and the word “experiences” could easily be replaced with “images,” or “events,” “phrases,” or “moments.” I can think of stories of mine that came from all three areas and combinations of them. Example: I actually dropped a mattress from a truck one day; it became the germ of a story. I was there in the truck in that weather, and I saw it disappear. Example: at a dinner party years ago I listened as my friend Larry told about a summer job he once had as a tour guide in a boat that navigated an underground cavern; it became the germ for a story called “Phenomenon.” I saw the cavern as he spoke, and the water and that world opened enough for me to get a hold of it. I wanted to find out more, have that experience. I wanted to go on the boat, guide my own tour. Example: I read about a foul-ball injury in a baseball game in Scottsdale, Arizona; it became the germ for “Zanduce at Second.” How would a person feel, a baseball player, if he had killed people accidentally with foul balls powerfully struck into the stands? I tried to imagine myself the afternoon before a game with these lives on my conscience. Example: I saw an aircraft carrier in New

York Harbor and thought: What if the government gave these ships to single-parent families? What if my mother raised kids in such a place? That notion became the germ for "On the U.S.S. Fortitude." Sometimes (perhaps all times) you have to be tolerant of your story "ideas" and see where they want to help you go.

Why do some of our experiences and ideas become the starting points for stories and other fabulous ideas simply fail to register? I don't know. I know that people have told me about absolutely amazing experiences that have no charge for me, and other times a mundane statement will come back to me days after it was uttered and demand attention, entrance, treatment, amplification. We're consciously and unconsciously fishing all the time, trolling the world and coming up with ideas. Everyone I've ever met has story ideas. I have never met anyone who doesn't have a story idea. That's the reason I stopped telling my seatmates on planes that I was a writer. Not because of the obvious reasons, the comments on best-selling writers (which for the most part are comments on plot and taste), and not for the comments about how they were going to take a couple weeks off soon and knock off their book. But because then we'd get into the approach that I'm going after in this book; writing is exploration, it isn't neat: you can actually write a story without knowing the ending. No one wants to hear this on an airplane from some ardent type, some writer, of whom they've never heard. They want to try out their idea on me (after I promise not to steal it), and it is always an idea about casino chips that turn out to be water soluble or the history of the development of power steering or some guy (always a guy)

who discovers a body, a manuscript in a box, or a surprising tattoo behind his knee.

Are these legitimate ideas for stories? Yes and no. It's a little bit like the dilemma of where to send a child to college. The truth is that it doesn't matter where she goes; it matters how she goes. If the idea matters to you, then it is worthy of exploration. That is the single criterion. If it doesn't matter to you, but you think you could sell it because you've recently (on an airplane) read a book whose central premise was not half as rich as yours, the idea is not worth writing. If you don't want to read the story, it is not worth writing. If you think it might be good enough for other people, that other people might like it, it is not worth writing. If you consider the audience of your story to be anyone other than yourself, you are inviting compromise. That is why television, with a few exceptions, is so awful. The writers there aren't in love with any of it; they can't afford to be. They work in groups and their note on what they produce is that it is good enough for the audience. They are writing for other people. I'd love to know what they read, but I'm certain I know that answer too—they don't. How could they? It would be too painful.

Years ago I was in a class with visiting writer Ed Abbey one winter quarter at the University of Utah, and among the litany of credos he announced that term was this: if you want to read a good story, you're going to have to write it yourself. You can hear his classic bravado there, but it's an honest challenge. And that feeling—*I can't wait to read this*—should carry you through the days as you write your stories.

do you have an outline?

ALL RIGHT, LET'S WRITE A STORY, or rather: let's examine the writing of the story. Not the story, the writing, not the product, the *process*. In reading we examine the story—and we are expert readers. It's what we've been trained and drilled in. To read a story is to react to it, and to write a story is to stay alert and open to the possibilities that emerge as each sentence cuts its way into the unknown. In writing we “find” the story, and our training as readers is of less help than our training as human beings, as men and women who see, feel, and intuit and who are open to possibilities.

A legitimate concern is how much do we need to know before we plunge in. The question is always posed to me this way: Do you have an outline? Do you know the ending? What percentage of the story do you know before you begin? I'll answer that specifically concerning “The Governor's Ball,” and other stories, but the honest answer is: it varies. Sometimes you know the last scene, the last sentence. (Many times that great last scene ends up being the first by the time you finish.) Sometimes you know a scene that you think goes in the middle. But the minimum is simply that you must have that story “notion” (an event, an image, a phrase, a moment) and the charge of some feeling for it. That is enough. You do not need to know the whole story. In fact, it would be impossible for you to know the whole story—regardless of how many years it's been gestating in your head, how complete an outline you have for it. Even in stories where you think you have control of all the elements, there are going to be

surprises and turns in the writing that you didn't anticipate. If there aren't, then the story is not going to be as solid as it should be. Simply, and others have said this: *if you get what you expect, it isn't good enough.*

Beginning a story without knowing all the terrain is not a comfortable feeling. It's uncomfortable enough in fact to keep most people away from the keyboard. In our lives we're used to knowing what we're doing, where we're going. It would be strange to get in the car and think you were going to pick up the kids at school, but not be really sure. But there are moments in the process of writing a story when you must tolerate that feeling: you stay alert to everything that is happening and by listening and watching, you find out where you are going by going there. Somebody else may get in the car.

It sounds like a mystery, and there are parts of this enterprise that remain elusive, unspeakable, but at the center what we're talking about here are the things you can learn from yourself while you are writing the story. I don't want to say more than that about finding words for our secret selves, but let's agree that we *know* more than we can fully express, and writing is a way of touching, tapping into the heart and finally locating that knowledge, ending up with more resources than we started out with.

The single largest advantage a veteran writer has over the beginner is this tolerance for not knowing. It's not style, skill, or any other dexterity. An experienced writer has been in those woods before and is willing to be lost; she knows that being lost is necessary for the discoveries to come. The seasoned writer waits, is patient, listens to her story as it talks to her. Now I've started being a little mystical here, and

I want to avoid the sense that writing is magic and not work. The story isn't going to talk to you, but things are going to happen in the heat of writing that cannot be predicted from outside the act itself. Much of a writer's work is exploration, and that involves so many things he cannot know from the outside. And we all agree that it is more comfortable to be outside the story considering it, than inside the story struggling to see it. Comfort isn't an issue.

A couple summers ago I taught at the Port Townsend Writers' Conference up on Washington's Olympic Peninsula. The conference is held at Fort Worden, a former military installation made famous because the movie *An Officer and a Gentleman* was filmed there. What is amazing about the place are the huge cement gun emplacements and underground bunkers that at one time housed sixty-ton guns and all the men necessary to guard the Strait of Juan de Fuca from foreign aggressors. These monstrous stone ruins are overgrown like Mayan temples and imbedded throughout the hilltop like some sort of vast archeological puzzle. My son Colin was nine at the time, and we tramped back and forth through these haunting structures. For a nine-year-old, it was perfect: the lost city. At one point in the dense bushes, Colin literally found an old door. We explored its chambers and many, many more. Colin led me through dark corridors and across parapets and through tunnels in the brush; he was intoxicated with happiness. At one point two small deer met us head-on as we crawled through the thicket. Later Colin took my hand as we approached another stone battlement, and he said something I will never forget. "Dad," he said, his voice rich with joy. "Don't you love it when you don't know where you're going?" I mean it sat

me down right on the ancient battlements. It was a fine moment in a great day for us that summer, but he seemed to have enunciated my credo as a writer. Those moments when you are beyond your map, past your plan, without instruments, and you continue to venture further and further into the story loving not knowing where you are going.

We live in a society that doesn't offer any support or approval for ventures that aren't clearly articulated and aligned for a goal. A writer gets past this. It's going to be a mess before you're finished, and you may not have a name for the mess or understand its utilitarian purposes. There aren't words for everything. For now, we'll call it the draft of a story.

The word "idea" has always made me vaguely nervous when I'm speaking about story because it has such a neat and narrow definition. An "idea" can be articulated. And sometimes the things that impel me into a story cannot be articulated. Sometimes it is simply that I want to finish a phrase or a sentence and follow that flow. Sometimes I simply want to create an image of a mountain campsite or the lobby of a small London hotel. Are these "ideas"? Most of my "ideas" for stories would be better termed "collisions." Something strikes me, somehow gets my attention, and I remember it. I see something out of context. I hear something.

"The Governor's Ball" began with such a collision. I've selected "The Governor's Ball" because it is a story I wrote in one long day several years ago, and I remember how I wrote it, and I'm going to tour you through that story and be as frank as I can about how I survived the writing. There are other stories I could not take apart this way because I do not know as much about how I wrote them. (Writers are

not obligated to explain their work, either their methods or their themes; and there's some danger in doing so. I'm an old teacher, and I'll take the risk.) My purpose here is not to gather readers in appreciation around an old story; my purpose is to take writers to the edge of each decision I made the day I typed that first draft.

I had dropped a mattress. In what we call real life I had dropped a mattress. This is an experience that had happened to me or that I—inadvertently—was the agent of. Working alone one January day I cleared out a rental house I owned in Salt Lake City, and I loaded my old Ford pickup with debris: junk, ruined wallboard, wicked carpet, and a large mattress. It was a strange cold day with low yellow clouds and a warm wind that couldn't quite thaw the old snow. On my way to the municipal landfill with this trash, I made a mistake. I took the easy route down Fifth South and onto the freeway. As soon as I got up to speed, I felt the mattress shift, and in the rearview mirror, I saw it fly from the truck bed and disappear off the elevated portion of the freeway. For a moment I was shocked.

This actually happened. Did I think of it as a story idea at the time? Only in that everything that happens is fair game. Regardless, this was the largest thing I'd ever dropped. It was doubly unusual for me, and I want to make this clear because I'm good with loading things. I've carried hundreds of loads in dozens of states in a variety of vehicles in all weathers, and I don't drop things. But there it was: gone. And apparently it had fallen a long way. I wrote a letter about the incident to my father and illustrated it with a little drawing of the mattress lifting into the air. Then it lodged in my mind quietly for a year.

What is the proper gestation period for a story, that is, between the "event" and beginning to type? Could (or should) you write a story about something that happened to you this morning? This week? This year? There are writers who can go to a dinner party and start to write the story the next morning. I have a friend who jokes that she's writing eleven days behind her life. And I like that phrase because it speaks to the advantage of "writing close"—that is, a certain immediacy, heat. I know other writers who wait and wait and wait purposely as long as they can before they begin because they know that they'll "get more" and not run out of material. The story I finished this spring was based on an event that happened to me forty years ago when I was a fry cook. The story I'm writing right now starts with an event at the Vernal, Utah rodeo sixteen years ago. There is no set measurement for the incubation period, but going in too soon can lead to a "thinner" experience. I prefer waiting "awhile," so the event/idea can stew for a while, or grow whiskers, modify, grow, change. Also, and more importantly, I wait for a while so that I know I'll be tolerant enough with the basic story idea to let it change and grow as I write. If I'm too close in time to the experience, I might be ruled, directed too much by it, not allowing all that it suggests to enter into the play of the writing.

Now what else did I know before I started "The Governor's Ball"? I thought not very much, but that isn't true. I knew Salt Lake City, which I would use as the setting. I knew the street names and I knew north from south—all you need in Utah as each town is set like a grid by the thrifty and sensible pioneers. My address in Salt Lake at the time was 1272 East 500 South. I also knew about the Governor's

Ball, where my wife and I had once been. It is a fund-raising event. In those years Scott Matheson, a fine man and one of the few Democrats in all of Utah, was governor, and they held the dinner dance at the Hotel Utah, which was an actual hotel then, a beautiful building that had served in a way as one of the crossroads of the West, before it became an office building. The ball was \$200 a person or a couple, I forget, because I couldn't afford such an outing, but we had a friend who could, and he bought a table and invited us to fill two of the seats. My wife looked good in a dress, and I could dance. There is a lot of other data I knew as well, without being overtly aware of it, but we'll turn that over as we come across it. It is truthful to say that I'd lost a mattress and had been to the Governor's Ball, and about a year after both events, I started typing a story.

If a writer is any good, what he makes will have its source in a realm much larger than that which his conscious mind can encompass and will always be a greater surprise to him than it can ever be to his reader.

Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*

this was the first sentence

This was the first sentence:

§ I didn't know until I had the ten-ton wet carpet on top of the hideous load of junk and I was soaked with the dank rust water that the Governor's Ball was that night.

The first word of the story is I. Who's speaking? Do I know? No. Is it me? No. Should I stop and write a character sketch for this guy, a moral code, a genealogy? No. What I have done is dive in the river. For whatever reasons, I've kicked myself off the edge in regard to this story and I've started. I felt ready. That mattress had been nibbling at me for almost a year, and I didn't want it to get away. I want to read this story. So now the most important thing for me is to figure out ways not to stop. I'm going to get out of my own way every chance I get. If I need a family tree for this guy, I'll pencil it up this afternoon when I'm out of gas for the day. For now, I've put the rope in my teeth and jumped in the river. I do not know where I will come out. As a writer you can plan, you can say, I'm going to swim across this river and come out there by that blooming jacaranda. But, you're not. It is impossible from the bank to estimate the force and contour of the current of the water, let alone the temperature and the hidden obstacles. You strip off your clothes, set your glasses on a rock, take the pencil from behind your ear, bite hard on the rope, look once, and leap in. You can't think your way across.

Your journey is going to require attention and effort. The first thing we should agree on is that writing is difficult. It is a strange activity done alone in a room mostly, and it is, many times, like work. Other times it's like anything you want it to be, meeting two brothers on a train, holding tight to the tail of what seems to be a Bengal tiger, sipping Ovaltine after midnight. Other times it can be unspeakable. When you blunder onto the far shore completing the first draft, you may be far downstream, and then you can tighten the rope, walk back, place it where you want, but let's worry about that later. Now, let's swim, find out.

So how is the first sentence? It's good. It's okay for a reader, but I don't care, I can't even think that way here. It's good for the writer because it creates what I'll call inventory—there's something in it. The writer David Boswell says it perfectly: "It was a dark and stormy night," is not a terrible sentence from a reader's point of view, but it is a terrible sentence for the writer because there's no help in it. 'Lightning struck the fence post' is much better because there's that charred and smoking fence post which I might have to use later." I'm constantly looking for *things* that are going to help me find the next sentence, survive the story.

staying in the room

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING a writer can do after completing a sentence is to stay in the room. The great temptation is to leave the room to celebrate the completion of the sentence or to go out in the den where the television lies like a dormant monster and rest up for a few days for the next sentence or to go wander the seductive possibilities of the kitchen. But. It's this simple. *The writer is the person who stays in the room.* The writer wants to read what she is in the process of creating with such passion and devotion that she will not leave the room. The writer understands that to stand up from the desk is to fail, and to leave the room is so radical and thorough a failure as to not be reversible. Who is not in the room writing? Everybody. Is it difficult to stay in the room, especially when you are not sure of what you're doing, where you're going? Yes. It's impossible. Who can do it? The writer.

In my first sentence there is some inventory: the carpet, the load of junk, and the mention of the Governor's Ball. They begin to form an inventory of evidence. And with this evidence what am I trying to prove? I am trying to prove that there was a wet carpet, a load of junk, a ball. And beyond that I'll have to write to find out. I see now that those first four lines are suggestive of something I didn't know that I meant: "I didn't know until..." I see (having completed the story) that this guy may be lying with that phrase. It's not important (useful) for me to know that when I type it. Its meaning will emerge.

I also *now* see as a reader (reactor) that I put both agendas in the first sentence: the load of junk and the ball. The former is the narrator's errand, mission, quest, through-story, duty to himself; and the latter is his duty to his marriage, his wife, friends, society. Knowing this is absolutely of no value to the writer. None. Zero. I say that here so that we stay square with the idea that we can find out what we were up to *after it's over*, as readers. As writers, these things are (and should be) a living, impenetrable code.

Then I typed sentence number two (don't worry—I'm not going to note this story sentence by sentence):

§ It was late afternoon and I had wrestled the carpet out of our basement, with all my strength and half my anger, to use it as a cover so none of the other wet wreckage that our burst pipes had ruined would blow out of the truck onto Twenty-first South as I drove to the dump.

I was glad to let the story migrate from "real life": now it isn't a rental house, it's "our" house after a plumbing problem. Things shift (conflate, migrate) as you type a sentence and hooray for that. It's going to happen if you encourage it or not, so get out of the way. The phrase, "all my strength and half my anger," is worth noting, first for the word "anger," which is a small clue about this guy and secondly for the construction, which I will echo again in a page, though I don't know it now.

Staying in the room will permit me to catch several things (dozens in any story) that I don't even know I've thrown into the air. This is a juggling metaphor and it's apt. You write

something, for example, “a blue and white wool sweater,” and what you want is a real sweater, something a character would really wear, something that might help us see and believe him a little bit. What you don’t know is that five pages from creating the sweater as a realistic item of your inventory, it is going to help his sister find him at the Garfield County Fair late that night. You didn’t plan that, but when it happens it will seem only necessary; and staying in the room will allow it to happen.

Then I typed the third sentence of the story and completed the first paragraph:

§ The wind had come up and my shirt front was stiffening as Cody pulled up the driveway in her Saab.

Now this is simply a fabulous sentence. Think of it: a new character enters! Opportunity! A reason to go on typing! It’s important to note that the sentence was typed straight out, that is, without hesitation: wind, shirt, Cody, driveway, Saab. A page of prose (and a poem even more so) represents hundreds of decisions, a causally linked series of problems to be solved. Every fourth word seems a fork (if not a cloverleaf) in the road. Who’s coming? The woman. What’s her name? Cody. What’s her car? A Saab. Sometimes you know going in who’s arriving in what. You change a person’s name from Cherry to Beth, and you use her real car, an old pearl-colored Valiant with a push-button transmission. What difference does it make, though, if her name is Beth or Cherry or even Cody? If her car is an Impulse or a Skylark? Let’s ask that again from the point of view of the person writing the story: What will help you stay in the room? Two things:

staying specific and not stopping. If I don’t know the woman’s name I simply use Doris. For a man: Mickey. I’ve been using Mickey and Doris in examples (and in first drafts) for twenty years. I specify all types of things; if I don’t know the car, it’s a Buick. I like the word Buick. To reach for your atlas, the yellow pages, your book of names, thesaurus, dictionary there at your writing desk during your writing time is a mistake. (Worse: Google, which didn’t exist when I wrote this story.) You aren’t looking for the right name, you’re looking for a reason to stop. I personally love to cruise the yellow pages for names, though I’ve found atlases more helpful, *but I never do it when I’m writing*. I try to get a name I believe right away, but if it isn’t right, there’ll be plenty of time to set that name right after my hour or two or six at the typewriter is over. Burned-out and dizzy with success and the faint hum of carpal tunnel, I’ll have all evening to locate the right name and do a ten-second search and replace.

the dictionary stand

LET'S SEARCH AND REPLACE these reference books before we get this name right. One of my closest friends is the director of a school-library system, and we'd talked about the functions of libraries for hundreds of hours. I always considered one of the fine curiosities of a library to be the dictionary stand. My friend has some beautiful oak dictionary stands in his edifice, holding their forty-pound Webster's open to the Ms and waiting for an inquiry. What I'm saying is that they struck me as quaint. First of all I don't have room in my study at home for one, and then I thought I always wanted my dictionaries close at hand, right there so I can grab it and look up *Yggdrasil* or find out just how many r's there are in *emba—assment*. I knew that the dictionary is an editor's tool, but then I learned firsthand that it is an instrument, like almost all the equipment under the roof for which you pay the rent/mortgage, which is asking you to stop writing. It sits there like the honest upright member of your library and asks you to stop typing and look something up. Don't. Instead: move that book. Get a dictionary stand and put it out by the window in the living room and lay that rich opprobrious volume on it, so you'll be reminded only later to begin to edit. That goes for Roget's work, the yellow pages, your maps, Bartlett's, Stories of the World's Great Operas, Encyclopedia of Manners, Universal Recipes, the almanac, etc., etc. Get a stand for each and put them downstairs and out by the window where they'll be visible from the street and thereby raise the expectations and behavior

of the general citizenry. But during your writing time, don't you touch them.

What has invaded the writer's room more than any of these editorial monitors, is the Internet, and I will just say that the Internet is the enemy of a writer's day. The Internet is a heaping helping of what everyone else is thinking—and right this minute. If you open your e-mail, you are asking to let go of the day. I don't want to belabor this obvious point, but we have welcomed this convenience right onto the very screens where we are writing stories, and e-mail is not a friend to the writer.

If you decided to paint your house and took a day and prepped it, and then with your paint ready and a roller in your hand, you decided to knock down the hornet's nest under the eave, you are going to spend the day killing hornets and being stung. Your house will not get painted, though you will have plenty of exercise. And when you go out tomorrow to paint, the hornet's nest will be there again within striking distance. The rule is that you should paint your house. Do a careful job and paint it all until you paint right up to the insects. Then you can knock at them, if you are so inclined. E-mail is a national addiction that has quietly corrupted every edge of the writer's day.

the editor's new hat

YOUR REFERENCE SOURCES are simply metaphors for the critic, teacher, reader, editor, reactor in all of us, and we must leave these people out of the room. They don't get to go in. You take off your editor's hat and check it at the door, your critic shirt, your teacher's pants, your reader's underwear, your reactionary socks, shoes, and jewelry and leave them too. The naked writer gets to enter alone and unmolested by convention and free to follow his or her native impulses as untutored and shockingly noble or base as they may be. Even if you write at a coffee shop, you must figure out a way to shed all those prudent measured selves and tap into your story in a radical way. I know a lot of people who write in coffee houses, and it has never been so convenient, since you can't go two blocks anywhere in this county without being offered an iced latte or a flagon of cappuccino, but it feels too public to me. I could take some notes or do other planning work, and I love coffee, but I would hesitate to let go and dive into my heart's work sitting somewhere in mixed company with hot beverages.

writing character: an inventory

I. naming names

Let's get back to names. I named this woman Cody, a relatively unusual name. I think I'd had a student with that name at a high school where I'd been a visiting writer. Whenever we name someone, we're doing some character work, some characterization. What's the goal? A name that is believable. A name that is apt. Nothing far out on the name continuum. Some names are male, some are very male, some are urban, some are rural, some educated, prissy, comic, able, careless, and on and on. We're not looking to impart any value to the character with the name, we're looking for credibility. I look at the baby-name books and psychological studies about the effects names have on people. One recent study indicated that the most trustworthy name for a woman, a woman you'd want as your doctor and treasurer, is Beth. That doesn't mean that the Beth in our story can't worship the Devil and print counterfeit store coupons, in fact it opens that door. If you name a character Orville, you're going to have to earn him back a little. That is, except for secondary characters, you shouldn't let the name do even 30 percent of the work. If Orville turns out to be those things that we expect Orville to be, some guy in overalls, then perhaps he should be the lawyer in the piece. Actually Orville is an interesting name, isn't it? He and Wilbur were force-ten bright and force-ten brave. But those names seem dated and quaint to us.

Okay, there's nothing here you don't already know. Get

a good specific name, and stay with it. Do we base characters on people we know? Yes. Could we use their names? No. Never. We don't keep a real name because ultimately it isn't going to be an instrument that will help us write the story. There's some energy at first, of course, from trading on the real name, real character, but it fades. Example: a writer has been through a divorce. She starts writing a story wherein a character named Sterling, which in fact is the name of her former husband, makes a vivid fool out of himself in arguing about their old bentwood rocker. Well, she based the scene on a real moment she had with her real husband Sterling, and just typing the way his face changes as he screams about her inability to care for the chair properly gives the writer a big charge. She's grinning and having fun—for now. But will this Sterling have the opportunity to surprise her later by dropping off the bottle of wood-nourishing oil, or do anything that the other Sterling didn't do? There is going to come a moment when we are no longer reporting the moment, but when fiction requires that we go beyond a bad scene in a tough time involving a nice old chair and reach for the story. I want to advise that writer to change Sterling to Mickey and to use the same emotional charge she has for the scene to power her through it by listening to every little detail. What truth of the scene is trying to emerge? That Mickey is a rattling avaricious dolt? Perhaps, but isn't there even something more that this ugly scene can reveal?

You are the writer; you have the power, and you've got to be careful with it. You want to hurt people with the force of your poignant story, not because you used their name in a situation they're going to recognize anyway. Besides, and this is important: you're not chained to the person. You may

begin to base a character on your college roommate (everybody else does), but you change his name from Roger to Eldon because this character is going to evolve. You need him to be free to be true to the vicissitudes of your story and not be locked into the events that actually transpired.

My wife and I taught for ten years at a prep school in Connecticut, where we encountered a certain genre of name. Every June, I would send my dear friend David Kranes in Utah the Hotchkiss graduation program, and he'd send me the program from the Salt Palace Rodeo. I still have a file of names, among other things, and I consult it sometimes—*after* my writing time to see what might be available.

2. personal inventory: detailing the status life

Then, of course, I gave Cody a Saab. Are you doing character work when you give someone a car? Yes. What's the goal? Credibility. All I want to do is believe it without being generic. What I don't see (and again I don't need to be aware of everything that's operating as I type) is that I've created two extremes: her nice imported car and his old truck. What does that mean? I don't know; if they're believable vehicles (data/inventory), then they will be their own meaning.

Do cars have various values? Yes. Should the nun drive a Jeep? Should the pimp drive a Cadillac? He can, of course. But I'm going to name my pimp Orville and put him in a Yugo.

This notion of inventory is an important consideration in creating character. Everything you give a character is another element in his or her definition and will help determine the weight s/he gives or receives in the story. If we start right at

the body and radiate outward, we see hundreds of believable opportunities to give our characters unique inventories.

The Body. The body is a charmed and potent field that has been well traveled by the jillion writers before us, and it is their footsteps that have created so many wicked clichés into which the novice often stumbles. This thing first: you are not obligated to give the body. Genre writers (thriller/romance/adventure) are obligated to give the body, and you can look it up. On page 24 of every bodice-ripper there is the “tall dark and something” paragraph that goes something like: “Jim came striding out of the bunkhouse, the most beautiful man Janey had ever seen in jeans. His muscular stomach and the cords in his neck and the white flecks of starlight in his steely gray eyes thrilled her to the depths of her . . .”

We, however, are not required to meet that convention—a good fiction writer is creating her own conventions. The body may be important to your story, and you may want to shine a light on a facet of it so that the reader can better imagine and thereby follow the character, but don’t stop the story to do it. The attributes you give the body should play a part in the story and not feel like furniture we need to lug along. It sounds as if I’m saying that if you give Jim a rippling washboard stomach on page 2 then he should use it to clean some clothes on page 10; what we want is to have physical details that are simply believable at first and convincingly brought forward or visited again.

Scars, tattoos, jewelry, body jewelry, hair, dental aberrations, deformities, missing digits, horns protruding through the scalp, etc. These close things are powerful: be careful. Tattoos, which took so much of their meaning from sailors and convicts, are losing some of their potency as character

signals because so many of our students have decided to so adorn themselves. I saw a beautiful tattoo recently on a young man at the University of Alaska: a steaming cup of coffee on the back of his shoulder; and as I write this I have a fine young student who has more skulls on his forearm than a country graveyard. So we’re warned: we don’t give the concert pianist long, slender delicate fingers; we don’t give the convict a three-day beard and a sneer. We don’t give anyone, except perhaps the comely princess who is our very heroine, a sneer.

On the body—part is better than whole. Don’t be encyclopedic from head to toe. Use the cowlick or the brown tooth or one single thing that we can believe and hold onto.

Then of course our inventory moves to clothing, the choices, such as a sharkskin suit that I’d like to see one of again, or a guy in nothing but clothing from a tony catalogue, say J. Crew, or a girl in a Grateful Dead T-shirt cut off at the midriff, etc. Everything is inventory; everything is evidence. We want to create something real enough to believe in.

The room: the dorm room, office, car interior, or whatever space is your character’s space. What is on her car seat as you slide into her Pontiac? What is on his refrigerator? What is on the credenza behind his desk? What is a credenza?

To think about selecting inventory, consider this:

Mickey and Doris work at the same insurance firm as claims adjusters. After Mickey’s divorce, Doris invites him out to dinner. Afterward they go to her apartment for a drink. Write the paragraph where they enter the apartment. Include three things which he sees. Then this: the following Saturday he invites her over to his place to

watch the Notre Dame game. Write the paragraph where he attends to three things in his apartment before she arrives.

Our rule for now shall be: include things. Not because we're trying to clutter our stories up so that the sheer catalogues of clothing, furniture, drinks, sporting equipment make their own kind of effluvial music, or because we want to select the most symbolic or meaningful element in a character's life, but because we're looking for a way to survive the writing of the story. When in doubt, include things. We may have Doris over the sink trying to get the lid off the espresso maker while not getting water on the sleeves of her silk blouse, and we may not know her state of mind, but at least we have that small appliance, the running water, and her sleeves to help us into the next sentence.

3. Character is action.

Action has a bad name right now, as it's being equated with tough guys who eat nails for breakfast, spend the midday manually subduing bad guys and all of their ordnance, and sleep on rocky ground with an Uzi for a pillow and one eye open. Who doesn't know what he'll do tomorrow when they send in the helicopters. There's always helicopters. Well, not always. More telling perhaps might be what he'll do next time he's home, and a young girl comes to the door selling magazine subscriptions. We're looking for the small acts that reveal character.

Action is narrative evidence. It proves as it goes, whereas

adjectival telling (she was careless, manipulative, compulsive, willful) alerts us to how a character might be, but doesn't prove it with the force good drama requires. How many kinds of careless are there? Just over a jillion. Which was she? Show us a woman in the shower with her hair standing in a column of soapsuds who thinks about what to plan for dinner and realizes she's left her children at the beach. That's a different careless woman than the one who never once in all her thirty years closed the fridge door, and the woman who had a Scrabble game missing six letters, two E's, the K, a B, an O, and an N. She will not replace that game and insists on playing, is happy to play, with an incomplete game; she's blissful, at ease.

In a story much narrative evidence concerning character appears in exposition, that is, in periods of time before the current story. Flashbacks. In the current story we see a young woman crossing a river on a big yellow horse. Will she make it? That part, the outer story: girl, horse, river is fun to write, and we already know that we need to stay close and learn what we can, being particular about the moments in a way that is utterly convincing. But who is she? The importance of whether she makes it across the river or not will be determined by narrative evidence from the past. That's what the past is: evidence. A girl simply riding a yellow horse for the pure pleasure of it on a spring day is in one kind of jeopardy; a girl riding toward her boyfriend's house to tell him about her brand-new pregnancy is in another; and a girl who has a pistol in her pocket is in another. What is the true weight of the jeopardy? That will be determined by the way the simple narrative moments in exposition are set out, so we find out who the girl is. Not all girls, not all boys (nor

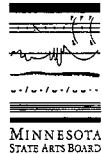
all women, men, children, dogs, horses, birds, reptiles, etc.), arrive at the current moment as equals. And the way they are different is established in expository narrative evidence. Sometimes this evidence is implied, and sometimes it is presented with simple flashback scenes.

One further example of this model: a boy is waiting in an airport for the arrival of his girlfriend. He gets a coffee and a copy of the *Times*. You can do a great deal with the coffee, the plastic seat in which he tries to get comfortable, the *Times*, the other people at Gate 21, the big dirty windows, and all the inventory of such a space. You'd stay close to find out what was going on. Perhaps you can imply that he, the boy Mickey, has been at this gate for thirty-six hours straight waiting for the one thing that makes his life worth living: Doris. Perhaps you can imply that he's still warm from the toasty and kinetic bed of Cora where he was exercising so pleasantly only twenty-five minutes before. Or perhaps you will use a short paragraph somewhere early in this little story to show scenes from A or B. These flashbacks would require the same particularity and attention to inventory that the current scene, Gate 21, requires, and they—regardless if they were two or twenty lines or more—would have their own dramatic force. The story of Mickey's wait would ultimately take its power from the meeting of the two narratives. Doris would arrive or would still be out there in a holding pattern, but something would be revealed about the Mickey we've created.

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