

THE WAR OF ART

Foreword by Robert McKee

Winning the Inner
Creative Battle

STEVEN
PRESSFIELD

THE WAR OF ART

Winning the Inner Creative Battle

STEVEN PRESSFIELD

FOREWORD BY ROBERT McKEE

ALSO BY

STEVEN PRESSFIELD

The Profession (2011)

Killing Rommel

The Afghan Campaign

The Virtues of War

Last of the Amazons

Tides of War

Gates of Fire

The Legend of Bagger Vance

PUBLISHED BY RUGGED LAND, LLC

276 CANAL STREET • FIFTH FLOOR • NEW YORK CITY • NY 10013 • USA

RUGGED LAND AND COLOPHON ARE TRADEMARKS OF RUGGED LAND, LLC.

Ebook Distribution By
FastPencil PREMIERE
premiere.fastpencil.com

COPYRIGHT © 2002 BY STEVEN PRESSFIELD
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

for
BERNAY

FOREWORD

by Robert McKee

Steven Pressfield wrote *The War of Art* for me. He undoubtedly wrote it for you too, but I know he did it expressly for me because I hold Olympic records for procrastination. I can procrastinate thinking about my procrastination problem. I can procrastinate dealing with my problem of procrastinating thinking about my procrastination problem. So Pressfield, that devil, asked me to write this foreword *against a deadline*, knowing that no matter how much I stalled, eventually I'd have to knuckle down and do the work. At the last possible hour I did, and as I leafed through Book One, "Defining the Enemy," I saw myself staring back guilty-eyed from every page. But then Book Two gave me a battle plan; Book Three, a vision of victory; and as I closed *The War of Art*, I felt a surge of positive calm. I now know I can win this war. And if I can, so can you.

To begin Book One, Pressfield labels the enemy of creativity Resistance, his all-encompassing term for what Freud called the Death Wish—that destructive force inside human nature that rises whenever we consider a tough, long-term course of action that might do for us or others something that's actually good. He then presents a rogue's gallery of the many manifestations of Resistance. You will recognize each and every one, for this force lives within us all—self-sabotage, self-deception, self-corruption. We writers know it as "block," a paralysis whose symptoms can bring on appalling behavior.

Some years ago I was as blocked as a Calcutta sewer, so what did I do? I decided to try on all my clothes. To show just how anal I can get, I put on every shirt, pair of pants, sweater, jacket, and sock, sorting them into piles: spring, summer, fall, winter, Salvation Army. Then I tried them on all over again, this time parsing them into spring casual, spring formal, summer casual . . . Two days of this and I thought I was going mad. Want to know how to cure writer's block? It's not a trip to your psychiatrist. For as Pressfield wisely points out, seeking "support" is Resistance at its most seductive. No, the cure is found in Book Two: "Turning Pro."

Steven Pressfield is the very definition of a pro. I know this because I can't count the times I called the author of *The Legend of Bagger Vance* to invite him for a round of golf, and although tempted, he declined. Why? Because he was working, and as any writer who has ever taken a backswing knows, golf is a beautifully virulent form of procrastination. In other words, Resistance. Steve packs a discipline forged of Bethlehem steel.

I read Steve's *Gates of Fire* and *Tides of War* back-to-back while traveling in Europe. Now, I'm not a lachrymose guy; I hadn't cried over a book since *The Red Pony*, but these novels got to me. I found myself sitting in cafés, choking back tears over the selfless courage of those Greeks who shaped and saved Western civilization. As I looked beneath his seamless prose and sensed his depth of research, of knowledge of human nature and society, of vividly imagined telling details, I was in awe of the work, the work, all the work that built the foundation of his riveting creations. And I'm not alone in this appreciation. When I bought the books in London, I was told that Steve's novels are now assigned by Oxford history dons who tell their students that if they wish to rub shoulders with life in classical Greece, read Pressfield.

How does an artist achieve that power? In the second book Pressfield lays out the day-by-day, step-by-step campaign of the professional: preparation, order, patience, endurance, acting in the face of fear and failure—no excuses, no bullshit. And best of all, Steve’s brilliant insight that first, last, and always, the professional focuses on mastery of the craft.

Book Three, “The Higher Realm,” looks at Inspiration, that sublime result that blossoms in the furrows of the professional who straps on the harness and plows the fields of his or her art. In Pressfield’s words: “When we sit down each day and do our work, power concentrates around us . . . we become like a magnetized rod that attracts iron filings. Ideas come. Insights accrete.” On this, the *effect* of Inspiration, Steve and I absolutely agree. Indeed, stunning images and ideas arrive as if from nowhere. In fact, these seemingly spontaneous flashes are so amazing, it’s hard to believe that our unworthy selves created them. From where, therefore, does our best stuff come?

It’s on this point, however, the *cause* of Inspiration, that we see things differently. In Book One Steve traces Resistance down its evolutionary roots to the genes. I agree. The cause is genetic. That negative force, that dark antagonism to creativity, is embedded deep in our humanity. But in Book Three he shifts gears and looks for the cause of Inspiration not in human nature, but on a “higher realm.” Then with a poetic fire he lays out his belief in muses and angels. The ultimate source of creativity, he argues, is divine. Many, perhaps most readers, will find Book Three profoundly moving.

I, on the other hand, believe that the source of creativity is found on the same plane of reality as Resistance. It, too, is genetic. It’s called talent: the innate power to discover the hidden connection between two things—images, ideas, words—that no one else has ever seen before, link them, and create for the world a third, utterly unique work. Like our IQ, talent is a gift from our ancestors. If we’re lucky, we inherit it. In the fortunate talented few, the dark dimension of their natures will first resist the labor that creativity demands, but once they commit to the task, their talented side stirs to action and rewards them with astonishing feats. These flashes of creative genius seem to arrive from out of the blue for the obvious reason: They come from the unconscious mind. In short, if the Muse exists, she does not whisper to the untalented.

So although Steve and I may differ on the cause, we agree on the effect: When inspiration touches talent, she gives birth to truth and beauty. And when Steven Pressfield was writing *The War of Art*, she had her hands all over him.

THE WAR OF ART

WHAT I DO

I get up, take a shower, have breakfast. I read the paper, brush my teeth. If I have phone calls to make, I make them. I've got my coffee now. I put on my lucky work boots and stitch up the lucky laces that my niece Meredith gave me. I head back to my office, crank up the computer. My lucky hooded sweatshirt is draped over the chair, with the lucky charm I got from a gypsy in Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer for only eight bucks in francs, and my lucky LARGO name tag that came from a dream I once had. I put it on. On my thesaurus is my lucky cannon that my friend Bob Versandi gave me from Morro Castle, Cuba. I point it toward my chair, so it can fire inspiration into me. I say my prayer, which is the Invocation of the Muse from Homer's *Odyssey*, translation by T. E. Lawrence, Lawrence of Arabia, which my dear mate Paul Rink gave me and which sits near my shelf with the cuff links that belonged to my father and my lucky acorn from the battlefield at Thermopylae. It's about ten-thirty now. I sit down and plunge in. When I start making typos, I know I'm getting tired. That's four hours or so. I've hit the point of diminishing returns. I wrap for the day. Copy whatever I've done to disk and stash the disk in the glove compartment of my truck in case there's a fire and I have to run for it. I power down. It's three, three-thirty. The office is closed. How many pages have I produced? I don't care. Are they any good? I don't even think about it. All that matters is I've put in my time and hit it with all I've got. All that counts is that, for this day, for this session, I have overcome Resistance.

WHAT I KNOW

There's a secret that real writers know that wannabe writers don't, and the secret is this: It's not the writing part that's hard. What's hard is sitting down to write.

What keeps us from sitting down is Resistance.

THE UNLIVED LIFE

Most of us have two lives. The life we live, and the unlived life within us. Between the two stands Resistance.

Have you ever brought home a treadmill and let it gather dust in the attic? Ever quit a diet, a course of yoga, a meditation practice? Have you ever bailed out on a call to embark upon a spiritual practice, dedicate yourself to a humanitarian calling, commit your life to the service of others? Have you ever wanted to be a mother, a doctor, an advocate for the weak and helpless; to run for office, crusade for the planet, campaign for world peace, or to preserve the environment? Late at night have you experienced a vision of the person you might become, the work you could accomplish, the realized being you were meant to be? Are you a writer who doesn't write, a painter who doesn't paint, an entrepreneur who never starts a venture? Then you know what Resistance is.

One night I was layin' down,
I heard Papa talkin' to Mama.
I heard Papa say, to let that boy boogie-woogie.
'Cause it's in him and it's got to come out.
—John Lee Hooker, “Boogie Chillen”

Resistance is the most toxic force on the planet. It is the root of more unhappiness than poverty, disease, and erectile dysfunction. To yield to Resistance deforms our spirit. It stunts us and makes us less than we are and were born to be. If you believe in God (and I do) you must declare Resistance evil, for it prevents us from achieving the life God intended when He endowed each of us with our own unique genius. *Genius* is a Latin word; the Romans used it to denote an inner spirit, holy and inviolable, which watches over us, guiding us to our calling. A writer writes with his *genius*; an artist paints with hers; everyone who creates operates from this sacramental center. It is our soul's seat, the vessel that holds our being-in-potential, our star's beacon and Polaris.

Every sun casts a shadow, and genius's shadow is Resistance. As powerful as is our soul's call to realization, so potent are the forces of Resistance arrayed against it. Resistance is faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, harder to kick than crack cocaine. We're not alone if we've been mowed down by Resistance; millions of good men and women have bitten the dust before us. And here's the biggest bitch: We don't even know what hit us. I never did. From age twenty-four to thirty-two, Resistance kicked my ass from East Coast to West and back again thirteen times and I never even knew it existed. I looked everywhere for the enemy and failed to see it right in front of my face.

Have you heard this story: Woman learns she has cancer, six months to live. Within days she quits her job, resumes the dream of writing Tex-Mex songs she gave up to raise a family (or starts studying classical Greek, or moves to the inner city and devotes herself to tending babies with AIDS). Woman's friends think she's crazy; she herself has never been happier. There's a postscript. Woman's cancer goes into remission.

Is that what it takes? Do we have to stare death in the face to make us stand up and confront Resistance? Does Resistance have to cripple and disfigure our lives before we wake up to its existence? How many of us have become drunks and drug addicts, developed tumors and neuroses, succumbed to painkillers, gossip, and compulsive cell-phone use, simply because we don't do that thing that our hearts, our inner genius, is calling us to? Resistance defeats us. If tomorrow morning by some stroke of magic every dazed and benighted soul woke up with the power to take the first step toward pursuing his or her dreams, every shrink in the directory would be out of business. Prisons would stand empty. The alcohol and tobacco industries would collapse, along with the junk food, cosmetic surgery, and infotainment businesses, not to mention pharmaceutical companies, hospitals, and the medical profession from top to bottom. Domestic abuse would become extinct, as would addiction, obesity, migraine headaches, road rage, and dandruff.

Look in your own heart. Unless I'm crazy, right now a still, small voice is piping up, telling you as it has ten thousand times before, the calling that is yours and yours alone. You know it. No one has to tell you. And unless I'm crazy, you're no closer to taking action on it than you were yesterday or will be tomorrow. You think Resistance isn't real? Resistance will bury you.

You know, Hitler wanted to be an artist. At eighteen he took his inheritance, seven hundred kronen, and moved to Vienna to live and study. He applied to the Academy of Fine Arts and later to the School of Architecture. Ever see one of his paintings? Neither have I. Resistance beat him. Call it overstatement but I'll say it anyway: it was easier for Hitler to start World War II than it was for him to face a blank square of canvas.

BOOK ONE

RESISTANCE

Defining the Enemy

The enemy is a very good teacher.
—the Dalai Lama

RESISTANCE'S GREATEST HITS

The following is a list, in no particular order, of those activities that most commonly elicit Resistance:

- 1)The pursuit of any calling in writing, painting, music, film, dance, or any creative art, however marginal or unconventional.
- 2)The launching of any entrepreneurial venture or enterprise, for profit or otherwise.
- 3)Any diet or health regimen.
- 4)Any program of spiritual advancement.
- 5)Any activity whose aim is tighter abdominals.
- 6)Any course or program designed to overcome an unwholesome habit or addiction.
- 7)Education of every kind.
- 8)Any act of political, moral, or ethical courage, including the decision to change for the better some unworthy pattern of thought or conduct in ourselves.
- 9)The undertaking of any enterprise or endeavor whose aim is to help others.
- 10)Any act that entails commitment of the heart. The decision to get married, to have a child, to weather a rocky patch in a relationship.
- 11)The taking of any principled stand in the face of adversity.

In other words, any act that rejects immediate gratification in favor of long-term growth, health, or integrity. Or, expressed another way, any act that derives from our higher nature instead of our lower. Any of these will elicit Resistance.

Now: what are the characteristics of Resistance?

RESISTANCE IS INVISIBLE

Resistance cannot be seen, touched, heard, or smelled. But it can be felt. We experience it as an energy field radiating from a work-in-potential. It's a repelling force. It's negative. Its aim is to shove us away, distract us, prevent us from doing our work.

RESISTANCE IS INTERNAL

Resistance seems to come from outside ourselves. We locate it in spouses, jobs, bosses, kids. “Peripheral opponents,” as Pat Riley used to say when he coached the Los Angeles Lakers.

Resistance is not a peripheral opponent. Resistance arises from within. It is self-generated and self-perpetuated. Resistance is the enemy within.

RESISTANCE IS INSIDIOUS

Resistance will tell you anything to keep you from doing your work. It will perjure, fabricate, falsify; seduce, bully, cajole. Resistance is protean. It will assume any form, if that's what it takes to deceive you. It will reason with you like a lawyer or jam a nine-millimeter in your face like a stickup man. Resistance has no conscience. It will pledge anything to get a deal, then double-cross you as soon as your back is turned. If you take Resistance at its word, you deserve everything you get. Resistance is always lying and always full of shit.

RESISTANCE IS IMPLACABLE

Resistance is like the Alien or the Terminator or the shark in *Jaws*. It cannot be reasoned with. It understands nothing but power. It is an engine of destruction, programmed from the factory with one object only: to prevent us from doing our work. Resistance is implacable, intractable, indefatigable. Reduce it to a single cell and that cell will continue to attack.

This is Resistance's nature. It's all it knows.

RESISTANCE IS IMPERSONAL

Resistance is not out to get you personally. It doesn't know who you are and doesn't care. Resistance is a force of nature. It acts objectively.

Though it feels malevolent, Resistance in fact operates with the indifference of rain and transits the heavens by the same laws as the stars. When we marshal our forces to combat Resistance, we must remember this.

RESISTANCE IS INFALLIBLE

Like a magnetized needle floating on a surface of oil, Resistance will unfailingly point to true North—meaning that calling or action it most wants to stop us from doing.

We can use this. We can use it as a compass. We can navigate by Resistance, letting it guide us to that calling or action that we must follow before all others.

Rule of thumb: The more important a call or action is to our soul's evolution, the more Resistance we will feel toward pursuing it.

RESISTANCE IS UNIVERSAL

We're wrong if we think we're the only ones struggling with Resistance. Everyone who has a body experiences Resistance.

RESISTANCE NEVER SLEEPS

Henry Fonda was still throwing up before each stage performance, even when he was seventy-five. In other words, fear doesn't go away. The warrior and the artist live by the same code of necessity, which dictates that the battle must be fought anew every day.

RESISTANCE PLAYS FOR KEEPS

Resistance's goal is not to wound or disable. Resistance aims to kill. Its target is the epicenter of our being: our genius, our soul, the unique and priceless gift we were put on earth to give and that no one else has but us. Resistance means business. When we fight it, we are in a war to the death.

RESISTANCE IS FUELED BY FEAR

Resistance has no strength of its own. Every ounce of juice it possesses comes from us. We feed it with power by our fear of it. Master that fear and we conquer Resistance.

RESISTANCE ONLY OPPOSES IN ONE DIRECTION

Resistance obstructs movement only from a lower sphere to a higher. It kicks in when we seek to pursue a calling in the arts, launch an innovative enterprise, or evolve to a higher station morally, ethically, or spiritually.

So if you're in Calcutta working with the Mother Teresa Foundation and you're thinking of bolting to launch a career in telemarketing. . . relax. Resistance will give you a free pass.

RESISTANCE IS MOST POWERFUL AT THE FINISH LINE

Odysseus almost got home years before his actual homecoming. Ithaca was in sight, close enough that the sailors could see the smoke of their families' fires on shore. Odysseus was so certain he was safe, he actually lay down for a snooze. It was then that his men, believing there was gold in an ox-hide sack among their commander's possessions, snatched this prize and cut it open. The bag contained the adverse Winds, which King Aeolus had bottled up for Odysseus when the wanderer had touched earlier at his blessed isle. The winds burst forth now in one mad blow, driving Odysseus' ships back across every league of ocean they had with such difficulty traversed, making him endure further trials and sufferings before, at last and alone, he reached home for good.

The danger is greatest when the finish line is in sight. At this point, Resistance knows we're about to beat it. It hits the panic button. It marshals one last assault and slams us with everything it's got.

The professional must be alert for this counterattack. Be wary at the end. Don't open that bag of wind.

RESISTANCE RECRUITS ALLIES

Resistance by definition is self-sabotage. But there's a parallel peril that must also be guarded against: sabotage by others.

When a writer begins to overcome her Resistance—in other words, when she actually starts to write—she may find that those close to her begin acting strange. They may become moody or sullen, they may get sick; they may accuse the awakening writer of “changing,” of “not being the person she was.” The closer these people are to the awakening writer, the more bizarrely they will act and the more emotion they will put behind their actions.

They are trying to sabotage her.

The reason is that they are struggling, consciously or unconsciously, against their own Resistance. The awakening writer's success becomes a reproach to them. If she can beat these demons, why can't they?

Often couples or close friends, even entire families, will enter into tacit compacts whereby each individual pledges (unconsciously) to remain mired in the same slough in which she and all her cronies have become so comfortable. The highest treason a crab can commit is to make a leap for the rim of the bucket.

The awakening artist must be ruthless, not only with herself but with others. Once you make your break, you can't turn around for your buddy who catches his trouser leg on the barbed wire. The best thing you can do for that friend (and he'd tell you this himself, if he really is your friend) is to get over the wall and keep motating.

The best and only thing that one artist can do for another is to serve as an example and an inspiration.

Now, let's consider the next aspect of Resistance: symptoms.

RESISTANCE AND PROCRASTINATION

Procrastination is the most common manifestation of Resistance because it's the easiest to rationalize. We don't tell ourselves, "I'm never going to write my symphony." Instead we say, "I am going to write my symphony; I'm just going to start tomorrow."

RESISTANCE AND PROCRASTINATION, PART TWO

The most pernicious aspect of procrastination is that it can become a habit. We don't just put off our lives today; we put them off till our deathbed.

Never forget: This very moment, we can change our lives. There never was a moment, and never will be, when we are without the power to alter our destiny. This second, we can turn the tables on Resistance.

This second, we can sit down and do our work.

RESISTANCE AND SEX

Sometimes Resistance takes the form of sex, or an obsessive preoccupation with sex. Why sex? Because sex provides immediate and powerful gratification. When someone sleeps with us, we feel validated and approved of, even loved. Resistance gets a big kick out of that. It knows it has distracted us with a cheap, easy fix and kept us from doing our work.

Of course not all sex is a manifestation of Resistance. In my experience, you can tell by the measure of hollowness you feel afterward. The more empty you feel, the more certain you can be that your true motivation was not love or even lust but Resistance.

It goes without saying that this principle applies to drugs, shopping, masturbation, TV, gossip, alcohol, and the consumption of all products containing fat, sugar, salt, or chocolate.

RESISTANCE AND TROUBLE

We get ourselves in trouble because it's a cheap way to get attention. Trouble is a faux form of fame. It's easier to get busted in the bedroom with the faculty chairman's wife than it is to finish that dissertation on the metaphysics of motley in the novellas of Joseph Conrad.

Ill health is a form of trouble, as are alcoholism and drug addiction, proneness to accidents, all neurosis including compulsive screwing-up, and such seemingly benign foibles as jealousy, chronic lateness, and the blasting of rap music at 110 dB from your smoked-glass '95 Supra. Anything that draws attention to ourselves through pain-free or artificial means is a manifestation of Resistance.

Cruelty to others is a form of Resistance, as is the willing endurance of cruelty from others.

The working artist will not tolerate trouble in her life because she knows trouble prevents her from doing her work. The working artist banishes from her world all sources of trouble. She harnesses the urge for trouble and transforms it in her work.

RESISTANCE AND SELF-DRAMATIZATION

Creating soap opera in our lives is a symptom of Resistance. Why put in years of work designing a new software interface when you can get just as much attention by bringing home a boyfriend with a prison record?

Sometimes entire families participate unconsciously in a culture of self-dramatization. The kids fuel the tanks, the grown-ups arm the phasers, the whole starship lurches from one spine-tingling episode to another. And the crew knows how to keep it going. If the level of drama drops below a certain threshold, someone jumps in to amp it up. Dad gets drunk, Mom gets sick, Janie shows up for church with an Oakland Raiders tattoo. It's more fun than a movie. And it works: Nobody gets a damn thing done.

Sometimes I think of Resistance as a sort of evil twin to Santa Claus, who makes his rounds house-to-house, making sure that everything's taken care of. When he comes to a house that's hooked on self-dramatization, his ruddy cheeks glow and he giddy-ups away behind his eight tiny reindeer. He knows there'll be no work done in that house.

RESISTANCE AND SELF-MEDICATION

Do you regularly ingest any substance, controlled or otherwise, whose aim is the alleviation of depression, anxiety, etc.? I offer the following experience:

I once worked as a writer for a big New York ad agency. Our boss used to tell us: Invent a disease. Come up with the disease, he said, and we can sell the cure.

Attention Deficit Disorder, Seasonal Affect Disorder, Social Anxiety Disorder. These aren't diseases, they're marketing ploys. Doctors didn't discover them, copywriters did. Marketing departments did. Drug companies did.

Depression and anxiety may be real. But they can also be Resistance.

When we drug ourselves to blot out our soul's call, we are being good Americans and exemplary consumers. We're doing exactly what TV commercials and pop materialist culture have been brainwashing us to do from birth. Instead of applying self-knowledge, self-discipline, delayed gratification and hard work, we simply consume a product.

Many pedestrians have been maimed or killed at the intersection of Resistance and Commerce.

RESISTANCE AND VICTIMHOOD

Doctors estimate that seventy to eighty percent of their business is non-health-related. People aren't sick, they're self-dramatizing. Sometimes the hardest part of a medical job is keeping a straight face. As Jerry Seinfeld observed of his twenty years of dating: "That's a lot of acting fascinated."

The acquisition of a condition lends significance to one's existence. An illness, a cross to bear. Some people go from condition to condition; they cure one, and another pops up to take its place. The condition becomes a work of art in itself, a shadow version of the real creative act the victim is avoiding by expending so much care cultivating his condition.

A victim act is a form of passive aggression. It seeks to achieve gratification not by honest work or a contribution made out of one's experience or insight or love, but by the manipulation of others through silent (and not-so-silent) threat. The victim compels others to come to his rescue or to behave as he wishes by holding them hostage to the prospect of his own further illness/meltdown/mental dissolution, or simply by threatening to make their lives so miserable that they do what he wants.

Casting yourself as a victim is the antithesis of doing your work. Don't do it. If you're doing it, stop.

RESISTANCE AND THE CHOICE OF A MATE

Sometimes, if we're not conscious of our own Resistance, we'll pick as a mate someone who has or is successfully overcoming Resistance. I'm not sure why. Maybe it's easier to endow our partner with the power that we in fact possess but are afraid to act upon. Maybe it's less threatening to believe that our beloved spouse is worthy to live out his or her unlived life, while we are not. Or maybe we're hoping to use our mate as a model. Maybe we believe (or wish we could) that some of our spouse's power will rub off on us, if we just hang around it long enough.

This is how Resistance disfigures love. The stew it creates is rich, it's colorful; Tennessee Williams could work it up into a trilogy. But is it love? If we're the supporting partner, shouldn't we face our own failure to pursue our unlived life, rather than hitchhike on our spouse's coattails? And if we're the supported partner, shouldn't we step out from the glow of our loved one's adoration and instead encourage him to let his own light shine?

RESISTANCE AND THIS BOOK

When I began this book, Resistance almost beat me. This is the form it took. It told me (the voice in my head) that I was a writer of fiction, not nonfiction, and that I shouldn't be exposing these concepts of Resistance literally and overtly; rather, I should incorporate them metaphorically into a novel. That's a pretty damn subtle and convincing argument. The rationalization Resistance presented me with was that I should write, say, a war piece in which the principles of Resistance were expressed as the fear a warrior feels.

Resistance also told me I shouldn't seek to instruct, or put myself forward as a purveyor of wisdom; that this was vain, egotistical, possibly even corrupt, and that it would work harm to me in the end. That scared me. It made a lot of sense.

What finally convinced me to go ahead was simply that I was so unhappy not going ahead. I was developing symptoms. As soon as I sat down and began, I was okay.

RESISTANCE AND UNHAPPINESS

What does Resistance feel like?

First, unhappiness. We feel like hell. A low-grade misery pervades everything. We're bored, we're restless. We can't get no satisfaction. There's guilt but we can't put our finger on the source. We want to go back to bed; we want to get up and party. We feel unloved and unlovable. We're disgusted. We hate our lives. We hate ourselves.

Unalleviated, Resistance mounts to a pitch that becomes unendurable. At this point vices kick in. Dope, adultery, web surfing.

Beyond that, Resistance becomes clinical. Depression, aggression, dysfunction. Then actual crime and physical self-destruction.

Sounds like life, I know. It isn't. It's Resistance.

What makes it tricky is that we live in a consumer culture that's acutely aware of this unhappiness and has massed all its profit-seeking artillery to exploit it. By selling us a product, a drug, a distraction. John Lennon once wrote:

Well, you think you're so clever
and classless and free
But you're all fucking peasants
As far as I can see

As artists and professionals it is our obligation to enact our own internal revolution, a private insurrection inside our own skulls. In this uprising we free ourselves from the tyranny of consumer culture. We overthrow the programming of advertising, movies, video games, magazines, TV, and MTV by which we have been hypnotized from the cradle. We unplug ourselves from the grid by recognizing that we will never cure our restlessness by contributing our disposable income to the bottom line of Bullshit, Inc., but only by doing our work.

RESISTANCE AND FUNDAMENTALISM

The artist and the fundamentalist both confront the same issue, the mystery of their existence as individuals. Each asks the same questions: Who am I? Why am I here? What is the meaning of my life?

At more primitive stages of evolution, humanity didn't have to deal with such questions. In the states of savagery, of barbarism, in nomadic culture, medieval society, in the tribe and the clan, one's position was fixed by the commandments of the community. It was only with the advent of modernity (starting with the ancient Greeks), with the birth of freedom and of the individual, that such matters ascended to the fore.

These are not easy questions. Who am I? Why am I here? They're not easy because the human being isn't wired to function as an individual. We're wired tribally, to act as part of a group. Our psyches are programmed by millions of years of hunter-gatherer evolution. We know what the clan is; we know how to fit into the band and the tribe. What we don't know is how to be alone. We don't know how to be free individuals.

The artist and the fundamentalist arise from societies at differing stages of development. The artist is the advanced model. His culture possesses affluence, stability, enough excess of resource to permit the luxury of self-examination. The artist is grounded in freedom. He is not afraid of it. He is lucky. He was born in the right place. He has a core of self-confidence, of hope for the future. He believes in progress and evolution. His faith is that humankind is advancing, however haltingly and imperfectly, toward a better world.

The fundamentalist entertains no such notion. In his view, humanity has fallen from a higher state. The truth is not out there awaiting revelation; it has already been revealed. The word of God has been spoken and recorded by His prophet, be he Jesus, Muhammad, or Karl Marx.

Fundamentalism is the philosophy of the powerless, the conquered, the displaced and the dispossessed. Its spawning ground is the wreckage of political and military defeat, as Hebrew fundamentalism arose during the Babylonian captivity, as white Christian fundamentalism appeared in the American South during Reconstruction, as the notion of the Master Race evolved in Germany following World War I. In such desperate times, the vanquished race would perish without a doctrine that restored hope and pride. Islamic fundamentalism ascends from the same landscape of despair and possesses the same tremendous and potent appeal.

What exactly is this despair? It is the despair of freedom. The dislocation and emasculation experienced by the individual cut free from the familiar and comforting structures of the tribe and the clan, the village and the family.

It is the state of modern life.

The fundamentalist (or, more accurately, the beleaguered individual who comes to embrace fundamentalism) cannot stand freedom. He cannot find his way into the future, so he retreats to the past. He returns in imagination to the glory days of his race and seeks to reconstitute both them and himself in their purer, more virtuous light. He gets back to basics. To fundamentals.

Fundamentalism and art are mutually exclusive. There is no such thing as fundamentalist art. This does not mean that the fundamentalist is not creative. Rather, his creativity is inverted. He creates destruction. Even the structures he builds, his schools and networks of organization, are dedicated to annihilation, of his enemies and of himself.

But the fundamentalist reserves his greatest creativity for the fashioning of Satan, the image of his foe, in opposition to which he defines and gives meaning to his own life. Like the artist, the fundamentalist experiences Resistance. He experiences it as temptation to sin. Resistance to the fundamentalist is the call of the Evil One, seeking to seduce him from his virtue. The fundamentalist is consumed with Satan, whom he loves as he loves death. Is it coincidence that the suicide bombers of the World Trade Center frequented strip clubs during their training, or that they conceived of their reward as a squadron of virgin brides and the license to ravish them in the fleshpots of heaven? The fundamentalist hates and fears women because he sees them as vessels of Satan, temptresses like Delilah who seduced Samson from his power.

To combat the call of sin, i.e., Resistance, the fundamentalist plunges either into action or into the study of sacred texts. He loses himself in these, much as the artist does in the process of creation. The difference is that while the one looks forward, hoping to create a better world, the other looks backward, seeking to return to a purer world from which he and all have fallen.

The humanist believes that humankind, as individuals, is called upon to co-create the world with God. This is why he values human life so highly. In his view, things do progress, life does evolve; each individual has value, at least potentially, in advancing this cause. The fundamentalist cannot conceive of this. In his society, dissent is not just crime but apostasy; it is heresy, transgression against God Himself.

When fundamentalism wins, the world enters a dark age. Yet still I can't condemn one who is drawn to this philosophy. I consider my own inner journey, the advantages I've had of education, affluence, family support, health, and the blind good luck to be born American, and still I have learned to exist as an autonomous individual, if indeed I have, only by a whisker, and at a cost I would hate to have to reckon up.

It may be that the human race is not ready for freedom. The air of liberty may be too rarefied for us to breathe. Certainly I wouldn't be writing this book, on this subject, if living with freedom were easy. The paradox seems to be, as Socrates demonstrated long ago, that the truly free individual is free only to the extent of his own self-mastery. While those who will not govern themselves are condemned to find masters to govern over them.

RESISTANCE AND CRITICISM

If you find yourself criticizing other people, you're probably doing it out of Resistance. When we see others beginning to live their authentic selves, it drives us crazy if we have not lived out our own.

Individuals who are realized in their own lives almost never criticize others. If they speak at all, it is to offer encouragement. Watch yourself. Of all the manifestations of Resistance, most only harm ourselves. Criticism and cruelty harm others as well.

RESISTANCE AND SELF-DOUBT

Self-doubt can be an ally. This is because it serves as an indicator of aspiration. It reflects love, love of something we dream of doing, and desire, desire to do it. If you find yourself asking yourself (and your friends), “Am I really a writer? Am I really an artist?” chances are you are.

The counterfeit innovator is wildly self-confident. The real one is scared to death.

RESISTANCE AND FEAR

Are you paralyzed with fear? That's a good sign.

Fear is good. Like self-doubt, fear is an indicator. Fear tells us what we have to do.

Remember our rule of thumb: The more scared we are of a work or calling, the more sure we can be that we have to do it.

Resistance is experienced as fear; the degree of fear equates to the strength of Resistance. Therefore the more fear we feel about a specific enterprise, the more certain we can be that that enterprise is important to us and to the growth of our soul. That's why we feel so much Resistance. If it meant nothing to us, there'd be no Resistance.

Have you ever watched *Inside the Actors Studio*? The host, James Lipton, invariably asks his guests, "What factors make you decide to take a particular role?" The actor always answers: "Because I'm afraid of it."

The professional tackles the project that will make him stretch. He takes on the assignment that will bear him into uncharted waters, compel him to explore unconscious parts of himself.

Is he scared? Hell, yes. He's petrified.

(Conversely, the professional turns down roles that he's done before. He's not afraid of them anymore. Why waste his time?)

So if you're paralyzed with fear, it's a good sign. It shows you what you have to do.

RESISTANCE AND LOVE

Resistance is directly proportional to love. If you're feeling massive Resistance, the good news is, it means there's tremendous love there too. If you didn't love the project that is terrifying you, you wouldn't feel anything. The opposite of love isn't hate; it's indifference.

The more Resistance you experience, the more important your unmanifested art/project/enterprise is to you—and the more gratification you will feel when you finally do it.

RESISTANCE AND BEING A STAR

Grandiose fantasies are a symptom of Resistance. They're the sign of an amateur. The professional has learned that success, like happiness, comes as a by-product of work.

The professional concentrates on the work and allows rewards to come or not come, whatever they like.

RESISTANCE AND ISOLATION

Sometimes we balk at embarking on an enterprise because we're afraid of being alone. We feel comfortable with the tribe around us; it makes us nervous going off into the woods on our own.

Here's the trick: We're never alone. As soon as we step outside the campfire glow, our Muse lights on our shoulder like a butterfly. The act of courage calls forth infallibly that deeper part of ourselves that supports and sustains us.

Have you seen interviews with the young John Lennon or Bob Dylan, when the reporter tries to ask about their personal selves? The boys deflect these queries with withering sarcasm. Why? Because Lennon and Dylan know that the part of them that writes the songs is not "them," not the personal self that is of such surpassing fascination to their boneheaded interrogators. Lennon and Dylan also know that the part of themselves that does the writing is too sacred, too precious, too fragile to be redacted into sound bites for the titillation of would-be idolators (who are themselves caught up in their own Resistance). So they put them on and blow them off.

It is a commonplace among artists and children at play that they're not aware of time or solitude while they're chasing their vision. The hours fly. The sculptress and the tree-climbing tyke both look up blinking when Mom calls, "Suppertime!"

RESISTANCE AND ISOLATION, PART TWO

Friends sometimes ask, “Don’t you get lonely sitting by yourself all day?” At first it seemed odd to hear myself answer No. Then I realized that I was not alone; I was in the book; I was with the characters. I was with my Self.

Not only do I not feel alone with my characters; they are more vivid and interesting to me than the people in my real life. If you think about it, the case can’t be otherwise. In order for a book (or any project or enterprise) to hold our attention for the length of time it takes to unfold itself, it has to plug into some internal perplexity or passion that is of paramount importance to us. That problem becomes the theme of our work, even if we can’t at the start understand or articulate it. As the characters arise, each embodies infallibly an aspect of that dilemma, that perplexity. These characters might not be interesting to anyone else but they’re absolutely fascinating to us. They are us. Meaner, smarter, sexier versions of ourselves. It’s fun to be with them because they’re wrestling with the same issue that has its hooks into us. They’re our soul mates, our lovers, our best friends. Even the villains. Especially the villains.

Even in a book like this, which has no characters, I don’t feel alone because I’m imagining the reader, whom I conjure as an aspiring artist much like my own younger, less grizzled self, to whom I hope to impart a little starch and inspiration and prime, a little, with some hard-knocks wisdom and a few tricks of the trade.

RESISTANCE AND HEALING

Have you ever spent time in Santa Fe? There's a subculture of "healing" there. The idea is that there's something therapeutic in the atmosphere. A safe place to go and get yourself together. There are other places (Santa Barbara and Ojai, California, come to mind), usually populated by upper-middle-class people with more time and money than they know what to do with, in which a culture of healing also obtains. The concept in all these environments seems to be that one needs to complete his healing before he is ready to do his work.

This way of thinking (are you ahead of me?) is a form of Resistance.

What are we trying to heal, anyway? The athlete knows the day will never come when he wakes up pain-free. He has to play hurt.

Remember, the part of us that we imagine needs healing is not the part we create from; that part is far deeper and stronger. The part we create from can't be touched by anything our parents did, or society did. That part is unsullied, uncorrupted; soundproof, waterproof, and bulletproof. In fact, the more troubles we've got, the better and richer that part becomes.

The part that needs healing is our personal life. Personal life has nothing to do with work. Besides, what better way of healing than to find our center of self-sovereignty? Isn't that the whole point of healing?

I washed up in New York a couple of decades ago, making twenty bucks a night driving a cab and running away full-time from doing my work. One night, alone in my \$110-a-month sublet, I hit bottom in terms of having diverted myself into so many phony channels so many times that I couldn't rationalize it for one more evening. I dragged out my ancient Smith-Corona, dreading the experience as pointless, fruitless, meaningless, not to say the most painful exercise I could think of. For two hours I made myself sit there, torturing out some trash that I chucked immediately into the shitcan. That was enough. I put the machine away. I went back to the kitchen. In the sink sat ten days of dishes. For some reason I had enough excess energy that I decided to wash them. The warm water felt pretty good. The soap and sponge were doing their thing. A pile of clean plates began rising in the drying rack. To my amazement I realized I was whistling.

It hit me that I had turned a corner.

I was okay.

I would be okay from here on.

Do you understand? I hadn't written anything good. It might be years before I would, if I ever did at all. That didn't matter. What counted was that I had, after years of running from it, actually

sat down and done my work.

Don't get me wrong. I've got nothing against true healing. We all need it. But it has nothing to do with doing our work and it can be a colossal exercise in Resistance. Resistance loves "healing." Resistance knows that the more psychic energy we expend dredging and re-dredging the tired, boring injustices of our personal lives, the less juice we have to do our work.

RESISTANCE AND SUPPORT

Have you ever been to a workshop? These boondoggles are colleges of Resistance. They ought to give out Ph.D.'s in Resistance. What better way of avoiding work than going to a workshop? But what I hate even worse is the word *support*.

Seeking support from friends and family is like having your people gathered around at your deathbed. It's nice, but when the ship sails, all they can do is stand on the dock waving goodbye.

Any support we get from persons of flesh and blood is like Monopoly money; it's not legal tender in that sphere where we have to do our work. In fact, the more energy we spend stoking up on support from colleagues and loved ones, the weaker we become and the less capable of handling our business.

My friend Carol had the following dream, at a time when her life felt like it was careening out of control:

She was a passenger on a bus. Bruce Springsteen was driving. Suddenly Springsteen pulled over, handed Carol the keys, and bolted. In the dream Carol was panicking. How could she drive this huge rolling Greyhound? By now all the passengers were staring. Clearly no one else was gonna step forward and take charge. Carol took the wheel. To her amazement, she found she could handle it.

Later, analyzing the dream, she figured Bruce Springsteen was "The Boss." The boss of her psyche. The bus was the vehicle of her life. The Boss was telling Carol it was time to take the wheel. More than that, the dream, by actually setting her down in the driver's seat and letting her feel that she could control the vehicle on the road, was providing her with a simulator run, to prime her with the confidence that she could actually take command in her life.

A dream like that is real support. It's a check you can cash when you sit down, alone, to do your work.

P.S. When your deeper Self delivers a dream like that, don't talk about it. Don't dilute its power. The dream is for you. It's between you and your Muse. Shut up and use it.

The only exception is, you may share it with another comrade-in-arms, if sharing it will help or encourage that comrade in his or her own endeavors.

RESISTANCE AND RATIONALIZATION

Rationalization is Resistance's right-hand man. Its job is to keep us from feeling the shame we would feel if we truly faced what cowards we are for not doing our work.

MICHAEL

Don't knock rationalization. Where would we be without it? I don't know anyone who can get through the day without two or three juicy rationalizations. They're more important than sex.

SAM

Aw, come on! Nothing's more important than sex.

MICHAEL

Oh yeah? Have you ever gone a week without a rationalization?

—Jeff Goldblum and Tom Berenger,
in Lawrence Kasdan's *The Big Chill*

But rationalization has its own sidekick. It's that part of our psyche that actually believes what rationalization tells us.

It's one thing to lie to ourselves. It's another thing to believe it.

RESISTANCE AND RATIONALIZATION, PART TWO

Resistance is fear. But Resistance is too cunning to show itself naked in this form. Why? Because if Resistance lets us see clearly that our own fear is preventing us from doing our work, we may feel shame at this. And shame may drive us to act in the face of fear.

Resistance doesn't want us to do this. So it brings in Rationalization. Rationalization is Resistance's spin doctor. It's Resistance's way of hiding the Big Stick behind its back. Instead of showing us our fear (which might shame us and impel us to do our work), Resistance presents us with a series of plausible, rational justifications for why we shouldn't do our work.

What's particularly insidious about the rationalizations that Resistance presents to us is that a lot of them are true. They're legitimate. Our wife may really be in her eighth month of pregnancy; she may in truth need us at home. Our department may really be instituting a changeover that will eat up hours of our time. Indeed it may make sense to put off finishing our dissertation, at least till after the baby's born.

What Resistance leaves out, of course, is that all this means diddly. Tolstoy had thirteen kids and wrote *War and Peace*. Lance Armstrong had cancer and won the Tour de France three years and counting.

RESISTANCE CAN BE BEATEN

If Resistance couldn't be beaten, there would be no Fifth Symphony, no *Romeo and Juliet*, no Golden Gate Bridge. Defeating Resistance is like giving birth. It seems absolutely impossible until you remember that women have been pulling it off successfully, with support and without, for fifty million years.

BOOK TWO

COMBATING RESISTANCE

Turning Pro

It is one thing to study war
and another to live the warrior's life.

—Telamon of Arcadia,
mercenary of the fifth century B.C.

PROFESSIONALS AND AMATEURS

Aspiring artists defeated by Resistance share one trait. They all think like amateurs. They have not yet turned pro.

The moment an artist turns pro is as epochal as the birth of his first child. With one stroke, everything changes. I can state absolutely that the term of my life can be divided into two parts: before turning pro, and after.

To be clear: When I say professional, I don't mean doctors and lawyers, those of "the professions." I mean the Professional as an ideal. The professional in contrast to the amateur. Consider the differences.

The amateur plays for fun. The professional plays for keeps.

To the amateur, the game is his avocation. To the pro it's his vocation.

The amateur plays part-time, the professional full-time.

The amateur is a weekend warrior. The professional is there seven days a week.

The word *amateur* comes from the Latin root meaning "to love." The conventional interpretation is that the amateur pursues his calling out of love, while the pro does it for money. Not the way I see it. In my view, the amateur does not love the game enough. If he did, he would not pursue it as a sideline, distinct from his "real" vocation.

The professional loves it so much he dedicates his life to it. He commits full-time.

That's what I mean when I say turning pro.

Resistance hates it when we turn pro.

A PROFESSIONAL

Someone once asked Somerset Maugham if he wrote on a schedule or only when struck by inspiration. “I write only when inspiration strikes,” he replied. “Fortunately it strikes every morning at nine o’clock sharp.”

That’s a pro.

In terms of Resistance, Maugham was saying, “I despise Resistance; I will not let it faze me; I will sit down and do my work.”

Maugham reckoned another, deeper truth: that by performing the mundane physical act of sitting down and starting to work, he set in motion a mysterious but infallible sequence of events that would produce inspiration, as surely as if the goddess had synchronized her watch with his.

He knew if he built it, she would come.

WHAT A WRITER'S DAY FEELS LIKE

I wake up with a gnawing sensation of dissatisfaction. Already I feel fear. Already the loved ones around me are starting to fade. I interact. I'm present. But I'm not.

I'm not thinking about the work. I've already consigned that to the Muse. What I am aware of is Resistance. I feel it in my guts. I afford it the utmost respect, because I know it can defeat me on any given day as easily as the need for a drink can overcome an alcoholic

I go through the chores, the correspondence, the obligations of daily life. Again I'm there but not really. The clock is running in my head; I know I can indulge in daily crap for a little while, but I must cut it off when the bell rings.

I'm keenly aware of the Principle of Priority, which states (a) you must know the difference between what is urgent and what is important, and (b) you must do what's important first.

What's important is the work. That's the game I have to suit up for. That's the field on which I have to leave everything I've got.

Do I really believe that my work is crucial to the planet's survival? Of course not. But it's as important to me as catching that mouse is to the hawk circling outside my window. He's hungry. He needs a kill. So do I.

I'm done with my chores now. It's time. I say my prayer and head out on the hunt.

The sun isn't up yet; it's cold; the fields are sopping. Brambles scratch my ankles, branches snap back in my face. The hill is a sonofabitch but what can you do? Set one foot in front of another and keep climbing.

An hour passes. I'm warmer now, the pace has got my blood going. The years have taught me one skill: how to be miserable. I know how to shut up and keep humping. This is a great asset because it's human, the proper role for a mortal. It does not offend the gods, but elicits their intercession. My bitching self is receding now. The instincts are taking over. Another hour passes. I turn the corner of a thicket and there he is: the nice fat hare I knew would show up if I just kept plugging.

Home from the hill, I thank the immortals and offer up their portion of the kill. They brought it to me; they deserve their share. I am grateful.

I joke with my kids beside the fire. They're happy; the old man has brought home the bacon. The old lady's happy; she's cooking it up. I'm happy; I've earned my keep on the planet, at least for this day.

Resistance is not a factor now. I don't think of the hunt and I don't think of the office. The tension drains from my neck and back. What I feel and say and do this night will not be coming from any disowned or unresolved part of me, any part corrupted by Resistance.

I go to sleep content, but my final thought is of Resistance. I will wake up with it tomorrow. Already I am steeling myself.

HOW TO BE MISERABLE

In my younger days dodging the draft, I somehow wound up in the Marine Corps. There's a myth that Marine training turns baby-faced recruits into bloodthirsty killers. Trust me, the Marine Corps is not that efficient. What it does teach, however, is a lot more useful.

The Marine Corps teaches you how to be miserable.

This is invaluable for an artist.

Marines love to be miserable. Marines derive a perverse satisfaction from having colder chow, crappier equipment, and higher casualty rates than any outfit of dogfaces, swab jockeys or flyboys, all of whom they despise. Why? Because these candy asses don't know how to be miserable.

The artist committing himself to his calling has volunteered for hell, whether he knows it or not. He will be dining for the duration on a diet of isolation, rejection, self-doubt, despair, ridicule, contempt, and humiliation.

The artist must be like that Marine. He has to know how to be miserable. He has to love being miserable. He has to take pride in being more miserable than any soldier or swabbie or jet jockey. Because this is war, baby. And war is hell.

WE'RE ALL PROS ALREADY

All of us are pros in one area: our jobs.

We get a paycheck. We work for money. We are professionals.

Now: Are there principles we can take from what we're already successfully doing in our workaday lives and apply to our artistic aspirations? What exactly are the qualities that define us as professionals?

1) *We show up every day.* We might do it only because we have to, to keep from getting fired. But we do it. We show up every day.

2) *We show up no matter what.* In sickness and in health, come hell or high water, we stagger in to the factory. We might do it only so as not to let down our co-workers, or for other, less noble reasons. But we do it. We show up no matter what.

3) *We stay on the job all day.* Our minds may wander, but our bodies remain at the wheel. We pick up the phone when it rings, we assist the customer when he seeks our help. We don't go home till the whistle blows.

4) *We are committed over the long haul.* Next year we may go to another job, another company, another country. But we'll still be working. Until we hit the lottery, we are part of the labor force.

5) *The stakes for us are high and real.* This is about survival, feeding our families, educating our children. It's about eating.

6) *We accept remuneration for our labor.* We're not here for fun. We work for money.

7) *We do not overidentify with our jobs.* We may take pride in our work, we may stay late and come in on weekends, but we recognize that we are not our job descriptions. The amateur, on the other hand, overidentifies with his avocation, his artistic aspiration. He defines himself by it. He is a musician, a painter, a playwright. Resistance loves this. Resistance knows that the amateur composer will never write his symphony because he is overly invested in its success and overterrified of its failure. The amateur takes it so seriously it paralyzes him.

8) *We master the technique of our jobs.*

9) *We have a sense of humor about our jobs.*

10) *We receive praise or blame in the real world.*

Now consider the amateur: the aspiring painter, the wannabe playwright. How does he pursue his calling?

One, he doesn't show up every day. Two, he doesn't show up no matter what. Three, he doesn't stay on the job all day. He is not committed over the long haul; the stakes for him are illusory and fake. He does not get money. And he overidentifies with his art. He does not have a sense of humor about failure. You don't hear him bitching, "This fucking trilogy is killing me!" Instead, he doesn't write his trilogy at all.

The amateur has not mastered the technique of his art. Nor does he expose himself to judgment in the real world. If we show our poem to our friend and our friend says, "It's wonderful, I love it," that's not real-world feedback, that's our friend being nice to us. Nothing is as empowering as real-world validation, even if it's for failure.

The first professional writing job I ever had, after seventeen years of trying, was on a movie called *King Kong Lives*. I and my partner-at-the-time, Ron Shusett (a brilliant writer and producer who also did *Alien* and *Total Recall*) hammered out the screenplay for Dino DeLaurentiis. We loved it; we were sure we had a hit. Even after we'd seen the finished film, we were certain it was a blockbuster. We invited everyone we knew to the premiere, even rented out the joint next door for a post-triumph blowout. Get there early, we warned our friends, the place'll be mobbed.

Nobody showed. There was only one guy in line beside our guests and he was muttering something about spare change. In the theater, our friends endured the movie in mute stupefaction. When the lights came up, they fled like cockroaches into the night.

Next day came the review in *Variety*: ". . . Ronald Shusett and Steven Pressfield; we hope these are not their real names, for their parents' sake." When the first week's grosses came in, the flick barely registered. Still I clung to hope. Maybe it's only tanking in urban areas, maybe it's playing better in the burbs. I motored to an Edge City multiplex. A youth manned the popcorn booth. "How's *King Kong Lives*?" I asked. He flashed thumbs-down. "Miss it, man. It sucks."

I was crushed. Here I was, forty-two years old, divorced, childless, having given up all normal human pursuits to chase the dream of being a writer; now I've finally got my name on a big-time Hollywood production starring Linda Hamilton, and what happens? I'm a loser, a phony; my life is worthless, and so am I.

My friend Tony Keppelman snapped me out of it by asking if I was gonna quit. Hell, no! "Then be happy. You're where you wanted to be, aren't you? So you're taking a few blows. That's the price for being in the arena and not on the sidelines. Stop complaining and be grateful."

That was when I realized I had become a pro. I had not yet had a success. But I had had a real failure.

FOR LOVE OF THE GAME

To clarify a point about professionalism: The professional, though he accepts money, does his work out of love. He has to love it. Otherwise he wouldn't devote his life to it of his own free will.

The professional has learned, however, that too much love can be a bad thing. Too much love can make him choke. The seeming detachment of the professional, the cold-blooded character to his demeanor, is a compensating device to keep him from loving the game so much that he freezes in action. Playing for money, or adopting the attitude of one who plays for money, lowers the fever.

Remember what we said about fear, love, and Resistance. The more you love your art/calling/enterprise, the more important its accomplishment is to the evolution of your soul, the more you will fear it and the more Resistance you will experience facing it. The payoff of playing-the-game-for-money is not the money (which you may never see anyway, even after you turn pro). The payoff is that playing the game for money produces the proper professional attitude. It inculcates the lunch-pail mentality, the hard-core, hard-head, hard-hat state of mind that shows up for work despite rain or snow or dark of night and slugs it out day after day.

The writer is an infantryman. He knows that progress is measured in yards of dirt extracted from the enemy one day, one hour, one minute at a time and paid for in blood. The artist wears combat boots. He looks in the mirror and sees GI Joe. Remember, the Muse favors working stiffs. She hates prima donnas. To the gods the supreme sin is not rape or murder, but pride. To think of yourself as a mercenary, a gun for hire, implants the proper humility. It purges pride and preciousness.

Resistance loves pride and preciousness. Resistance says, "Show me a writer who's too good to take Job X or Assignment Y and I'll show you a guy I can crack like a walnut."

Technically, the professional takes money. Technically, the pro plays for pay. But in the end, he does it for love.

Now let's consider: What are the aspects of the Professional?

A PROFESSIONAL IS PATIENT

Resistance outwits the amateur with the oldest trick in the book: It uses his own enthusiasm against him. Resistance gets us to plunge into a project with an overambitious and unrealistic timetable for its completion. It knows we can't sustain that level of intensity. We will hit the wall. We will crash.

The professional, on the other hand, understands delayed gratification. He is the ant, not the grasshopper; the tortoise, not the hare. Have you heard the legend of Sylvester Stallone staying up three nights straight to churn out the screenplay for *Rocky*? I don't know, it may even be true. But it's the most pernicious species of myth to set before the awakening writer, because it seduces him into believing he can pull off the big score without pain and without persistence.

The professional arms himself with patience, not only to give the stars time to align in his career, but to keep himself from flaming out in each individual work. He knows that any job, whether it's a novel or a kitchen remodel, takes twice as long as he thinks and costs twice as much. He accepts that. He recognizes it as reality.

The professional steels himself at the start of a project, reminding himself it is the Iditarod, not the sixty-yard dash. He conserves his energy. He prepares his mind for the long haul. He sustains himself with the knowledge that if he can just keep those huskies mushing, sooner or later the sled will pull in to Nome.

A PROFESSIONAL SEEKS ORDER

When I lived in the back of my Chevy van, I had to dig my typewriter out from beneath layers of tire tools, dirty laundry, and moldering paperbacks. My truck was a nest, a hive, a hellhole on wheels whose sleeping surface I had to clear each night just to carve out a foxhole to snooze in.

The professional cannot live like that. He is on a mission. He will not tolerate disorder. He eliminates chaos from his world in order to banish it from his mind. He wants the carpet vacuumed and the threshold swept, so the Muse may enter and not soil her gown.

A PROFESSIONAL DEMYSTIFIES

A pro views her work as craft, not art. Not because she believes art is devoid of a mystical dimension. On the contrary. She understands that all creative endeavor is holy, but she doesn't dwell on it. She knows if she thinks about that too much, it will paralyze her. So she concentrates on technique. The professional masters how, and leaves what and why to the gods. Like Somerset Maugham she doesn't wait for inspiration, she acts in the anticipation of its apparition. The professional is acutely aware of the intangibles that go into inspiration. Out of respect for them, she lets them work. She grants them their sphere while she concentrates on hers.

The sign of the amateur is overglorification of and preoccupation with the mystery.

The professional shuts up. She doesn't talk about it. She does her work.

A PROFESSIONAL REINVENTS HIMSELF

Goldie Hawn once observed that there are only three ages for an actress in Hollywood: “Babe, D.A., and Driving Miss Daisy.” She was making a different point, but the truth remains: As artists we serve the Muse, and the Muse may have more than one job for us over our lifetime.

The professional does not permit himself to become hidebound within one incarnation, however comfortable or successful. Like a transmigrating soul, he shucks his outworn body and dons a new one. He continues his journey.

On Writing

By

Stephen King

——— A Memoir of the Craft ———

Scribner

On Writing
By
Stephen King

——— A Memoir of the Craft ———

Scribner



SCRIBNER
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020
www.SimonandSchuster.com

Copyright © 2000 by Stephen King

All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form.

SCRIBNER and design are trademarks of Macmillan Library

Reference USA, Inc., used under license by Simon & Schuster, the publisher of this work.

DESIGNED BY ERICH HOBGING

Set in Garamond No. 3

Visit our website at:

www.SimonSays.com

ISBN 0-743-21153-7
eISBN: 978-0-743-21153-6

Author's Note

Unless otherwise attributed, all prose examples, both good and evil, were composed by the author.

Permissions

There Is a Mountain words and music by Donovan Leitch. Copyright © 1967 by Donovan (Music) Ltd. Administered by Peer International Corporation. Copyright renewed. International copyright secured. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Granpa Was a Carpenter by John Prine © Walden Music, Inc. (ASCAP).

All rights administered by WB Music Corp. All rights reserved. Used by permission. Warner Bros. Publications U.S. Inc., Miami, FL 33014.

Honesty's the best policy.

—Miguel de Cervantes

Liars prosper.

—Anonymous

First Foreword

In the early nineties (it might have been 1992, but it's hard to remember when you're having a good time) I joined a rock-and-roll band composed mostly of writers. The Rock Bottom Remainders were the brainchild of Kathi Kamen Goldmark, a book publicist and musician from San Francisco. The group included Dave Barry on lead guitar, Ridley Pearson on bass, Barbara Kingsolver on keyboards, Robert Fulghum on mandolin, and me on rhythm guitar. There was also a trio of "chick singers," *à la* the Dixie Cups, made up (usually) of Kathi, Tad Bartimus, and Amy Tan.

The group was intended as a one-shot deal—we would play two shows at the American Booksellers Convention, get a few laughs, recapture our misspent youth for three or four hours, then go our separate ways.

It didn't happen that way, because the group never quite broke up. We found that we liked playing together too much to quit, and with a couple of "ringer" musicians on sax and drums (plus, in the early days, our musical guru, Al Kooper, at the heart of the group), we sounded pretty good. You'd pay to hear us. Not a lot, not U2 or E Street Band prices, but maybe what the oldtimers call "roadhouse money." We took the group on tour, wrote a book about it (my wife took the photos and danced whenever the spirit took her, which was quite often), and continue to play now and then, sometimes as The Remainders, sometimes as Raymond Burr's Legs. The personnel comes and goes—columnist Mitch Albom has replaced Barbara on keyboards, and Al doesn't play with the group anymore 'cause he and Kathi don't get along—but the core has remained Kathi, Amy, Ridley, Dave, Mitch Albom, and me ... plus Josh Kelly on drums and Erasmo Paolo on sax.

We do it for the music, but we also do it for the companionship. We like each other, and we like having a chance to talk sometimes about the real job, the day job people are always telling us not to quit. We are writers, and we never ask one another where we get our ideas; we know we don't know.

One night while we were eating Chinese before a gig in Miami Beach, I asked Amy if there was any one question she was *never* asked during the Q-and-A that follows almost every writer's talk—that question you never get to answer when you're standing in front of a group of author-struck fans and pretending you don't put your pants on one leg at a time like everyone else. Amy paused, thinking it over very carefully, and then said: "No one ever asks about the language."

I owe an immense debt of gratitude to her for saying that. I had been playing with the idea of writing a little book about writing for a year or more at that time, but had held back because I didn't trust my own motivations—*why* did I want to write about writing? What made me think I had anything worth saying?

The easy answer is that someone who has sold as many books of fiction as I have must have *something* worthwhile to say about writing it, but the easy answer isn't always the truth. Colonel Sanders sold a hell of a lot of fried chicken, but I'm not sure anyone wants to know how he made it. If I was going to be presumptuous enough to tell people how to write, I felt there had to be a better reason than my popular success. Put another way, I didn't want to write a book, even a

short one like this, that would leave me feeling like either a literary gas-bag or a transcendental asshole. There are enough of those books—and those writers—on the market already, thanks.

But Amy was right: nobody ever asks about the language. They ask the DeLillos and the Updikes and the Styrons, but they don't ask popular novelists. Yet many of us proles also care about the language, in our humble way, and care passionately about the art and craft of telling stories on paper. What follows is an attempt to put down, briefly and simply, how I came to the craft, what I know about it now, and how it's done. It's about the day job; it's about the language.

This book is dedicated to Amy Tan, who told me in a very simple and direct way that it was okay to write it.

Second Foreword

This is a short book because most books about writing are filled with bullshit. Fiction writers, present company included, don't understand very much about what they do—not why it works when it's good, not why it doesn't when it's bad. I figured the shorter the book, the less the bullshit.

One notable exception to the bullshit rule is *The Elements of Style*, by William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White. There is little or no detectable bullshit in that book. (Of course it's short; at eighty-five pages it's much shorter than this one.) I'll tell you right now that every aspiring writer should read *The Elements of Style*. Rule 17 in the chapter titled Principles of Composition is "Omit needless words." I will try to do that here.

Third Foreword

One rule of the road not directly stated elsewhere in this book: "The editor is always right." The corollary is that no writer will take all of his or her editor's advice; for all have sinned and fallen short of editorial perfection. Put another way, to write is human, to edit is divine. Chuck Verrill edited this book, as he has so many of my novels. And as usual, Chuck, you were divine.

—Steve

C.V.

I was stunned by Mary Karr's memoir, *The Liars' Club*. Not just by its ferocity, its beauty, and by her delightful grasp of the vernacular, but by its *totality*—she is a woman who remembers *everything* about her early years.

I'm not that way. I lived an odd, herky-jerky childhood, raised by a single parent who moved around a lot in my earliest years and who—I am not completely sure of this—may have farmed my brother and me out to one of her sisters for awhile because she was economically or emotionally unable to cope with us for a time. Perhaps she was only chasing our father, who piled up all sorts of bills and then did a runout when I was two and my brother David was four. If so, she never succeeded in finding him. My mom, Nellie Ruth Pillsbury King, was one of America's early liberated women, but not by choice.

Mary Karr presents her childhood in an almost unbroken panorama. Mine is a fogged-out landscape from which occasional memories appear like isolated trees ... the kind that look as if they might like to grab and eat you.

What follows are some of those memories, plus assorted snapshots from the somewhat more coherent days of my adolescence and young manhood. This is not an autobiography. It is, rather, a kind of *curriculum vitae*—my attempt to show how one writer was formed. Not how one writer was *made*; I don't believe writers *can* be made, either by circumstances or by self-will (although I did believe those things once). The equipment comes with the original package. Yet it is by no means unusual equipment; I believe large numbers of people have at least some talent as writers and storytellers, and that those talents can be strengthened and sharpened. If I didn't believe that, writing a book like this would be a waste of time.

This is how it was for me, that's all—a disjointed growth process in which ambition, desire, luck, and a little talent all played a part. Don't bother trying to read between the lines, and don't look for a through-line. There are *no* lines—only snapshots, most out of focus.

– 1 –

My earliest memory is of imagining I was someone else—imagining that I was, in fact, the Ringling Brothers Circus Strongboy. This was at my Aunt Ethelyn and Uncle Oren's house in Durham, Maine. My aunt remembers this quite clearly, and says I was two and a half or maybe three years old.

I had found a cement cinderblock in a corner of the garage and had managed to pick it up. I carried it slowly across the garage's smooth cement floor, except in my mind I was dressed in an animal skin singlet (probably a leopard skin) and carrying the cinderblock across the center ring. The vast crowd was silent. A brilliant blue-white spotlight marked my remarkable progress. Their wondering faces told the story: never had they seen such an incredibly strong kid. "And he's only *two*!" someone muttered in disbelief.

Unknown to me, wasps had constructed a small nest in the lower half of the cinderblock. One of them, perhaps pissed off at being relocated, flew out and stung me on the ear. The pain was brilliant, like a poisonous inspiration. It was the worst pain I had ever suffered in my short life, but it only held the top spot for a few seconds. When I dropped the cinderblock on one bare foot,

mashing all five toes, I forgot all about the wasp. I can't remember if I was taken to the doctor, and neither can my Aunt Ethelyn (Uncle Oren, to whom the Evil Cinderblock surely belonged, is almost twenty years dead), but she remembers the sting, the mashed toes, and my reaction. "How you howled, Stephen!" she said. "You were certainly in fine voice that day."

- 2 -

A year or so later, my mother, my brother, and I were in West De Pere, Wisconsin. I don't know why. Another of my mother's sisters, Cal (a WAAC beauty queen during World War II), lived in Wisconsin with her convivial beer-drinking husband, and maybe Mom had moved to be near them. If so, I don't remember seeing much of the Weimers. *Any* of them, actually. My mother was working, but I can't remember what her job was, either. I want to say it was a bakery she worked in, but I think that came later, when we moved to Connecticut to live near her sister Lois and *her* husband (no beer for Fred, and not much in the way of conviviality, either; he was a crewcut daddy who was proud of driving his convertible with the top *up*, God knows why).

There was a stream of babysitters during our Wisconsin period. I don't know if they left because David and I were a handful, or because they found better-paying jobs, or because my mother insisted on higher standards than they were willing to rise to; all I know is that there were a lot of them. The only one I remember with any clarity is Eula, or maybe she was Beulah. She was a teenager, she was as big as a house, and she laughed a lot. Eula-Beulah had a wonderful sense of humor, even at four I could recognize that, but it was a *dangerous* sense of humor—there seemed to be a potential thunderclap hidden inside each hand-patting, butt-rocking, head-tossing outburst of glee. When I see those hidden-camera sequences where real-life babysitters and nannies just all of a sudden wind up and clout the kids, it's my days with Eula-Beulah I always think of.

Was she as hard on my brother David as she was on me? I don't know. He's not in any of these pictures. Besides, he would have been less at risk from Hurricane Eula-Beulah's dangerous winds; at six, he would have been in the first grade and off the gunnery range for most of the day.

Eula-Beulah would be on the phone, laughing with someone, and beckon me over. She would hug me, tickle me, get me laughing, and then, still laughing, go upside my head hard enough to knock me down. Then she would tickle me with her bare feet until we were both laughing again.

Eula-Beulah was prone to farts—the kind that are both loud and smelly. Sometimes when she was so afflicted, she would throw me on the couch, drop her wool-skirted butt on my face, and let loose. "Pow!" she'd cry in high glee. It was like being buried in marshgas fireworks. I remember the dark, the sense that I was suffocating, and I remember laughing. Because, while what was happening was sort of horrible, it was also sort of funny. In many ways, Eula-Beulah prepared me for literary criticism. After having a two-hundred-pound babysitter fart on your face and yell *Pow!*, *The Village Voice* holds few terrors.

I don't know what happened to the other sitters, but Eula-Beulah was fired. It was because of the eggs. One morning Eula-Beulah fried me an egg for breakfast. I ate it and asked for another one. Eula-Beulah fried me a second egg, then asked if I wanted another one. She had a look in her eye that said, "You don't *dare* eat another one, Stevie." So I asked for another one. And another one. And so on. I stopped after seven, I think—seven is the number that sticks in my mind, and quite

clearly. Maybe we ran out of eggs. Maybe I cried off. Or maybe Eula-Beulah got scared. I don't know, but probably it was good that the game ended at seven. Seven eggs is quite a few for a four-year-old.

I felt all right for awhile, and then I yarked all over the floor. Eula-Beulah laughed, then went upside my head, then shoved me into the closet and locked the door. Pow. If she'd locked me in the bathroom, she might have saved her job, but she didn't. As for me, I didn't really mind being in the closet. It was dark, but it smelled of my mother's Coty perfume, and there was a comforting line of light under the door.

I crawled to the back of the closet, Mom's coats and dresses brushing along my back. I began to belch—long loud belches that burned like fire. I don't remember being sick to my stomach but I must have been, because when I opened my mouth to let out another burning belch, I yarked again instead. All over my mother's shoes. That was the end for Eula-Beulah. When my mother came home from work that day, the babysitter was fast asleep on the couch and little Stevie was locked in the closet, fast asleep with half-digested fried eggs drying in his hair.

– 3 –

Our stay in West De Pere was neither long nor successful. We were evicted from our third-floor apartment when a neighbor spotted my six-year-old brother crawling around on the roof and called the police. I don't know where my mother was when this happened. I don't know where the babysitter of the week was, either. I only know that I was in the bathroom, standing with my bare feet on the heater, watching to see if my brother would fall off the roof or make it back into the bathroom okay. He made it back. He is now fifty-five and living in New Hampshire.

– 4 –

When I was five or six, I asked my mother if she had ever seen anyone die. Yes, she said, she had seen one person die and had heard another one. I asked how you could hear a person die and she told me that it was a girl who had drowned off Prout's Neck in the 1920s. She said the girl swam out past the rip, couldn't get back in, and began screaming for help. Several men tried to reach her, but that day's rip had developed a vicious undertow, and they were all forced back. In the end they could only stand around, tourists and townies, the teenager who became my mother among them, waiting for a rescue boat that never came and listening to that girl scream until her strength gave out and she went under. Her body washed up in New Hampshire, my mother said. I asked how old the girl was. Mom said she was fourteen, then read me a comic book and packed me off to bed. On some other day she told me about the one she saw—a sailor who jumped off the roof of the Graymore Hotel in Portland, Maine, and landed in the street.

"He splattered," my mother said in her most matter-of-fact tone. She paused, then added, "The stuff that came out of him was green. I have never forgotten it."

That makes two of us, Mom.

– 5 –

Most of the nine months I should have spent in the first grade I spent in bed. My problems started with the measles—a perfectly ordinary case—and then got steadily worse. I had bout after bout of what I mistakenly thought was called “stripe throat” I lay in bed drinking cold water and imagining my throat in alternating stripes of red and white (this was probably not so far wrong).

At some point my ears became involved, and one day my mother called a taxi (she did not drive) and took me to a doctor too important to make house calls—an ear specialist. (For some reason I got the idea that this sort of doctor was called an otologist.) I didn’t care whether he specialized in ears or assholes. I had a fever of a hundred and four degrees, and each time I swallowed, pain lit up the sides of my face like a jukebox.

The doctor looked in my ears, spending most of his time (I think) on the left one. Then he laid me down on his examining table. “Lift up a minute, Stevie,” his nurse said, and put a large absorbent cloth—it might have been a diaper—under my head, so that my cheek rested on it when I lay back down. I should have guessed that something was rotten in Denmark. Who knows, maybe I did.

There was a sharp smell of alcohol. A clank as the ear doctor opened his sterilizer. I saw the needle in his hand—it looked as long as the ruler in my school pencil-box—and tensed. The ear doctor smiled reassuringly and spoke the lie for which doctors should be immediately jailed (time of incarceration to be doubled when the lie is told to a child): “Relax, Stevie, this won’t hurt.” I believed him.

He slid the needle into my ear and punctured my eardrum with it. The pain was beyond anything I have ever felt since—the only thing close was the first month of recovery after being struck by a van in the summer of 1999. That pain was longer in duration but not so intense. The puncturing of my eardrum was pain beyond the world. I screamed. There was a sound inside my head—a loud kissing sound. Hot fluid ran out of my ear—it was as if I had started to cry out of the wrong hole. God knows I was crying enough out of the right ones by then. I raised my streaming face and looked unbelieving at the ear doctor and the ear doctor’s nurse. Then I looked at the cloth the nurse had spread over the top third of the exam table. It had a big wet patch on it. There were fine tendrils of yellow pus on it as well.

“There,” the ear doctor said, patting my shoulder. “You were very brave, Stevie, and it’s all over.”

The next week my mother called another taxi, we went back to the ear doctor’s, and I found myself once more lying on my side with the absorbent square of cloth under my head. The ear doctor once again produced the smell of alcohol—a smell I still associate, as I suppose many people do, with pain and sickness and terror—and with it, the long needle. He once more assured me that it wouldn’t hurt, and I once more believed him. Not completely, but enough to be quiet while the needle slid into my ear.

It *did* hurt. Almost as much as the first time, in fact. The smooching sound in my head was louder, too; this time it was giants kissing (“suckin’ face and rotatin’ tongues,” as we used to say). “There,” the ear doctor’s nurse said when it was over and I lay there crying in a puddle of watery pus. “It only hurts a little, and you don’t want to be deaf, do you? Besides, it’s all over.”

I believed that for about five days, and then another taxi came. We went back to the ear doctor’s. I remember the cab driver telling my mother that he was going to pull over and let us out if she

couldn't shut that kid up.

Once again it was me on the exam table with the diaper under my head and my mom out in the waiting room with a magazine she was probably incapable of reading (or so I like to imagine). Once again the pungent smell of alcohol and the doctor turning to me with a needle that looked as long as my school ruler. Once more the smile, the approach, the assurance that *this* time it wouldn't hurt.

Since the repeated eardrum-lancings when I was six, one of my life's firmest principles has been this: Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me. Fool me three times, shame on both of us. The third time on the ear doctor's table I struggled and screamed and thrashed and fought. Each time the needle came near the side of my face, I knocked it away. Finally the nurse called my mother in from the waiting room, and the two of them managed to hold me long enough for the doctor to get his needle in. I screamed so long and so loud that I can still hear it. In fact, I think that in some deep valley of my head that last scream is still echoing.

– 6 –

In a dull cold month not too long after that—it would have been January or February of 1954, if I've got the sequence right—the taxi came again. This time the specialist wasn't the ear doctor but a throat doctor. Once again my mother sat in the waiting room, once again I sat on the examining table with a nurse hovering nearby, and once again there was that sharp smell of alcohol, an aroma that still has the power to double my heartbeat in the space of five seconds.

All that appeared this time, however, was some sort of throat swab. It stung, and it tasted awful, but after the ear doctor's long needle it was a walk in the park. The throat doctor donned an interesting gadget that went around his head on a strap. It had a mirror in the middle, and a bright fierce light that shone out of it like a third eye. He looked down my gullet for a long time, urging me to open wider until my jaws creaked, but he did not put needles into me and so I loved him. After awhile he allowed me to close my mouth and summoned my mother.

"The problem is his tonsils," the doctor said. "They look like a cat clawed them. They'll have to come out."

At some point after that, I remember being wheeled under bright lights. A man in a white mask bent over me. He was standing at the head of the table I was lying on (1953 and 1954 were my years for lying on tables), and to me he looked upside down.

"Stephen," he said. "Can you hear me?"

I said I could.

"I want you to breathe deep," he said. "When you wake up, you can have all the ice cream you want."

He lowered a gadget over my face. In the eye of my memory, it looks like an outboard motor. I took a deep breath, and everything went black. When I woke up I was indeed allowed all the ice cream I wanted, which was a fine joke on me because I didn't want any. My throat felt swollen and fat. But it was better than the old needle-in-the-ear trick. Oh yes. *Anything* would have been better than the old needle-in-the-ear trick. Take my tonsils if you have to, put a steel birdcage on my leg if you must, but God save me from the otologist.

– 7 –

That year my brother David jumped ahead to the fourth grade and I was pulled out of school entirely. I had missed too much of the first grade, my mother and the school agreed; I could start it fresh in the fall of the year, if my health was good.

Most of that year I spent either in bed or housebound. I read my way through approximately six tons of comic books, progressed to Tom Swift and Dave Dawson (a heroic World War II pilot whose various planes were always “prop-clawing for altitude”), then moved on to Jack London’s bloodcurdling animal tales. At some point I began to write my own stories. Imitation preceded creation; I would copy *Combat Casey* comics word for word in my Blue Horse tablet, sometimes adding my own descriptions where they seemed appropriate. “They were camped in a big dratty farmhouse room,” I might write; it was another year or two before I discovered that *drat* and *draft* were different words. During that same period I remember believing that *details* were *dentals* and that a bitch was an extremely tall woman. A son of a bitch was apt to be a basketball player. When you’re six, most of your Bingo balls are still floating around in the draw-tank.

Eventually I showed one of these copycat hybrids to my mother, and she was charmed—I remember her slightly amazed smile, as if she was unable to believe a kid of hers could be so smart—practically a damned prodigy, for God’s sake. I had never seen that look on her face before—not on my account, anyway—and I absolutely loved it.

She asked me if I had made the story up myself, and I was forced to admit that I had copied most of it out of a funny-book. She seemed disappointed, and that drained away much of my pleasure. At last she handed back my tablet. “Write one of your own, Stevie,” she said. “Those *Combat Casey* funny-books are just junk—he’s always knocking someone’s teeth out. I bet you could do better. Write one of your own.”

– 8 –

I remember an immense feeling of *possibility* at the idea, as if I had been ushered into a vast building filled with closed doors and had been given leave to open any I liked. There were more doors than one person could ever open in a lifetime, I thought (and still think).

I eventually wrote a story about four magic animals who rode around in an old car, helping out little kids. Their leader was a large white bunny named Mr. Rabbit Trick. He got to drive the car. The story was four pages long, laboriously printed in pencil. No one in it, so far as I can remember, jumped from the roof of the Graymore Hotel. When I finished, I gave it to my mother, who sat down in the living room, put her pocketbook on the floor beside her, and read it all at once. I could tell she liked it—she laughed in all the right places—but I couldn’t tell if that was because she liked me and wanted me to feel good or because it really *was* good.

“You didn’t copy this one?” she asked when she had finished. I said no, I hadn’t. She said it was good enough to be in a book. Nothing anyone has said to me since has made me feel any happier. I wrote four more stories about Mr. Rabbit Trick and his friends. She gave me a quarter apiece for them and sent them around to her four sisters, who pitied her a little, I think. *They* were all still married, after all; their men had stuck. It was true that Uncle Fred didn’t have much sense of humor and was stubborn about keeping the top of his convertible up, it was also true that Uncle

Oren drank quite a bit and had dark theories about how the Jews were running the world, but they were *there*. Ruth, on the other hand, had been left holding the baby when Don ran out. She wanted them to see that he was a talented baby, at least.

Four stories. A quarter apiece. That was the first buck I made in this business.

- 9 -

We moved to Stratford, Connecticut. By then I was in the second grade and stone in love with the pretty teenage girl who lived next door. She never looked twice at me in the daytime, but at night, as I lay in bed and drifted toward sleep, we ran away from the cruel world of reality again and again. My new teacher was Mrs. Taylor, a kind lady with gray Elsa Lanchester—*Bride of Frankenstein* hair and protruding eyes. “When we’re talking I always want to cup my hands under Mrs. Taylor’s peepers in case they fall out,” my mom said.

Our new third-floor apartment was on West Broad Street. A block down the hill, not far from Teddy’s Market and across from Burrets Building Materials, was a huge tangled wilderness area with a junkyard on the far side and a train track running through the middle. This is one of the places I keep returning to in my imagination; it turns up in my books and stories again and again, under a variety of names. The kids in *It* called it the Barrens; we called it the jungle. Dave and I explored it for the first time not long after we had moved into our new place. It was summer. It was hot. It was great. We were deep into the green mysteries of this cool new playground when I was struck by an urgent need to move my bowels.

“Dave,” I said. “Take me home! I have to push!” (This was the word we were given for this particular function.)

David didn’t want to hear it. “Go do it in the woods,” he said. It would take at least half an hour to walk me home, and he had no intention of giving up such a shining stretch of time just because his little brother had to take a dump.

“I can’t!” I said, shocked by the idea. “I won’t be able to wipe!”

“Sure you will,” Dave said. “Wipe yourself with some leaves. That’s how the cowboys and Indians did it.”

By then it was probably too late to get home, anyway; I have an idea I was out of options. Besides, I was enchanted by the idea of shitting like a cowboy. I pretended I was Hopalong Cassidy, squatting in the underbrush with my gun drawn, not to be caught unawares even at such a personal moment. I did my business, and took care of the cleanup as my older brother had suggested, carefully wiping my ass with big handfuls of shiny green leaves. These turned out to be poison ivy.

Two days later I was bright red from the backs of my knees to my shoulderblades. My penis was spared, but my testicles turned into stoplights. My ass itched all the way up to my ribcage, it seemed. Yet worst of all was the hand I had wiped with; it swelled to the size of Mickey Mouse’s after Donald Duck has bopped it with a hammer, and gigantic blisters formed at the places where the fingers rubbed together. When they burst they left deep divots of raw pink flesh. For six weeks I sat in lukewarm starch baths, feeling miserable and humiliated and stupid, listening through the open door as my mother and brother laughed and listened to Peter Tripp’s countdown on the radio and played Crazy Eights.

– 10 –

Dave was a great brother, but too smart for a ten-year-old. His brains were always getting him in trouble, and he learned at some point (probably after I had wiped my ass with poison ivy) that it was usually possible to get Brother Stevie to join him in the point position when trouble was in the wind. Dave never asked me to shoulder *all* the blame for his often brilliant fuck-ups—he was neither a sneak nor a coward—but on several occasions I was asked to share it. Which was, I think, why we both got in trouble when Dave dammed up the stream running through the jungle and flooded much of lower West Broad Street. Sharing the blame was also the reason we both ran the risk of getting killed while implementing his potentially lethal school science project.

This was probably 1958. I was at Center Grammar School; Dave was at Stratford Junior High. Mom was working at the Stratford Laundry, where she was the only white lady on the mangle crew. That's what she was doing—feeding sheets into the mangle—while Dave constructed his Science Fair project. My big brother wasn't the sort of boy to content himself drawing frog-diagrams on construction paper or making The House of the Future out of plastic Tyco bricks and painted toilet-tissue rolls; Dave aimed for the stars. His project that year was Dave's Super Duper Electromagnet. My brother had great affection for things which were super duper and things which began with his own name; this latter habit culminated with *Dave's Rag*, which we will come to shortly.

His first stab at the Super Duper Electromagnet wasn't very super duper; in fact, it may not have worked at all—I don't remember for sure. It *did* come out of an actual book, rather than Dave's head, however. The idea was this: you magnetized a spike nail by rubbing it against a regular magnet. The magnetic charge imparted to the spike would be weak, the book said, but enough to pick up a few iron filings. After trying this, you were supposed to wrap a length of copper wire around the barrel of the spike, and attach the ends of the wire to the terminals of a dry-cell battery. According to the book, the electricity would strengthen the magnetism, and you could pick up a lot more iron filings.

Dave didn't just want to pick up a stupid pile of metal flakes, though; Dave wanted to pick up Buicks, railroad boxcars, possibly Army transport planes. Dave wanted to turn on the juice and move the world in its orbit.

Pow! Super!

We each had our part to play in creating the Super Duper Electromagnet. Dave's part was to build it. My part would be to test it. Little Stevie King, Stratford's answer to Chuck Yeager.

Dave's new version of the experiment bypassed the pokey old dry cell (which was probably flat anyway when we bought it at the hardware store, he reasoned) in favor of actual wall-current. Dave cut the electrical cord off an old lamp someone had put out on the curb with the trash, stripped the coating all the way down to the plug, then wrapped his magnetized spike in spirals of bare wire. Then, sitting on the floor in the kitchen of our West Broad Street apartment, he offered me the Super Duper Electromagnet and bade me do my part and plug it in.

I hesitated—give me at least that much credit—but in the end, Dave's manic enthusiasm was too much to withstand. I plugged it in. There was no noticeable magnetism, but the gadget *did* blow out every light and electrical appliance in our apartment, every light and electrical appliance in the building, and every light and electrical appliance in the building next door (where my dream-

girl lived in the ground-floor apartment). Something popped in the electrical transformer out front, and some cops came. Dave and I spent a horrible hour watching from our mother's bedroom window, the only one that looked out on the street (all the others had a good view of the grassless, turd-studded yard behind us, where the only living thing was a mangy canine named Roop-Roop). When the cops left, a power truck arrived. A man in spiked shoes climbed the pole between the two apartment houses to examine the transformer. Under other circumstances, this would have absorbed us completely, but not that day. That day we could only wonder if our mother would come and see us in reform school. Eventually, the lights came back on and the power truck went away. We were not caught and lived to fight another day. Dave decided he might build a Super Duper Glider instead of a Super Duper Electromagnet for his science project. I, he told me, would get to take the first ride. Wouldn't that be great?

– 11 –

I was born in 1947 and we didn't get our first television until 1958. The first thing I remember watching on it was *Robot Monster*, a film in which a guy dressed in an ape-suit with a goldfish bowl on his head—Ro-Man, he was called—ran around trying to kill the last survivors of a nuclear war. I felt this was art of quite a high nature.

I also watched *Highway Patrol* with Broderick Crawford as the fearless Dan Matthews, and *One Step Beyond*, hosted by John Newland, the man with the world's spookiest eyes. There was *Cheyenne* and *Sea Hunt*, *Your Hit Parade* and *Annie Oakley*; there was Tommy Rettig as the first of Lassie's many friends, Jock Mahoney as *The Range Rider*, and Andy Devine yowling, "Hey, Wild Bill, wait for me!" in his odd, high voice. There was a whole world of vicarious adventure which came packaged in black-and-white, fourteen inches across and sponsored by brand names which still sound like poetry to me. I loved it all.

But TV came relatively late to the King household, and I'm glad. I am, when you stop to think of it, a member of a fairly select group: the final handful of American novelists who learned to read and write before they learned to eat a daily helping of video bullshit. This might not be important. On the other hand, if you're just starting out as a writer, you could do worse than strip your television's electric plug-wire, wrap a spike around it, and then stick it back into the wall. See what blows, and how far.

Just an idea.

– 12 –

In the late 1950s, a literary agent and compulsive science fiction memorabilia collector named Forrest J. Ackerman changed the lives of thousands of kids—I was one—when he began editing a magazine called *Famous Monsters of Filmland*. Ask anyone who has been associated with the fantasy-horror-science fiction genres in the last thirty years about this magazine, and you'll get a laugh, a flash of the eyes, and a stream of bright memories—I practically guarantee it.

Around 1960, Forry (who sometimes referred to himself as "the Ackermmonster") spun off the short-lived but interesting *Spacemen*, a magazine which covered science fiction films. In 1960, I sent a story to *Spacemen*. It was, as well as I can remember, the first story I ever submitted for

publication. I don't recall the title, but I was still in the Ro-Man phase of my development, and this particular tale undoubtedly owed a great deal to the killer ape with the goldfish bowl on his head.

My story was rejected, but Forry kept it. (Forry keeps *everything*, which anyone who has ever toured his house—the Ackermansion—will tell you.) About twenty years later, while I was signing autographs at a Los Angeles bookstore, Forry turned up in line ... with my story, single-spaced and typed with the long-vanished Royal typewriter my mom gave me for Christmas the year I was eleven. He wanted me to sign it to him, and I guess I did, although the whole encounter was so surreal I can't be completely sure. Talk about your ghosts. Man oh man.

– 13 –

The first story I did actually publish was in a horror fanzine issued by Mike Garrett of Birmingham, Alabama (Mike is still around, and still in the biz). He published this novella under the title “In a Half-World of Terror,” but I still like my title much better. Mine was “I Was a Teen-Age Grave-robber.” Super Duper! Pow!

– 14 –

My first really original story idea—you always know the first one, I think—came near the end of Ike's eight-year reign of benignity. I was sitting at the kitchen table of our house in Durham, Maine, and watching my mother stick sheets of S&H Green Stamps into a book. (For more colorful stories about Green Stamps, see *The Liars' Club*.) Our little family troika had moved back to Maine so our mom could take care of her parents in their declining years. Mama was about eighty at that time, obese and hypertensive and mostly blind; Daddy Guy was eighty-two, scrawny, morose, and prone to the occasional Donald Duck outburst which only my mother could understand. Mom called Daddy Guy “Fazza.”

My mother's sisters had gotten my mom this job, perhaps thinking they could kill two birds with one stone—the aged Ps would be taken care of in a homey environment by a loving daughter, and The Nagging Problem of Ruth would be solved. She would no longer be adrift, trying to take care of two boys while she floated almost aimlessly from Indiana to Wisconsin to Connecticut, baking cookies at five in the morning or pressing sheets in a laundry where the temperatures often soared to a hundred and ten in the summer and the foreman gave out salt pills at one and three every afternoon from July to the end of September.

She hated her new job, I think—in their effort to take care of her, her sisters turned our self-sufficient, funny, slightly nutty mother into a sharecropper living a largely cashless existence. The money the sisters sent her each month covered the groceries but little else. They sent boxes of clothes for us. Toward the end of each summer, Uncle Clayt and Aunt Ella (who were not, I think, real relatives at all) would bring cartons of canned vegetables and preserves. The house we lived in belonged to Aunt Ethelyn and Uncle Oren. And once she was there, Mom was caught. She got another actual job after the old folks died, but she lived in that house until the cancer got her. When she left Durham for the last time—David and his wife Linda cared for her during the final weeks of her final illness—I have an idea she was probably more than ready to go.

– 15 –

Let's get one thing clear right now, shall we? There is no Idea Dump, no Story Central, no Island of the Buried Bestsellers; good story ideas seem to come quite literally from nowhere, sailing at you right out of the empty sky: two previously unrelated ideas come together and make something new under the sun. Your job isn't to find these ideas but to recognize them when they show up.

On the day this particular idea—the first really good one—came sailing at me, my mother remarked that she needed six more books of stamps to get a lamp she wanted to give her sister Molly for Christmas, and she didn't think she would make it in time. "I guess it will have to be for her birthday, instead," she said. "These cussed things always look like a lot until you stick them in a book." Then she crossed her eyes and ran her tongue out at me. When she did, I saw her tongue was S&H green. I thought how nice it would be if you could make those damned stamps in your basement, and in that instant a story called "Happy Stamps" was born. The concept of counterfeiting Green Stamps and the sight of my mother's green tongue created it in an instant.

The hero of my story was your classic Poor Schmuck, a guy named Roger who had done jail time twice for counterfeiting money—one more bust would make him a three-time loser. Instead of money, he began to counterfeit Happy Stamps ... except, he discovered, the design of Happy Stamps was so moronically simple that he wasn't really counterfeiting at all; he was creating reams of the actual article. In a funny scene—probably the first really competent scene I ever wrote—Roger sits in the living room with his old mom, the two of them mooning over the Happy Stamps catalogue while the printing press runs downstairs, ejecting bale after bale of those same trading stamps.

"Great Scott!" Mom says. "According to the fine print, you can get *anything* with Happy Stamps, Roger—you tell them what you want, and they figure out how many books you need to get it. Why, for six or seven million books, we could probably get a Happy Stamps house in the suburbs!"

Roger discovers, however, that although the *stamps* are perfect, the *glue* is defective. If you lap the stamps and stick them in the book they're fine, but if you send them through a mechanical licker, the pink Happy Stamps turn blue. At the end of the story, Roger is in the basement, standing in front of a mirror. Behind him, on the table, are roughly ninety books of Happy Stamps, each book filled with individually licked sheets of stamps. Our hero's lips are pink. He runs out his tongue; that's even pinker. Even his teeth are turning pink. Mom calls cheerily down the stairs, saying she has just gotten off the phone with the Happy Stamps National Redemption Center in Terre Haute, and the lady said they could probably get a nice Tudor home in Weston for only eleven million, six hundred thousand books of Happy Stamps.

"That's nice, Mom," Roger says. He looks at himself a moment longer in the mirror, lips pink and eyes bleak, then slowly returns to the table. Behind him, billions of Happy Stamps are stuffed into basement storage bins. Slowly, our hero opens a fresh stamp-book, then begins to lick sheets and stick them in. Only eleven million, five hundred and ninety thousand books to go, he thinks as the story ends, and Mom can have her Tudor.

There were things wrong with this story (the biggest hole was probably Roger's failure simply to

start over with a different glue), but it was cute, it was fairly original, and I knew I had done some pretty good writing. After a long time spent studying the markets in my beat-up *Writer's Digest*, I sent "Happy Stamps" off to *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*. It came back three weeks later with a form rejection slip attached. This slip bore Alfred Hitchcock's unmistakable profile in red ink and wished me good luck with my story. At the bottom was an unsigned jotted message, the only personal response I got from *AHMM* over eight years of periodic submissions. "Don't staple manuscripts," the postscript read. "Loose pages plus paperclip equal correct way to submit copy." This was pretty cold advice, I thought, but useful in its way. I have never stapled a manuscript since.

– 16 –

My room in our Durham house was upstairs, under the eaves. At night I could lie in bed beneath one of these eaves—if I sat up suddenly, I was apt to whack my head a good one—and read by the light of a gooseneck lamp that put an amusing boa constrictor of shadow on the ceiling. Sometimes the house was quiet except for the whoosh of the furnace and the patter of rats in the attic; sometimes my grandmother would spend an hour or so around midnight yelling for someone to check Dick—she was afraid he hadn't been fed. Dick, a horse she'd had in her days as a schoolteacher, was at least forty years dead. I had a desk beneath the room's other eave, my old Royal typewriter, and a hundred or so paperback books, mostly science fiction, which I lined up along the baseboard. On my bureau was a Bible won for memorizing verses in Methodist Youth Fellowship and a Webcor phonograph with an automatic changer and a turntable covered in soft green velvet. On it I played my records, mostly 45s by Elvis, Chuck Berry, Freddy Cannon, and Fats Domino. I liked Fats; he knew how to rock, and you could tell he was having fun.

When I got the rejection slip from *AHMM*, I pounded a nail into the wall above the Webcor, wrote "Happy Stamps" on the rejection slip, and poked it onto the nail. Then I sat on my bed and listened to Fats sing "I'm Ready." I felt pretty good, actually. When you're still too young to shave, optimism is a perfectly legitimate response to failure.

By the time I was fourteen (and shaving twice a week whether I needed to or not) the nail in my wall would no longer support the weight of the rejection slips impaled upon it. I replaced the nail with a spike and went on writing. By the time I was sixteen I'd begun to get rejection slips with handwritten notes a little more encouraging than the advice to stop using staples and start using paperclips. The first of these hopeful notes was from Algis Budrys, then the editor of *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, who read a story of mine called "The Night of the Tiger" (the inspiration was, I think, an episode of *The Fugitive* in which Dr. Richard Kimble worked as an attendant cleaning out cages in a zoo or a circus) and wrote: "This is good. Not for us, but good. You have talent. Submit again."

Those four brief sentences, scribbled by a fountain pen that left big ragged blotches in its wake, brightened the dismal winter of my sixteenth year. Ten years or so later, after I'd sold a couple of novels, I discovered "The Night of the Tiger" in a box of old manuscripts and thought it was still a perfectly respectable tale, albeit one obviously written by a guy who had only begun to learn his chops. I rewrote it and on a whim resubmitted it to *F&SF*. This time they bought it. One thing I've noticed is that when you've had a little success, magazines are a lot less apt to use that

phrase, “Not for us.”

– 17 –

Although he was a year younger than his classmates, my big brother was bored with high school. Some of this had to do with his intellect—Dave’s IQ tested in the 150s or 160s—but I think it was mostly his restless nature. For Dave, high school just wasn’t super duper enough—there was no pow, no wham, no *fun*. He solved the problem, at least temporarily, by creating a newspaper which he called *Dave’s Rag*.

The *Rag*’s office was a table located in the dirt-floored, rock-walled, spider-infested confines of our basement, somewhere north of the furnace and east of the root-cellar, where Clayt and Ella’s endless cartons of preserves and canned vegetables were kept. The *Rag* was an odd combination of family newsletter and small-town bi-weekly. Sometimes it was a monthly, if Dave got sidetracked by other interests (maple-sugaring, cider-making, rocket-building, and car-customizing, just to name a few), and then there would be jokes I didn’t understand about how Dave’s *Rag* was a little late this month or how we shouldn’t bother Dave, because he was down in the basement, on the *Rag*.

Jokes or no jokes, circulation rose slowly from about five copies per issue (sold to nearby family members) to something like fifty or sixty, with our relatives and the relatives of neighbors in our small town (Durham’s population in 1962 was about nine hundred) eagerly awaiting each new edition. A typical number would let people know how Charley Harrington’s broken leg was mending, what guest speakers might be coming to the West Durham Methodist Church, how much water the King boys were hauling from the town pump to keep from draining the well behind the house (of course it went dry every fucking summer no matter how much water we hauled), who was visiting the Browns or the Halls on the other side of Methodist Corners, and whose relatives were due to hit town each summer. Dave also included sports, word-games, weather reports (“It’s been pretty dry, but local farmer Harold Davis says if we don’t have at least one good rain in August he will smile and kiss a pig”), recipes, a continuing story (I wrote that), and Dave’s Jokes and Humor, which included nuggets like these:

Stan: “What did the beaver say to the oak tree?”

Jan: “It was nice gnawing you!”

1st Beatnik: “How do you get to Carnegie Hall?”

2nd Beatnik: “Practice man practice!”

During the *Rag*’s first year, the print was purple—those issues were produced on a flat plate of jelly called a hectograph. My brother quickly decided the hectograph was a pain in the butt. It was just too slow for him. Even as a kid in short pants, Dave hated to be halted. Whenever Milt, our mom’s boyfriend (“Sweeter than smart,” Mom said to me one day a few months after she dropped him), got stuck in traffic or at a stoplight, Dave would lean over from the back seat of Milt’s Buick and yell, “Drive over em, Uncle Milt! Drive over em!”

As a teenager, waiting for the hectograph to “freshen” between pages printed (while

“freshening,” the print would melt into a vague purple membrane which hung in the jelly like a manatee’s shadow) drove David all but insane with impatience. Also, he badly wanted to add photographs to the newspaper. He took good ones, and by age sixteen he was developing them, as well. He rigged a darkroom in a closet and from its tiny, chemical-stinking confines produced pictures which were often startling in their clarity and composition (the photo on the back of *The Regulators*, showing me with a copy of the magazine containing my first published story, was taken by Dave with an old Kodak and developed in his closet darkroom).

In addition to these frustrations, the flats of hectograph jelly had a tendency to incubate and support colonies of strange, sporelike growths in the unsavory atmosphere of our basement, no matter how meticulous we were about covering the damned old slowcoach thing once the day’s printing chores were done. What looked fairly ordinary on Monday sometimes looked like something out of an H. P. Lovecraft horror tale by the weekend.

In Brunswick, where he went to high school, Dave found a shop with a small drum printing press for sale. It worked—barely. You typed up your copy on stencils which could be purchased in a local office-supply store for nineteen cents apiece—my brother called this chore “cutting stencil,” and it was usually my job, as I was less prone to make typing errors. The stencils were attached to the drum of the press, lathered up with the world’s stinkiest, oogiest ink, and then you were off to the races—crank ’til your arm falls off, son. We were able to put together in two nights what had previously taken a week with the hectograph, and while the drum-press was messy, it did not look infected with a potentially fatal disease. *Dave’s Rag* entered its brief golden age.

– 18 –

I wasn’t much interested in the printing process, and I wasn’t interested at all in the arcana of first developing and then reproducing photographs. I didn’t care about putting Hearst shifters in cars, making cider, or seeing if a certain formula would send a plastic rocket into the stratosphere (usually they didn’t even make it over the house). What I cared about most between 1958 and 1966 was movies.

As the fifties gave way to the sixties, there were only two movie theaters in the area, both in Lewiston. The Empire was the first-run house, showing Disney pictures, Bible epics, and musicals in which widescreen ensembles of well-scrubbed folks danced and sang. I went to these if I had a ride—a movie was a movie, after all—but I didn’t like them very much. They were boringly wholesome. They were predictable. During *The Parent Trap*, I kept hoping Hayley Mills would run into Vic Morrow from *The Blackboard Jungle*. That would have livened things up a little, by God. I felt that one look at Vic’s switchblade knife and gimlet gaze would have put Hayley’s piddling domestic problems in some kind of reasonable perspective. And when I lay in bed at night under my eave, listening to the wind in the trees or the rats in the attic, it was not Debbie Reynolds as Tammy or Sandra Dee as Gidget that I dreamed of, but Yvette Vickers from *Attack of the Giant Leeches* or Luana Anders from *Dementia 13*. Never mind sweet; never mind uplifting; never mind Snow White and the Seven Goddam Dwarfs. At thirteen I wanted monsters that ate whole cities, radioactive corpses that came out of the ocean and ate surfers, and girls in black bras who looked like trailer trash.

Horror movies, science fiction movies, movies about teenage gangs on the prowl, movies about

losers on motorcycles—this was the stuff that turned my dials up to ten. The place to get all of this was not at the Empire, on the upper end of Lisbon Street, but at the Ritz, down at the lower end, amid the pawnshops and not far from Louie's Clothing, where in 1964 I bought my first pair of Beatle boots. The distance from my house to the Ritz was fourteen miles, and I hitch-hiked there almost every weekend during the eight years between 1958 and 1966, when I finally got my driver's license. Sometimes I went with my friend Chris Chesley, sometimes I went alone, but unless I was sick or something, I always went. It was at the Ritz that I saw *I Married a Monster from Outer Space*, with Tom Tryon; *The Haunting*, with Claire Bloom and Julie Harris; *The Wild Angels*, with Peter Fonda and Nancy Sinatra. I saw Olivia de Havilland put out James Caan's eyes with makeshift knives in *Lady in a Cage*, saw Joseph Cotten come back from the dead in *Hush ... Hush*, *Sweet Charlotte*, and watched with held breath (and not a little prurient interest) to see if Allison Hayes would grow all the way out of her clothes in *Attack of the 50 Ft. Woman*. At the Ritz, all the finer things in life were available ... or *might be* available, if you only sat in the third row, paid close attention, and did not blink at the wrong moment.

Chris and I liked just about any horror movie, but our faves were the string of American-International films, most directed by Roger Corman, with titles cribbed from Edgar Allan Poe. I wouldn't say *based upon* the works of Edgar Allan Poe, because there is little in any of them which has anything to do with Poe's actual stories and poems (*The Raven* was filmed as a comedy—no kidding). And yet the best of them—*The Haunted Palace*, *The Conqueror Worm*, *The Masque of the Red Death*—achieved a hallucinatory eeriness that made them special. Chris and I had our own name for these films, one that made them into a separate genre. There were westerns, there were love stories, there were war stories ... and there were Poepictures.

"Wanna hitch to the show Saturday afternoon?" Chris would ask. "Go to the Ritz?"

"What's on?" I'd ask.

"A motorcycle picture and a Poepicture," he'd say. I, of course, was on that combo like white on rice. Bruce Dern going batshit on a Harley and Vincent Price going batshit in a haunted castle overlooking a restless ocean: who could ask for more? You might even get Hazel Court wandering around in a lacy low-cut nightgown, if you were lucky.

Of all the Poepictures, the one that affected Chris and me the most deeply was *The Pit and the Pendulum*. Written by Richard Matheson and filmed in both widescreen and Technicolor (color horror pictures were still a rarity in 1961, when this one came out), *Pit* took a bunch of standard gothic ingredients and turned them into something special. It might have been the last really great studio horror picture before George Romero's ferocious indie *The Night of the Living Dead* came along and changed everything forever (in some few cases for the better, in most for the worse). The best scene—the one which froze Chris and me into our seats—depicted John Kerr digging into a castle wall and discovering the corpse of his sister, who was obviously buried alive. I have never forgotten the corpse's close-up, shot through a red filter and a distorting lens which elongated the face into a huge silent scream.

On the long hitch home that night (if rides were slow in coming, you might end up walking four or five miles and not get home until well after dark) I had a wonderful idea: I would turn *The Pit and the Pendulum* into a book! Would novelize it, as Monarch Books had novelized such undying film classics as *Jack the Ripper*, *Gorgo*, and *Konga*. But I wouldn't just write this masterpiece; I would also print it, using the drum-press in our basement, and sell copies at

school! Zap! Ka-pow!

As it was conceived, so was it done. Working with the care and deliberation for which I would later be critically acclaimed, I turned out my “novel version” of *The Pit and the Pendulum* in two days, composing directly onto the stencils from which I’d print. Although no copies of that particular masterpiece survive (at least to my knowledge), I believe it was eight pages long, each page single-spaced and paragraph breaks kept to an absolute minimum (each stencil cost nineteen cents, remember). I printed sheets on both sides, just as in a standard book, and added a title page on which I drew a rudimentary pendulum dripping small black blotches which I hoped would look like blood. At the last moment I realized I had forgotten to identify the publishing house. After a half-hour or so of pleasant mulling, I typed the words **A V.I.B. BOOK** in the upper right corner of my title page. V.I.B. stood for Very Important Book.

I ran off about forty copies of *The Pit and the Pendulum*, blissfully unaware that I was in violation of every plagiarism and copyright statute in the history of the world; my thoughts were focused almost entirely on how much money I might make if my story was a hit at school. The stencils had cost me \$1.71 (having to use up one whole stencil for the title page seemed a hideous waste of money, but you had to look good, I’d reluctantly decided; you had to go out there with a bit of the old attitude), the paper had cost another two bits or so, the staples were free, cribbed from my brother (you might have to paperclip stories you were sending out to magazines, but this was a *book*, this was the bigtime). After some further thought, I priced V.I.B. #1, *The Pit and the Pendulum* by Steve King, at a quarter a copy. I thought I might be able to sell ten (my mother would buy one to get me started; she could always be counted on), and that would add up to \$2.50. I’d make about forty cents, which would be enough to finance another educational trip to the Ritz. If I sold two more, I could get a big sack of popcorn and a Coke, as well.

The Pit and the Pendulum turned out to be my first bestseller. I took the entire print-run to school in my book-bag (in 1961 I would have been an eighth-grader at Durham’s newly built four-room elementary school), and by noon that day I had sold two dozen. By the end of lunch hour, when word had gotten around about the lady buried in the wall (“They stared with horror at the bones sticking out from the ends of her fingers, realizing she had died scratcheining madley for escape”), I had sold three dozen. I had nine dollars in change weighing down the bottom of my book-bag (upon which Durham’s answer to Daddy Cool had carefully printed most of the lyrics to “The Lion Sleeps Tonight”) and was walking around in a kind of dream, unable to believe my sudden ascension to previously unsuspected realms of wealth. It all seemed too good to be true.

It was. When the school day ended at two o’clock, I was summoned to the principal’s office, where I was told I couldn’t turn the school into a marketplace, especially not, Miss Hisler said, to sell such trash as *The Pit and the Pendulum*. Her attitude didn’t much surprise me. Miss Hisler had been the teacher at my previous school, the one-roomer at Methodist Corners, where I went to the fifth and sixth grades. During that time she had spied me reading a rather sensational “teenage rumble” novel (*The Amboy Dukes*, by Irving Shulman), and had taken it away. This was just more of the same, and I was disgusted with myself for not seeing the outcome in advance. In those days we called someone who did an idiotic thing a dubber (pronounced *dubba* if you were from Maine). I had just dubbed up bigtime.

“What I don’t understand, Stevie,” she said, “is why you’d write junk like this in the first place. You’re talented. Why do you want to waste your abilities?” She had rolled up a copy of V.I.B.

#1 and was brandishing it at me the way a person might brandish a rolled-up newspaper at a dog that has piddled on the rug. She waited for me to answer—to her credit, the question was not entirely rhetorical—but I had no answer to give. I was ashamed. I have spent a good many years since—too many, I think—being ashamed about what I write. I think I was forty before I realized that almost every writer of fiction and poetry who has ever published a line has been accused by someone of wasting his or her God-given talent. If you write (or paint or dance or sculpt or sing, I suppose), someone will try to make you feel lousy about it, that’s all. I’m not editorializing, just trying to give you the facts as I see them.

Miss Hisler told me I would have to give everyone’s money back. I did so with no argument, even to those kids (and there were quite a few, I’m happy to say) who insisted on keeping their copies of V.I.B. #1. I ended up losing money on the deal after all, but when summer vacation came I printed four dozen copies of a new story, an original called *The Invasion of the Star-Creatures*, and sold all but four or five. I guess that means I won in the end, at least in a financial sense. But in my heart I stayed ashamed. I kept hearing Miss Hisler asking why I wanted to waste my talent, why I wanted to waste my time, why I wanted to write junk.

– 19 –

Doing a serial story for *Dave’s Rag* was fun, but my other journalistic duties bored me. Still, I had worked for a newspaper of sorts, word got around, and during my sophomore year at Lisbon High I became editor of our school newspaper, *The Drum*. I don’t recall being given any choice in this matter; I think I was simply appointed. My second-in-command, Danny Emond, had even less interest in the paper than I did. Danny just liked the idea that Room 4, where we did our work, was near the girls’ bathroom. “Someday I’ll just go crazy and hack my way in there, Steve,” he told me on more than one occasion. “Hack, hack, hack.” Once he added, perhaps in an effort to justify himself: “The prettiest girls in school pull up their skirts in there.” This struck me as so fundamentally stupid it might actually be wise, like a Zen koan or an early story by John Updike.

The Drum did not prosper under my editorship. Then as now, I tend to go through periods of idleness followed by periods of workaholic frenzy. In the schoolyear 1963-1964, *The Drum* published just one issue, but that one was a monster thicker than the Lisbon Falls telephone book. One night—sick to death of Class Reports, Cheerleading Updates, and some lamebrain’s efforts to write a school poem—I created a satiric high school newspaper of my own when I should have been captioning photographs for *The Drum*. What resulted was a four-sheet which I called *The Village Vomit*. The boxed motto in the upper lefthand corner was not “All the News That’s Fit to Print” but “All the Shit That Will Stick.” That piece of dimwit humor got me into the only real trouble of my high school career. It also led me to the most useful writing lesson I ever got.

In typical *Mad* magazine style (“What, me worry?”), I filled the *Vomit* with fictional tidbits about the LHS faculty, using teacher nicknames the student body would immediately recognize. Thus Miss Raypach, the study-hall monitor, became Miss Rat Pack; Mr. Ricker, the college-track English teacher (and the school’s most urbane faculty member—he looked quite a bit like Craig Stevens in *Peter Gunn*), became Cow Man because his family owned Ricker Dairy; Mr. Diehl,

the earth-science teacher, became Old Raw Diehl.

As all sophomoric humorists must be, I was totally blown away by my own wit. What a funny fellow I was! A regular mill-town H. L. Mencken! I simply must take the *Vomit* to school and show all my friends! They would bust a collective gut!

As a matter of fact, they *did* bust a collective gut; I had some good ideas about what tickled the funnybones of high school kids, and most of them were showcased in *The Village Vomit*. In one article, Cow Man's prize Jersey won a livestock farting contest at Topsham Fair; in another, Old Raw Diehl was fired for sticking the eyeballs of specimen fetal pigs up his nostrils. Humor in the grand Swiftian manner, you see. Pretty sophisticated, eh?

During period four, three of my friends were laughing so hard in the back of study-hall that Miss Raypach (Rat Pack to you, chum) crept up on them to see what was so funny. She confiscated *The Village Vomit*, on which I had, either out of overweening pride or almost unbelievable naiveté, put my name as Editor in Chief & Grand High Poobah, and at the close of school I was for the second time in my student career summoned to the office on account of something I had written.

This time the trouble was a good deal more serious. Most of the teachers were inclined to be good sports about my teasing—even Old Raw Diehl was willing to let bygones be bygones concerning the pigs' eyeballs—but one was not. This was Miss Margitan, who taught shorthand and typing to the girls in the business courses. She commanded both respect and fear; in the tradition of teachers from an earlier era, Miss Margitan did not want to be your pal, your psychologist, or your inspiration. She was there to teach business skills, and she wanted all learning to be done by the rules. *Her* rules. Girls in Miss Margitan's classes were sometimes asked to kneel on the floor, and if the hems of their skirts didn't touch the linoleum, they were sent home to change. No amount of tearful begging could soften her, no reasoning could modify her view of the world. Her detention lists were the longest of any teacher in the school, but her girls were routinely selected as valedictorians or salutatorians and usually went on to good jobs. Many came to love her. Others loathed her then and likely still do now, all these years later. These latter girls called her "Maggot" Margitan, as their mothers had no doubt before them. And in *The Village Vomit* I had an item which began, "Miss Margitan, known affectionately to Lisbonians everywhere as Maggot ..."

Mr. Higgins, our bald principal (breezily referred to in the *Vomit* as Old Cue-Ball), told me that Miss Margitan had been very hurt and very upset by what I had written. She was apparently not too hurt to remember that old scriptural admonition which goes "Vengeance is mine, saith the shorthand teacher," however; Mr. Higgins said she wanted me suspended from school.

In my character, a kind of wildness and a deep conservatism are wound together like hair in a braid. It was the crazy part of me that had first written *The Village Vomit* and then carried it to school; now that troublesome Mr. Hyde had dubbed up and slunk out the back door. Dr. Jekyll was left to consider how my mom would look at me if she found out I had been suspended—her hurt eyes. I had to put thoughts of her out of my mind, and fast. I was a sophomore, I was a year older than most others in my class, and at six feet two I was one of the bigger boys in school. I desperately didn't want to cry in Mr. Higgins's office—not with kids surging through the halls and looking curiously in the window at us: Mr. Higgins behind his desk, me in the Bad Boy Seat. In the end, Miss Margitan settled for a formal apology and two weeks of detention for the bad

boy who had dared call her Maggot in print. It was bad, but what in high school is not? At the time we're stuck in it, like hostages locked in a Turkish bath, high school seems the most serious business in the world to just about all of us. It's not until the second or third class reunion that we start realizing how absurd the whole thing was.

A day or two later I was ushered into Mr. Higgins's office and made to stand in front of her. Miss Margitan sat ramrod-straight with her arthritic hands folded in her lap and her gray eyes fixed unflinchingly on my face, and I realized that something about her was different from any other adult I had ever met. I didn't pinpoint that difference at once, but I knew that there would be no charming this lady, no winning her over. Later, while I was flying paper planes with the other bad boys and bad girls in detention hall (detention turned out to be not so bad), I decided that it was pretty simple: Miss Margitan didn't like boys. She was the first woman I ever met in my life who didn't like boys, not even one little bit.

If it makes any difference, my apology was heartfelt. Miss Margitan really had been hurt by what I wrote, and that much I could understand. I doubt that she hated me—she was probably too busy—but she was the National Honor Society advisor at LHS, and when my name showed up on the candidate list two years later, she vetoed me. The Honor Society did not need boys “of his type,” she said. I have come to believe she was right. A boy who once wiped his ass with poison ivy probably doesn't belong in a smart people's club.

I haven't trucked much with satire since then.

– 20 –

Hardly a week after being sprung from detention hall, I was once more invited to step down to the principal's office. I went with a sinking heart, wondering what new shit I'd stepped in.

It wasn't Mr. Higgins who wanted to see me, at least; this time the school guidance counsellor had issued the summons. There had been discussions about me, he said, and how to turn my “restless pen” into more constructive channels. He had enquired of John Gould, editor of Lisbon's weekly newspaper, and had discovered Gould had an opening for a sports reporter. While the school couldn't *insist* that I take this job, everyone in the front office felt it would be a good idea. *Do it or die*, the G.C.'s eyes suggested. Maybe that was just paranoia, but even now, almost forty years later, I don't think so.

I groaned inside. I was shut of *Dave's Rag*, almost shut of *The Drum*, and now here was the *Lisbon Weekly Enterprise*. Instead of being haunted by waters, like Norman Maclean in *A River Runs Through It*, I was as a teenager haunted by newspapers. Still, what could I do? I rechecked the look in the guidance counsellor's eyes and said I would be delighted to interview for the job.

Gould—not the well-known New England humorist or the novelist who wrote *The Greenleaf Fires* but a relation of both, I think—greeted me warily but with some interest. We would try each other out, he said, if that suited me.

Now that I was away from the administrative offices of Lisbon High, I felt able to muster a little honesty. I told Mr. Gould that I didn't know much about sports. Gould said, “These are games people understand when they're watching them drunk in bars. You'll learn if you try.”

He gave me a huge roll of yellow paper on which to type my copy—I think I still have it somewhere—and promised me a wage of half a cent a word. It was the first time someone had

promised me wages for writing.

The first two pieces I turned in had to do with a basketball game in which an LHS player broke the school scoring record. One was a straight piece of reporting. The other was a sidebar about Robert Ransom's record-breaking performance. I brought both to Gould the day after the game so he'd have them for Friday, which was when the paper came out. He read the game piece, made two minor corrections, and spiked it. Then he started in on the feature piece with a large black pen.

I took my fair share of English Lit classes in my two remaining years at Lisbon, and my fair share of composition, fiction, and poetry classes in college, but John Gould taught me more than any of them, and in no more than ten minutes. I wish I still had the piece—it deserves to be framed, editorial corrections and all—but I can remember pretty well how it went and how it looked after Gould had combed through it with that black pen of his. Here's an example:

Last night, in the well-loved gymnasium of Lisbon High School, partisans and Jay Hills fans alike were stunned by an athletic performance unequalled in school history. Bob Ransom, known as "Bullet" Bob, for both his size and accuracy, scored thirty-seven points. Yes, you heard me right. ~~Plus~~ he did it with grace, speed . . . and with an odd courtesy as well,

committing only two personal fouls in his ~~last~~ ^{11th} quest for a record which has eluded Lisbon ~~players~~ ^{players} since the years of Korea . . .

Gould stopped at "the years of Korea" and looked up at me. "What year was the last record made?" he asked.

Luckily, I had my notes. "1953," I said. Gould grunted and went back to work. When he finished marking my copy in the manner indicated above, he looked up and saw something on my face. I think he must have mistaken it for horror. It wasn't; it was pure revelation. Why, I wondered, didn't English teachers ever do this? It was like the Visible Man Old Raw Diehl had on his desk in the biology room.

"I only took out the bad parts, you know," Gould said. "Most of it's pretty good."

"I know," I said, meaning both things: yes, most of it was good—okay anyway, serviceable—and yes, he had only taken out the bad parts. "I won't do it again."

He laughed. "If that's true, you'll never have to work for a living. You can do *this* instead. Do I have to explain any of these marks?"

"No," I said.

"When you write a story, you're telling yourself the story," he said. "When you rewrite, your main job is taking out all the things that are *not* the story."

Gould said something else that was interesting on the day I turned in my first two pieces: write with the door closed, rewrite with the door open. Your stuff starts out being just for you, in other words, but then it goes out. Once you know what the story is and get it right—as right as you

can, anyway—it belongs to anyone who wants to read it. Or criticize it. If you're very lucky (this is my idea, not John Gould's, but I believe he would have subscribed to the notion), more will want to do the former than the latter.

– 21 –

Just after the senior class trip to Washington, D.C., I got a job at Worumbo Mills and Weaving, in Lisbon Falls. I didn't want it—the work was hard and boring, the mill itself a dingy fuckhole overhanging the polluted Androscoggin River like a workhouse in a Charles Dickens novel—but I needed the paycheck. My mother was making lousy wages as a housekeeper at a facility for the mentally ill in New Gloucester, but she was determined I was going to college like my brother David (University of Maine, class of '66, *cum laude*). In her mind, the education had become almost secondary. Durham and Lisbon Falls and the University of Maine at Orono were part of a small world where folks neighbored and still minded each other's business on the four- and six-party lines which then served the Stickville townships. In the big world, boys who didn't go to college were being sent overseas to fight in Mr. Johnson's undeclared war, and many of them were coming home in boxes. My mother liked Lyndon's War on Poverty ("That's the war *I'm* in," she sometimes said), but not what he was up to in Southeast Asia. Once I told her that enlisting and going over there might be good for me—surely there would be a book in it, I said.

"Don't be an idiot, Stephen," she said. "With your eyes, you'd be the first one to get shot. You can't write if you're dead."

She meant it; her head was set and so was her heart. Consequently, I applied for scholarships, I applied for loans, and I went to work in the mill. I certainly wouldn't get far on the five and six dollars a week I could make writing about bowling tournaments and Soap Box Derby races for the *Enterprise*.

During my final weeks at Lisbon High, my schedule looked like this: up at seven, off to school at seven-thirty, last bell at two o'clock, punch in on the third floor of Worumbo at 2:58, bag loose fabric for eight hours, punch out at 11:02, get home around quarter of twelve, eat a bowl of cereal, fall into bed, get up the next morning, do it all again. On a few occasions I worked double shifts, slept in my '60 Ford Galaxie (Dave's old car) for an hour or so before school, then slept through periods five and six in the nurse's cubicle after lunch.

Once summer vacation came, things got easier. I was moved down to the dyehouse in the basement, for one thing, where it was thirty degrees cooler. My job was dyeing swatches of melton cloth purple or navy blue. I imagine there are still folks in New England with jackets in their closets dyed by yours truly. It wasn't the best summer I ever spent, but I managed to avoid being sucked into the machinery or stitching my fingers together with one of the heavy-duty sewing machines we used to belt the undyed cloth.

During Fourth of July week, the mill closed. Employees with five years or more at Worumbo got the week off with pay. Those with fewer than five years were offered work on a crew that was going to clean the mill from top to bottom, including the basement, which hadn't been touched in forty or fifty years. I probably would have agreed to work on this crew—it was time and a half—but all the positions were filled long before the foreman got down to the high school kids, who'd be gone in September. When I got back to work the following week, one of the dyehouse guys

told me I should have been there, it was wild. “The rats down in that basement were big as cats,” he said. “Some of them, goddam if they weren’t as big as *dogs*.”

Rats as big as dogs! Yow!

One day late in my final semester at college, finals over and at loose ends, I recalled the dyehouse guy’s story about the rats under the mill—big as cats, goddam, some as big as *dogs*—and started writing a story called “Graveyard Shift.” I was only passing the time on a late spring afternoon, but two months later *Cavalier* magazine bought the story for two hundred dollars. I had sold two other stories previous to this, but they had brought in a total of just sixty-five dollars. This was three times that, and at a single stroke. It took my breath away, it did. I was rich.

– 22 –

During the summer of 1969 I got a work-study job in the University of Maine library. That was a season both fair and foul. In Vietnam, Nixon was executing his plan to end the war, which seemed to consist of bombing most of Southeast Asia into Kibbles ’n Bits. “Meet the new boss,” The Who sang, “same as the old boss.” Eugene McCarthy was concentrating on his poetry, and happy hippies wore bell-bottom pants and tee-shirts that said things like KILLING FOR PEACE IS LIKE FUCKING FOR CHASTITY. I had a great set of muttonchop sideburns. Creedence Clearwater Revival was singing “Green River”—barefoot girls, dancing in the moonlight—and Kenny Rogers was still with The First Edition. Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were dead, but Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, Bob “The Bear” Hite, Jimi Hendrix, Cass Elliot, John Lennon, and Elvis Presley were still alive and making music. I was staying just off campus in Ed Price’s Rooms (seven bucks a week, one change of sheets included). Men had landed on the moon, and I had landed on the Dean’s List. Miracles and wonders abounded.

One day in late June of that summer, a bunch of us library guys had lunch on the grass behind the university bookstore. Sitting between Paolo Silva and Eddie Marsh was a trim girl with a raucous laugh, red-tinted hair, and the prettiest legs I had ever seen, well-displayed beneath a short yellow skirt. She was carrying a copy of *Soul on Ice*, by Eldridge Cleaver. I hadn’t run across her in the library, and I didn’t believe a college student could utter such a wonderful, unafraid laugh. Also, heavy reading or no heavy reading, she swore like a mill-worker instead of a coed. (Having been a millworker, I was qualified to judge.) Her name was Tabitha Spruce. We got married a year and a half later. We’re still married, and she has never let me forget that the first time I met her I thought she was Eddie Marsh’s townie girlfriend. Maybe a book-reading waitress from the local pizza joint on her afternoon off.

– 23 –

It’s worked. Our marriage has outlasted all of the world’s leaders except for Castro, and if we keep talking, arguing, making love, and dancing to the Ramones—gabba-gabba-hey—it’ll probably keep working. We came from different religions, but as a feminist Tabby has never been crazy about the Catholics, where the men make the rules (including the God-given directive to always go in bareback) and the women wash the underwear. And while I believe in God I have no use for organized religion. We came from similar working-class backgrounds, we both

ate meat, we were both political Democrats with typical Yankee suspicions of life outside New England. We were sexually compatible and monogamous by nature. Yet what ties us most strongly are the words, the language, and the work of our lives.

We met when we were working in a library, and I fell in love with her during a poetry workshop in the fall of 1969, when I was a senior and Tabby was a junior. I fell in love with her partly because I understood what she was doing with her work. I fell because *she* understood what she was doing with it. I also fell because she was wearing a sexy black dress and silk stockings, the kind that hook with garters.

I don't want to speak too disparagingly of my generation (actually I do, we had a chance to change the world and opted for the Home Shopping Network instead), but there was a view among the student writers I knew at that time that good writing came spontaneously, in an uprush of feeling that had to be caught at once; when you were building that all-important stairway to heaven, you couldn't just stand around with your hammer in your hand. *Ars poetica* in 1969 was perhaps best expressed by a Donovan Leitch song that went, "First there is a mountain / Then there is no mountain / Then there is." Would-be poets were living in a dewy Tolkien-tinged world, catching poems out of the ether. It was pretty much unanimous: serious art came from ... *out there!* Writers were blessed stenographers taking divine dictation. I don't want to embarrass any of my old mates from that period, so here is a fictionalized version of what I'm talking about, created from bits of many actual poems:

*I close my eyes
in th dark I see
Rodan Rimbaud
in th dark
i swallow th cloth
of loneliness
crow I am here
raven I am here*

If you were to ask the poet what this poem *meant*, you'd likely get a look of contempt. A slightly uncomfortable silence was apt to emanate from the rest. Certainly the fact that the poet would likely have been unable to tell you anything about the mechanics of creation would not have been considered important. If pressed, he or she might have said that there *were* no mechanics, only that seminal spurt of feeling: first there is a mountain, then there is no mountain, then there is. And if the resulting poem is sloppy, based on the assumption that such general words as "loneliness" mean the same thing to all of us—hey man, so what, let go of that outdated bullshit and just dig the heaviness. I didn't cop to much of this attitude (although I didn't dare say so out loud, at least not in so many words), and was overjoyed to find that the pretty girl in the black dress and the silk stockings didn't cop to much of it, either. She didn't come right out and say so, but she didn't need to. Her work spoke for her.

The workshop group met once or twice a week in the living room of instructor Jim Bishop's house, perhaps a dozen undergrads and three or four faculty members working in a marvellous atmosphere of equality. Poems were typed up and mimeographed in the English Department office on the day of each workshop. Poets read while the rest of us followed along on our copies. Here is one of Tabby's poems from that fall:

A GRADUAL CANTICLE FOR AUGUSTINE

*The thinnest bear is awakened in the winter
by the sleep-laughter of locusts,
by the dream-blustering of bees,
by the honeyed scent of desert sands
that the wind carries in her womb
into the distant hills, into the houses of Cedar.*

*The bear has heard a sure promise.
Certain words are edible; they nourish
more than snow heaped upon silver plates
or ice overflowing golden bowls. Chips of ice
from the mouth of a lover are not always better,
Nor a desert dreaming always a mirage.
The rising bear sings a gradual canticle
woven of sand that conquers cities
by a slow cycle. His praise seduces
a passing wind, traveling to the sea
wherein a fish, caught in a careful net,
hears a bear's song in the cool-scented snow.*

There was silence when Tabby finished reading. No one knew exactly how to react. Cables seemed to run through the poem, tightening the lines until they almost hummed. I found the combination of crafty diction and delirious imagery exciting and illuminating. Her poem also made me feel that I wasn't alone in my belief that good writing can be simultaneously intoxicating and idea-driven. If stone-sober people can fuck like they're out of their minds—can actually be out of their minds while caught in that throe—why shouldn't writers be able to go bonkers and still stay sane?

There was also a work-ethic in the poem that I liked, something that suggested writing poems (or stories, or essays) had as much in common with sweeping the floor as with mythic moments of revelation. There's a place in *A Raisin in the Sun* where a character cries out: "I want to fly! I want to touch the sun!" to which his wife replies, "First eat your eggs."

In the discussion that followed Tab's reading, it became clear to me that she understood her own poem. She knew exactly what she had meant to say, and had said most of it. Saint Augustine (A.D. 354-430) she knew both as a Catholic and as a history major. Augustine's mother (a saint herself) was a Christian, his father a pagan. Before his conversion, Augustine pursued both money and women. Following it he continued to struggle with his sexual impulses, and is known for the Libertine's Prayer, which goes: "O Lord, make me chaste ... but not yet." In his writing he focused on man's struggle to give up belief in self in favor of belief in God. And he sometimes likened himself to a bear. Tabby has a way of tilting her chin down when she smiles—it makes her look both wise and severely cute. She did that then, I remember, and said, "Besides, I like bears."

The canticle is gradual perhaps because the bear's awakening is gradual. The bear is powerful and sensual, although thin because he is out of his time. In a way, Tabby said when called upon to explicate, the bear can be seen as a symbol of mankind's troubling and wonderful habit of

dreaming the right dreams at the wrong time. Such dreams are difficult because they're inappropriate, but also wonderful in their promise. The poem also suggests that dreams are powerful—the bear's is strong enough to seduce the wind into bringing his song to a fish caught in a net.

I won't try to argue that "A Gradual Canticle" is a great poem (although I think it's a pretty good one). The point is that it was a reasonable poem in a hysterical time, one sprung from a writing ethic that resonated all through my heart and soul.

Tabby was in one of Jim Bishop's rocking chairs that night. I was sitting on the floor beside her. I put my hand on her calf as she spoke, cupping the curve of warm flesh through her stocking. She smiled at me. I smiled back. Sometimes these things are not accidents. I'm almost sure of it.

– 24 –

We had two kids by the time we'd been married three years. They were neither planned nor unplanned; they came when they came, and we were glad to have them. Naomi was prone to ear infections. Joe was healthy enough but never seemed to sleep. When Tabby went into labor with him, I was at a drive-in movie in Brewer with a friend—it was a Memorial Day triple feature, three horror films. We were on the third movie (*The Corpse Grinders*) and the second sixpack when the guy in the office broke in with an announcement. There were still pole-speakers in those days; when you parked your car you lifted one off and hung it over your window. The manager's announcement thus rang across the entire parking lot: "STEVE KING, PLEASE GO HOME! YOUR WIFE IS IN LABOR! STEVE KING, PLEASE GO HOME! YOUR WIFE IS GOING TO HAVE THE BABY!"

As I drove our old Plymouth toward the exit, a couple of hundred horns blared a satiric salute. Many people flicked their headlights on and off, bathing me in a stuttery glow. My friend Jimmy Smith laughed so hard he slid into the footwell on the passenger side of the front seat. There he remained for most of the trip back to Bangor, chortling among the beer-cans. When I got home, Tabby was calm and packed. She gave birth to Joe less than three hours later. He entered the world easily. For the next five years or so, nothing else about Joe was easy. But he was a treat. Both of them were, really. Even when Naomi was tearing off the wallpaper above her crib (maybe she thought she was housekeeping) and Joe was shitting in the wicker seat of the rocker we kept on the porch of our apartment on Sanford Street, they were a treat.

– 25 –

My mother knew I wanted to be a writer (with all those rejection slips hanging from the spike on my bedroom wall, how could she not?), but she encouraged me to get a teacher's credential "so you'll have something to fall back on."

"You may want to get married, Stephen, and a garret by the Seine is only romantic if you're a bachelor," she'd said once. "It's no place to raise a family."

I did as she suggested, entering the College of Education at UMO and emerging four years later with a teacher's certificate ... sort of like a golden retriever emerging from a pond with a dead duck in its jaws. It was dead, all right. I couldn't find a teaching job and so went to work at New Franklin Laundry for wages not much higher than those I had been making at Worumbo Mills

and Weaving four years before. I was keeping my family in a series of garrets which overlooked not the Seine but some of Bangor's less appetizing streets, the ones where the police cruisers always seemed to show up at two o'clock on Saturday morning.

I never saw personal laundry at New Franklin unless it was a "fire order" being paid for by an insurance company (most fire orders consisted of clothes that *looked* okay but smelled like barbecued monkeymeat). The greater part of what I loaded and pulled were motel sheets from Maine's coastal towns and table linen from Maine's coastal restaurants. The table linen was desperately nasty. When tourists go out to dinner in Maine, they usually want clams and lobster. Mostly lobster. By the time the tablecloths upon which these delicacies had been served reached me, they stank to high heaven and were often boiling with maggots. The maggots would try to crawl up your arms as you loaded the washers; it was as if the little fuckers knew you were planning to cook them. I thought I'd get used to them in time but I never did. The maggots were bad; the smell of decomposing clams and lobster-meat was even worse. *Why are people such slob?* I would wonder, loading feverish linens from Testa's of Bar Harbor into my machines. *Why are people such fucking slob?*

Hospital sheets and linens were even worse. These also crawled with maggots in the summertime, but it was blood they were feeding on instead of lobster-meat and clam-jelly. Clothes, sheets, and pillowslips deemed to be infected were stuffed inside what we called "plague-bags" which dissolved when the hot water hit them, but blood was not, in those times, considered to be especially dangerous. There were often little extras in the hospital laundry; those loads were like nasty boxes of Cracker Jacks with weird prizes in them. I found a steel bedpan in one load and a pair of surgical shears in another (the bedpan was of no practical use, but the shears were a damned handy kitchen implement). Ernest "Rocky" Rockwell, the guy I worked with, found twenty dollars in a load from Eastern Maine Medical Center and punched out at noon to start drinking. (Rocky referred to quitting time as "Slitz o'clock.")

On one occasion I heard a strange clicking from inside one of the Washex three-pockets which were my responsibility. I hit the Emergency Stop button, thinking the goddam thing was stripping its gears or something. I opened the doors and hauled out a huge wad of dripping surgical tunics and green caps, soaking myself in the process. Below them, lying scattered across the colander-like inner sleeve of the middle pocket, was what looked like a complete set of human teeth. It crossed my mind that they would make an interesting necklace, then I scooped them out and tossed them in the trash. My wife has put up with a lot from me over the years, but her sense of humor stretches only so far.

– 26 –

From a financial point of view, two kids were probably two too many for college grads working in a laundry and the second shift at Dunkin' Donuts. The only edge we had came courtesy of magazines like *Dude*, *Cavalier*, *Adam*, and *Swank*—what my Uncle Oren used to call "the titty books." By 1972 they were showing quite a lot more than bare breasts and fiction was on its way out, but I was lucky enough to ride the last wave. I wrote after work; when we lived on Grove Street, which was close to the New Franklin, I would sometimes write a little on my lunch hour, too. I suppose that sounds almost impossibly Abe Lincoln, but it was no big deal—I was having fun. Those stories, grim as some of them were, served as brief escapes from the boss, Mr.

Brooks, and Harry the floor-man.

Harry had hooks instead of hands as a result of a tumble into the sheet-mangler during World War II (he was dusting the beams above the machine and fell off). A comedian at heart, he would sometimes duck into the bathroom and run water from the cold tap over one hook and water from the hot tap over the other. Then he'd sneak up behind you while you were loading laundry and lay the steel hooks on the back of your neck. Rocky and I spent a fair amount of time speculating on how Harry accomplished certain bathroom cleanup activities. "Well," Rocky said one day while we were drinking our lunch in his car, "at least he don't need to wash his hands."

There were times—especially in summer, while swallowing my afternoon salt-pill—when it occurred to me that I was simply repeating my mother's life. Usually this thought struck me as funny. But if I happened to be tired, or if there were extra bills to pay and no money to pay them with, it seemed awful. I'd think *This isn't the way our lives are supposed to be going*. Then I'd think *Half the world has the same idea*.

The stories I sold to the men's magazines between August of 1970, when I got my two-hundred-dollar check for "Graveyard Shift," and the winter of 1973-1974 were just enough to create a rough sliding margin between us and the welfare office (my mother, a Republican all her life, had communicated her deep horror of "going on the county" to me; Tabby had some of that same horror).

My clearest memory of those days is of our coming back to the Grove Street apartment one Sunday afternoon after spending the weekend at my mother's house in Durham—this would have been right around the time the symptoms of the cancer which killed her started to show themselves. I have a picture from that day—Mom, looking both tired and amused, is sitting in a chair in her dooryard, holding Joe in her lap while Naomi stands sturdily beside her. Naomi wasn't so sturdy by Sunday afternoon, however; she had come down with an ear infection, and was burning with fever.

Trudging from the car to our apartment building on that summer afternoon was a low point. I was carrying Naomi and a tote-bag full of baby survival equipment (bottles, lotions, diapers, sleep suits, undershirts, socks) while Tabby carried Joe, who had spit up on her. She was dragging a sack of dirty diapers behind her. We both knew Naomi needed THE PINK STUFF, which was what we called liquid amoxicillin. THE PINK STUFF was expensive, and we were broke. I mean stony.

I managed to get the downstairs door open without dropping my daughter and was easing her inside (she was so feverish she glowed against my chest like a banked coal) when I saw there was an envelope sticking out of our mailbox—a rare Saturday delivery. Young marrieds don't get much mail; everyone but the gas and electric companies seems to forget they are alive. I snagged it, praying it wouldn't turn out to be another bill. It wasn't. My friends at the Dugent Publishing Corporation, purveyors of *Cavalier* and many other fine adult publications, had sent me a check for "Sometimes They Come Back," a long story I hadn't believed would sell anywhere. The check was for five hundred dollars, easily the largest sum I'd ever received. Suddenly we were able to afford not only a doctor's visit and a bottle of THE PINK STUFF, but also a nice Sunday-night meal. And I imagine that once the kids were asleep, Tabby and I got friendly.

I think we had a lot of happiness in those days, but we were scared a lot, too. We weren't much

more than kids ourselves (as the saying goes), and being friendly helped keep the mean reds away. We took care of ourselves and the kids and each other as best we could. Tabby wore her pink uniform out to Dunkin' Donuts and called the cops when the drunks who came in for coffee got obstreperous. I washed motel sheets and kept writing one-reel horror movies.

– 27 –

By the time I started *Carrie*, I had landed a job teaching English in the nearby town of Hampden. I would be paid sixty-four hundred dollars a year, which seemed an unthinkable sum after earning a dollar-sixty an hour at the laundry. If I'd done the math, being careful to add in all the time spent in after-school conferences and correcting papers at home, I might have seen it was a very thinkable sum indeed, and that our situation was worse than ever. By the late winter of 1973 we were living in a doublewide trailer in Hermon, a little town west of Bangor. (Much later, when asked to do the *Playboy* Interview, I called Hermon "The asshole of the world." Hermonites were infuriated by that, and I hereby apologize. Hermon is really no more than the armpit of the world.) I was driving a Buick with transmission problems we couldn't afford to fix, Tabby was still working at Dunkin' Donuts, and we had no telephone. We simply couldn't afford the monthly charge. Tabby tried her hand at confession stories during that period ("Too Pretty to Be a Virgin"—stuff like that), and got personal responses of the this-isn't-quite-right-for-us-buttry-again type immediately. She would have broken through if given an extra hour or two in every day, but she was stuck with the usual twenty-four. Besides, any amusement value the confession-mag formula (it's called the Three R's—Rebellion, Ruin, and Redemption) might have had for her at the start wore off in a hurry.

I wasn't having much success with my own writing, either. Horror, science fiction, and crime stories in the men's magazines were being replaced by increasingly graphic tales of sex. That was part of the trouble, but not all of it. The bigger deal was that, for the first time in my life, writing was *hard*. The problem was the teaching. I liked my coworkers and loved the kids—even the Beavis and Butt-Head types in Living with English could be interesting—but by most Friday afternoons I felt as if I'd spent the week with jumper cables clamped to my brain. If I ever came close to despairing about my future as a writer, it was then. I could see myself thirty years on, wearing the same shabby tweed coats with patches on the elbows, potbelly rolling over my Gap khakis from too much beer. I'd have a cigarette cough from too many packs of Pall Malls, thicker glasses, more dandruff, and in my desk drawer, six or seven unfinished manuscripts which I would take out and tinker with from time to time, usually when drunk. If asked what I did in my spare time, I'd tell people I was writing a book—what else does *any* self-respecting creative-writing teacher do with his or her spare time? And of course I'd lie to myself, telling myself there was still time, it wasn't too late, there were novelists who didn't get started until they were fifty, hell, even sixty. Probably plenty of them.

My wife made a crucial difference during those two years I spent teaching at Hampden (and washing sheets at New Franklin Laundry during the summer vacation). If she had suggested that the time I spent writing stories on the front porch of our rented house on Pond Street or in the laundry room of our rented trailer on Klatt Road in Hermon was wasted time, I think a lot of the heart would have gone out of me. Tabby never voiced a single doubt, however. Her support was

a constant, one of the few good things I could take as a given. And whenever I see a first novel dedicated to a wife (or a husband), I smile and think, *There's someone who knows*. Writing is a lonely job. Having someone who believes in you makes a lot of difference. They don't have to make speeches. Just believing is usually enough.

– 28 –

While he was going to college my brother Dave worked summers as a janitor at Brunswick High, his old alma mater. For part of one summer I worked there, too. I can't remember which year, only that it was before I met Tabby but after I started to smoke. That would have made me nineteen or twenty, I suppose. I got paired with a guy named Harry, who wore green fatigues, a big keychain, and walked with a limp. (He *did* have hands instead of hooks, however.) One lunch hour Harry told me what it had been like to face a Japanese *banzai* charge on the island of Tarawa, all the Japanese officers waving swords made out of Maxwell House coffee cans, all the screaming enlisted men behind them stoned out of their gourds and smelling of burned poppies. Quite a raconteur was my pal Harry.

One day he and I were supposed to scrub the rust-stains off the walls in the girls' shower. I looked around the locker room with the interest of a Muslim youth who for some reason finds himself deep within the women's quarters. It was the same as the boys' locker room, and yet completely different. There were no urinals, of course, and there were two extra metal boxes on the tile walls—unmarked, and the wrong size for paper towels. I asked what was in them. "Pussyplugs," Harry said. "For them certain days of the month."

I also noticed that the showers, unlike those in the boys' locker room, had chrome U-rings with pink plastic curtains attached. You could actually shower in privacy. I mentioned this to Harry, and he shrugged. "I guess young girls are a bit more shy about being undressed."

This memory came back to me one day while I was working at the laundry, and I started seeing the opening scene of a story: girls showering in a locker room where there were no U-rings, pink plastic curtains, or privacy. And this one girl starts to have her period. Only she doesn't know what it is, and the other girls—grossed out, horrified, amused—start pelting her with sanitary napkins. Or with tampons, which Harry had called pussy-plugs. The girl begins to scream. All that blood! She thinks she's dying, that the other girls are making fun of her even while she's bleeding to death ... she reacts ... fights back ... but how?

I'd read an article in *Life* magazine some years before, suggesting that at least some reported poltergeist activity might actually be telekinetic phenomena—telekinesis being the ability to move objects just by thinking about them. There was some evidence to suggest that young people might have such powers, the article said, especially girls in early adolescence, right around the time of their first—

Pow! Two unrelated ideas, adolescent cruelty and telekinesis, came together, and I had an idea. I didn't leave my post at Washex #2, didn't go running around the laundry waving my arms and shouting "Eureka!," however. I'd had many other ideas as good and some that were better. Still, I thought I might have the basis for a good *Cavalier* yarn, with the possibility of *Playboy* lurking in the back of my mind. *Playboy* paid up to two thousand dollars for short fiction. Two thousand bucks would buy a new transmission for the Buick with plenty left over for groceries. The story

remained on the back burner for awhile, simmering away in that place that's not quite the conscious but not quite the subconscious, either. I had started my teaching career before I sat down one night to give it a shot. I did three single-spaced pages of a first draft, then crumpled them up in disgust and threw them away.

I had four problems with what I'd written. First and least important was the fact that the story didn't move me emotionally. Second and slightly more important was the fact that I didn't much like the lead character. Carrie White seemed thick and passive, a ready-made victim. The other girls were chucking tampons and sanitary napkins at her, chanting "Plug it up! Plug it up!" and I just didn't care. Third and more important still was not feeling at home with either the surroundings or my all-girl cast of supporting characters. I had landed on Planet Female, and one sortie into the girls' locker room at Brunswick High School years before wasn't much help in navigating there. For me writing has always been best when it's intimate, as sexy as skin on skin. With *Carrie* I felt as if I were wearing a rubber wet-suit I couldn't pull off. Fourth and most important of all was the realization that the story wouldn't pay off unless it was pretty long, probably even longer than "Sometimes They Come Back," which had been at the absolute outer limit of what the men's magazine market could accept in terms of word-count. You had to save plenty of room for those pictures of cheerleaders who had somehow forgotten to put on their underpants—they were what guys really bought the magazines for. I couldn't see wasting two weeks, maybe even a month, creating a novella I didn't like and wouldn't be able to sell. So I threw it away.

The next night, when I came home from school, Tabby had the pages. She'd spied them while emptying my wastebasket, had shaken the cigarette ashes off the crumpled balls of paper, smoothed them out, and sat down to read them. She wanted me to go on with it, she said. She wanted to know the rest of the story. I told her I didn't know jackshit about high school girls. She said she'd help me with that part. She had her chin tilted down and was smiling in that severely cute way of hers. "You've got something here," she said. "I really think you do."

– 29 –

I never got to like Carrie White and I never trusted Sue Snell's motives in sending her boyfriend to the prom with her, but I *did* have something there. Like a whole career. Tabby somehow knew it, and by the time I had piled up fifty single-spaced pages, I knew it, too. For one thing, I didn't think any of the characters who went to Carrie White's prom would ever forget it. Those few who lived through it, that was.

I had written three other novels before *Carrie*—*Rage*, *The Long Walk*, and *The Running Man* were later published. *Rage* is the most troubling of them. *The Long Walk* may be the best of them. But none of them taught me the things I learned from Carrie White. The most important is that the writer's original perception of a character or characters may be as erroneous as the reader's. Running a close second was the realization that stopping a piece of work just because it's hard, either emotionally or imaginatively, is a bad idea. Sometimes you have to go on when you don't feel like it, and sometimes you're doing good work when it feels like all you're managing is to shovel shit from a sitting position.

Tabby helped me, beginning with the information that the sanitary-napkin dispensers in high

schools were usually not coin-op—faculty and administration didn't like the idea of girls' walking around with blood all over their skirts just because they happened to come to school short a quarter, my wife said. And I also helped myself, digging back to my memories of high school (my job teaching English didn't help; I was twenty-six by then, and on the wrong side of the desk), remembering what I knew about the two loneliest, most reviled girls in my class—how they looked, how they acted, how they were treated. Very rarely in my career have I explored more distasteful territory.

I'll call one of these girls Sondra. She and her mother lived in a trailer home not too far from me, with their dog, Cheddar Cheese. Sondra had a burbly, uneven voice, as if she were always speaking through a throatful of tightly packed phlegm. She wasn't fat, but her flesh had a loose, pale look, like the undersides of some mushrooms. Her hair clung to her pimply cheeks in tight Little Orphan Annie curls. She had no friends (except for Cheddar Cheese, I guess). One day her mother hired me to move some furniture. Dominating the trailer's living room was a nearly life-sized crucified Jesus, eyes turned up, mouth turned down, blood dribbling from beneath the crown of thorns on his head. He was naked except for a rag twisted around his hips and loins. Above this bit of breechclout were the hollowed belly and the jutting ribs of a concentration-camp inmate. It occurred to me that Sondra had grown up beneath the agonal gaze of this dying god, and doing so had undoubtedly played a part in making her what she was when I knew her: a timid and homely outcast who went scuttling through the halls of Lisbon High like a frightened mouse.

"That's Jesus Christ, my Lord and Savior," Sondra's mother said, following my gaze. "Have *you* been saved, Steve?"

I hastened to tell her I was saved as saved could be, although I didn't think you could ever be good enough to have *that* version of Jesus intervene on your behalf. The pain had driven him out of his mind. You could see it on his face. If *that* guy came back, he probably wouldn't be in a saving mood.

The other girl I'll call Dodie Franklin, only the other girls called her Dodo or Doodoo. Her parents were interested in only one thing, and that was entering contests. They were good at them, too; they had won all sorts of odd stuff, including a year's supply of Three Diamonds Brand Fancy Tuna and Jack Benny's Maxwell automobile. The Maxwell sat off to the left of their house in that part of Durham known as Southwest Bend, gradually sinking into the landscape. Every year or two, one of the local papers—the *Portland Press-Herald*, the *Lewiston Sun*, the *Lisbon Weekly Enterprise*—would do a piece on all the weird shit Dodie's folks had won in raffles and sweepstakes and giant prize drawings. Usually there would be a photo of the Maxwell, or Jack Benny with his violin, or both.

Whatever the Franklins might have won, a supply of clothes for growing teenagers wasn't part of the haul. Dodie and her brother Bill wore the same stuff every day for the first year and a half of high school: black pants and a short-sleeved checked sport shirt for him, a long black skirt, gray knee-socks, and a sleeveless white blouse for her. Some of my readers may not believe I am being literal when I say *every day*, but those who grew up in country towns during the fifties and sixties will know that I am. In the Durham of my childhood, life wore little or any makeup. I went to school with kids who wore the same neckdirt for months, kids whose skin festered with sores and rashes, kids with the eerie dried-apple-doll faces that result from untreated burns, kids who were sent to school with stones in their dinnerbuckets and nothing but air in their

Thermoses. It wasn't Arcadia; for the most part it was Dogpatch with no sense of humor.

Dodie and Bill Franklin got on all right at Durham Elementary, but high school meant a much bigger town, and for children like Dodie and Bill, Lisbon Falls meant ridicule and ruin. We watched in amusement and horror as Bill's sport shirt faded and began to unravel from the short sleeves up. He replaced a missing button with a paperclip. Tape, carefully colored black with a crayon to match his pants, appeared over a rip behind one knee. Dodie's sleeveless white blouse began to grow yellow with wear, age, and accumulated sweat-stains. As it grew thinner, the straps of her bra showed through more and more clearly. The other girls made fun of her, at first behind her back and then to her face. Teasing became taunting. The boys weren't a part of it; we had Bill to take care of (yes, I helped—not a whole lot, but I was there). Dodie had it worse, I think. The girls didn't just laugh at Dodie; they hated her, too. Dodie was everything they were afraid of.

After Christmas vacation of our sophomore year, Dodie came back to school resplendent. The dowdy old black skirt had been replaced by a cranberry-colored one that stopped at her knees instead of halfway down her shins. The tatty knee-socks had been replaced by nylon stockings, which looked pretty good because she had finally shaved the luxuriant mat of black hair off her legs. The ancient sleeveless blouse had given way to a soft wool sweater. She'd even had a permanent. Dodie was a girl transformed, and you could see by her face that she knew it. I have no idea if she saved for those new clothes, if they were given to her for Christmas by her parents, or if she went through a hell of begging that finally bore dividends. It doesn't matter, because mere clothes changed nothing. The teasing that day was worse than ever. Her peers had no intention of letting her out of the box they'd put her in; she was punished for even trying to break free. I had several classes with her, and was able to observe Dodie's ruination at first hand. I saw her smile fade, saw the light in her eyes first dim and then go out. By the end of the day she was the girl she'd been before Christmas vacation—a dough-faced and freckle-cheeked wraith, scurrying through the halls with her eyes down and her books clasped to her chest.

She wore the new skirt and sweater the next day. And the next. And the next. When the school year ended she was still wearing them, although by then the weather was much too hot for wool and there were always beads of sweat at her temples and on her upper lip. The home permanent wasn't repeated and the new clothes took on a matted, dispirited look, but the teasing had dropped back to its pre-Christmas levels and the taunting stopped entirely. Someone made a break for the fence and had to be knocked down, that was all. Once the escape was foiled and the entire company of prisoners was once more accounted for, life could go back to normal.

Both Sondra and Dodie were dead by the time I started writing *Carrie*. Sondra moved out of the trailer in Durham, out from beneath the agonal gaze of the dying savior, and into an apartment in Lisbon Falls. She must have worked somewhere close by, probably in one of the mills or shoe factories. She was epileptic and died during a seizure. She lived alone, so there was no one to help her when she went down with her head bent the wrong way. Dodie married a TV weatherman who gained something of a reputation in New England for his drawling downeast delivery. Following the birth of a child—I think it was their second—Dodie went into the cellar and put a .22 bullet in her abdomen. It was a lucky shot (or unlucky, depending on your point of view, I guess), hitting the portal vein and killing her. In town they said it was postpartum depression, how sad. Myself, I suspected high school hangover might have had something to do with it.

I never liked Carrie, that female version of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, but through Sondra and Dodie I came at last to understand her a little. I pitied her and I pitied her classmates as well, because I had been one of them once upon a time.

– 30 –

The manuscript of *Carrie* went off to Doubleday, where I had made a friend named William Thompson. I pretty much forgot about it and moved on with my life, which at that time consisted of teaching school, raising kids, loving my wife, getting drunk on Friday afternoons, and writing stories.

My free period that semester was five, right after lunch. I usually spent it in the teachers' room, grading papers and wishing I could stretch out on the couch and take a nap—in the early afternoon I have all the energy of a boa constrictor that's just swallowed a goat. The intercom came on and Colleen Sites in the office asked if I was there. I said I was, and she asked me to come to the office. I had a phone call. My wife.

The walk from the teachers' room in the lower wing to the main office seemed long even with classes in session and the halls mostly empty. I hurried, not quite running, my heart beating hard. Tabby would have had to dress the kids in their boots and jackets to use the neighbors' phone, and I could think of only two reasons she might have done so. Either Joe or Naomi had fallen off the stoop and broken a leg, or I had sold *Carrie*.

My wife, sounding out of breath but deliriously happy, read me a telegram. Bill Thompson (who would later go on to discover a Mississippi scribbler named John Grisham) had sent it after trying to call and discovering the Kings no longer had a phone. CONGRATULATIONS, it read. CARRIE OFFICIALLY A DOUBLEDAY BOOK. IS \$2500 ADVANCE OKAY? THE FUTURE LIES AHEAD. LOVE, BILL.

Twenty-five hundred dollars was a very small advance, even for the early seventies, but I didn't know that and had no literary agent to know it for me. Before it occurred to me that I might actually need an agent, I had generated well over three million dollars' worth of income, a good deal of it for the publisher. (The standard Doubleday contract in those days was better than indentured servitude, but not much.) And my little high school horror novel marched toward publication with excruciating slowness. Although it was accepted in late March or early April of 1973, publication wasn't slated until the spring of 1974. This wasn't unusual. In those days Doubleday was an enormous fiction-mill churning out mysteries, romances, science fiction yarns, and Double D westerns at a rate of fifty or more a month, all of this in addition to a robust frontlist including books by heavy hitters like Leon Uris and Allen Drury. I was only one small fish in a very busy river.

Tabby asked if I could quit teaching. I told her no, not based on a twenty-five-hundred-dollar advance and only nebulous possibilities beyond that. If I'd been on my own, maybe (hell, *probably*). But with a wife and two kids? Not happening. I remember the two of us lying in bed that night, eating toast and talking until the small hours of the morning. Tabby asked me how much we'd make if Doubleday was able to sell paperback reprint rights to *Carrie*, and I said I didn't know. I'd read that Mario Puzo had just scored a huge advance for paperback rights to *The Godfather*—four hundred thousand dollars according to the newspaper—but I didn't believe *Carrie* would fetch anything near that, assuming it sold to paperback at all.

Tabby asked—rather timidly for my normally outspoken wife—if *I* thought the book would find a paperback publisher. I told her I thought the chances were pretty good, maybe seven or eight in ten. She asked how much it might bring. I said my best guess would be somewhere between ten and sixty thousand dollars.

“Sixty thousand dollars?” She sounded almost shocked. “Is that much even possible?”

I said it was—not *likely*, perhaps, but *possible*. I also reminded her that my contract specified a fifty-fifty paperback split, which meant that if Ballantine or Dell *did* pay sixty grand, we’d only get thirty. Tabby didn’t dignify this with a reply—she didn’t have to. Thirty thousand dollars was what I could expect to make in four years of teaching, even with annual salary increases thrown in. It was a lot of money. Probably just pie in the sky, but it was a night for dreaming.

– 31 –

Carrie inched along toward publication. We spent the advance on a new car (a standard shift which Tabby hated and reviled in her most colorful millworker’s language) and I signed a teaching contract for the 1973-1974 academic year. I was writing a new novel, a peculiar combination of *Peyton Place* and *Dracula* which I called *Second Coming*. We had moved to a ground-floor apartment back in Bangor, a real pit, but we were in town again, we had a car covered by an actual warranty, and we had a telephone.

To tell you the truth, *Carrie* had fallen off my radar screen almost completely. The kids were a handful, both the ones at school and the ones at home, and I had begun to worry about my mother. She was sixty-one, still working at Pineland Training Center and as funny as ever, but Dave said she didn’t feel very well a lot of the time. Her bedside table was covered with prescription painkillers, and he was afraid there might be something seriously wrong with her. “She’s always smoked like a chimney, you know,” Dave said. He was a great one to talk, since he smoked like a chimney himself (so did I, and how my wife hated the expense and the constant ashy dirt of it), but I knew what he meant. And although I didn’t live as close to her as Dave and didn’t see her as often, the last time I *had* seen her I could tell she had lost weight.

“What can we do?” I asked. Behind the question was all we knew of our mother, who “kept herself to herself,” as she liked to say. The result of that philosophy was a vast gray space where other families have histories; Dave and I knew almost nothing about our father or his family, and little enough about our own mother’s past, which included an incredible (to me, at least) eight dead brothers and sisters and her own failed ambition to become a concert pianist (she did play the organ on some of the NBC radio soaps and Sunday church shows during the war, she claimed).

“We can’t do anything,” Dave replied, “until she asks.”

One Sunday not long after that call, I got another one from Bill Thompson at Doubleday. I was alone in the apartment; Tabby had packed the kids off to her mother’s for a visit, and I was working on the new book, which I thought of as *Vampires in Our Town*.

“Are you sitting down?” Bill asked.

“No,” I said. Our phone hung on the kitchen wall, and I was standing in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room. “Do I need to?”

“You might,” he said. “The paperback rights to *Carrie* went to Signet Books for four hundred thousand dollars.”

When I was a little kid, Daddy Guy had once said to my mother: “Why don’t you shut that kid up, Ruth? When Stephen opens his mouth, all his guts fall out.” It was true then, has been true all my life, but on that Mother’s Day in May of 1973 I was completely speechless. I stood there in the doorway, casting the same shadow as always, but I couldn’t talk. Bill asked if I was still there, kind of laughing as he said it. He knew I was.

I hadn’t heard him right. Couldn’t have. The idea allowed me to find my voice again, at least. “Did you say it went for forty thousand dollars?”

“Four *hundred thousand* dollars,” he said. “Under the rules of the road”—meaning the contract I’d signed—“two hundred K of it’s yours. Congratulations, Steve.”

I was still standing in the doorway, looking across the living room toward our bedroom and the crib where Joe slept. Our place on Sanford Street rented for ninety dollars a month and this man I’d only met once face-to-face was telling me I’d just won the lottery. The strength ran out of my legs. I didn’t fall, exactly, but I kind of whooshed down to a sitting position there in the doorway.

“Are you sure?” I asked Bill.

He said he was. I asked him to say the number again, very slowly and very clearly, so I could be sure I hadn’t misunderstood. He said the number was a four followed by five zeros. “After that a decimal point and two more zeros,” he added.

We talked for another half an hour, but I don’t remember a single word of what we said. When the conversation was over, I tried to call Tabby at her mother’s. Her youngest sister, Marcella, said Tab had already left. I walked back and forth through the apartment in my stocking feet, exploding with good news and without an ear to hear it. I was shaking all over. At last I pulled on my shoes and walked downtown. The only store that was open on Bangor’s Main Street was LaVerdiere’s Drug. I suddenly felt that I had to buy Tabby a Mother’s Day present, something wild and extravagant. I tried, but here’s one of life’s true facts: there’s nothing really wild and extravagant for sale at LaVerdiere’s. I did the best I could. I got her a hair-dryer.

When I got back home she was in the kitchen, unpacking the baby bags and singing along with the radio. I gave her the hair-dryer. She looked at it as if she’d never seen one before. “What’s this for?” she asked.

I took her by the shoulders. I told her about the paperback sale. She didn’t appear to understand. I told her again. Tabby looked over my shoulder at our shitty little four-room apartment, just as I had, and began to cry.

– 32 –

I got drunk for the first time in 1966. This was on the seniorclass trip to Washington. We went on a bus, about forty kids and three chaperones (one of them was Old Cue-Ball, as a matter of fact), and spent the first night in New York, where the drinking age was then eighteen. Thanks to my bad ears and shitty tonsils, I was almost nineteen. Room to spare.

A bunch of us more adventurous boys found a package store around the corner from the hotel. I cast an eye over the shelves, aware that my spending money was far from a fortune. There was too much—too many bottles, too many brands, too many prices over ten dollars. Finally I gave

up and asked the guy behind the counter (the same bald, bored-looking, gray-coated guy who has, I'm convinced, sold alcohol virgins their first bottle since the dawn of commerce) what was cheap. Without a word, he put a pint of Old Log Cabin whiskey down on the Winston mat beside the cash register. The sticker on the label said \$1.95. The price was right.

I have a memory of being led onto the elevator later that night—or maybe it was early the next morning—by Peter Higgins (Old Cue-Ball's son), Butch Michaud, Lenny Partridge, and John Chizmar. This memory is more like a scene from a TV show than a real memory. I seem to be outside of myself, watching the whole thing. There's just enough of me left inside to know that I am globally, perhaps even galactically, fucked up.

The camera watches as we go up to the girls' floor. The camera watches as I am propelled up and down the hall, a kind of rolling exhibit. An amusing one, it seems. The girls are in nighties, robes, curlers, cold cream. They are all laughing at me, but their laughter seems good-natured enough. The sound is muted, as if I am hearing them through cotton. I am trying to tell Carole Lemke that I love the way she wears her hair, and that she has the most beautiful blue eyes in the world. What comes out is something like "Uggin-wuggin-blue eyes, wuggin-ruggin-whole world." Carole laughs and nods as if she understands completely. I am very happy. The world is seeing an asshole, no doubt, but he is a *happy* asshole, and everyone loves him. I spend several minutes trying to tell Gloria Moore that I've discovered *The Secret Life of Dean Martin*.

At some point after that I am in my bed. The bed holds still but the room starts to spin around it, faster and faster. It occurs to me that it's spinning like the turntable of my Web-cor phonograph, on which I used to play Fats Domino and now play Dylan and the Dave Clark Five. The room is the turntable, I am the spindle, and pretty soon the spindle is going to start tossing its platters.

I go away for a little bit. When I wake up, I'm on my knees in the bathroom of the double room I'm sharing with my friend Louis Purington. I have no idea how I got in there, but it's good that I did because the toilet is full of bright yellow puke. *Looks like Niblets*, I think, and that's all it takes to get me going again. Nothing comes up but whiskey-flavored strings of spit, but my head feels like it's going to explode. I can't walk. I crawl back to bed with my sweaty hair hanging in my eyes. *I'll feel better tomorrow*, I think, and then I go away again.

In the morning my stomach has settled a little but my diaphragm is sore from vomiting and my head is throbbing like a mouthful of infected teeth. My eyes have turned into magnifying glasses; the hideously bright morning light coming in through the hotel windows is being concentrated by them and will soon set my brains on fire.

Participating in that day's scheduled activities—a walk to Times Square, a boat ride to the Statue of Liberty, a climb to the top of the Empire State Building—is out of the question. Walking? Urk. Boats? Double urk. Elevators? Urk to the fourth power. Christ, I can hardly move. I make some sort of feeble excuse and spend most of the day in bed. By late afternoon I'm feeling a little better. I dress, creep down the hall to the elevator, and descend to the first floor. Eating is still impossible, but I believe I'm ready for a ginger ale, a cigarette, and a magazine. And who should I see in the lobby, sitting in a chair and reading a newspaper, but Mr. Earl Higgins, alias Old Cue-Ball. I pass him as silently as I can, but it's no good. When I come back from the gift shop he's sitting with his newspaper in his lap, looking at me. I feel my stomach drop. Here is more trouble with the principal, probably even worse than the trouble I got into over *The Village Vomit*. He calls me over and I discover something interesting: Mr. Higgins is actually an okay

guy. He bounced me pretty hard over my joke newspaper, but perhaps Miss Margitan had insisted on that. And I'd just been sixteen, after all. On the day of my first hangover I'm going on nineteen, I've been accepted at the state university, and I have a mill job waiting for me when the class trip is over.

"I understand you were too sick to tour New York with the rest of the boys and girls," Old Cue-Ball says. He eyes me up and down.

I say that's right, I'd been sick.

"A shame for you to miss the fun," Old Cue-Ball says. "Feeling better now?"

Yes, I was feeling better. Probably stomach flu, one of those twenty-four-hour bugs.

"I hope you won't get that bug again," he says. "At least not on this trip." He looks at me for a moment longer, his eyes asking if we understand each other.

"I'm sure I won't," I say, meaning it. I know what drunk is like, now—a vague sense of roaring goodwill, a clearer sense that most of your consciousness is out of your body, hovering like a camera in a science fiction movie and filming everything, and then the sickness, the puking, the aching head. No, I won't get that bug again, I tell myself, not on this trip, not ever. Once is enough, just to find out what it's like. Only an idiot would make a second experiment, and only a lunatic—a *masochistic* lunatic—would make booze a regular part of his life.

The next day we go on to Washington, making one stop in Amish country on the way. There's a liquor store near where the bus parks. I go in and look around. Although the drinking age in Pennsylvania is twenty-one, I must look easily that in my one good suit and Fazza's old black overcoat—in fact, I probably look like a freshly released young convict, tall and hungry and very likely not bolted together right. The clerk sells me a fifth of Four Roses without asking to see any ID, and by the time we stop for the night I'm drunk again.

Ten years or so later I'm in an Irish saloon with Bill Thompson. We have lots to celebrate, not the least of which is the completion of my third book, *The Shining*. That's the one which just happens to be about an alcoholic writer and ex-schoolteacher. It's July, the night of the All-Star baseball game. Our plan is to eat a good old-fashioned meal from the dishes set out on the steam table, then get shitfaced. We begin with a couple at the bar, and I start reading all the signs. HAVE A MANHATTAN IN MANHATTAN, says one. TUESDAYS ARE TWOFOURS, says another. WORK IS THE CURSE OF THE DRINKING CLASS, says a third. And there, right in front of me, is one which reads: EARLY BIRD SPECIAL! SCREWDRIVERS A BUCK MONDAY-FRIDAY 8-10 A.M.

I motion to the bartender. He comes over. He's bald, he's wearing a gray jacket, he could be the guy who sold me my first pint back in 1966. Probably he is. I point to the sign and ask, "Who comes in at eight-fifteen in the morning and orders a screwdriver?"

I'm smiling but he doesn't smile back. "College boys," he replies. "Just like you."

– 33 –

In 1971 or '72, Mom's sister Carolyn Weimer died of breast cancer. My mother and my Aunt Ethelyn (Carolyn's twin) flew out to Aunt Cal's funeral in Minnesota. It was the first time my mother had flown in twenty years. On the plane trip back, she began to bleed profusely from what she would have called "her privates." Although long past her change of life by that point,

she told herself it was simply one final menstrual period. Locked in the tiny bathroom of a bouncing TWA jet, she stanching the bleeding with tampons (*plug it up, plug it up*, as Sue Snell and her friends might have cried), then returned to her seat. She said nothing to Ethelyn and nothing to David and me. She didn't go to see Joe Mendes in Lisbon Falls, her physician since time out of mind. Instead of any of those things, she did what she always did in times of trouble: kept herself to herself. For awhile, things seemed to be all right. She enjoyed her job, she enjoyed her friends, and she enjoyed her four grandchildren, two from Dave's family and two from mine. Then things stopped being all right. In August of 1973, during a checkup following an operation to "strip" some of her outrageously varicose veins, my mother was diagnosed with uterine cancer. I think Nellie Ruth Pillsbury King, who once dumped a bowl of Jell-O on the floor and then danced in it while her two boys lay collapsed in the corner, screaming with laughter, actually died of embarrassment.

The end came in February of 1974. By then a little of the money from *Carrie* had begun to flow and I was able to help with some of the medical expenses—there was that much to be glad about. And I was there for the last of it, staying in the back bedroom of Dave and Linda's place. I'd been drunk the night before but was only moderately hungover, which was good. One wouldn't want to be too hungover at the deathbed of one's mother.

Dave woke me at 6:15 in the morning, calling softly through the door that he thought she was going. When I got into the master bedroom he was sitting beside her on the bed and holding a Kool for her to smoke. This she did between harsh gasps for breath. She was only semiconscious, her eyes going from Dave to me and then back to Dave again. I sat next to Dave, took the cigarette, and held it to her mouth. Her lips stretched out to clamp on the filter. Beside her bed, reflected over and over again in a cluster of glasses, was an early bound galley of *Carrie*. Aunt Ethelyn had read it to her aloud a month or so before she died.

Mom's eyes went from Dave to me, Dave to me, Dave to me. She had gone from one hundred and sixty pounds to about ninety. Her skin was yellow and so tightly stretched that she looked like one of those mummies they parade through the streets of Mexico on the Day of the Dead. We took turns holding the cigarette for her, and when it was down to the filter, I put it out.

"My boys," she said, then lapsed into what might have been sleep or unconsciousness. My head ached. I took a couple of aspirin from one of the many bottles of medicine on her table. Dave held one of her hands and I held the other. Under the sheet was not the body of our mother but that of a starved and deformed child. Dave and I smoked and talked a little. I don't remember what we said. It had rained the night before, then the temperature had dropped and the morning streets were filled with ice. We could hear the pause after each rasping breath she drew growing longer and longer. Finally there were no more breaths and it was all pause.

– 34 –

My mother was buried out of the Congregational Church at Southwest Bend; the church she'd attended in Methodist Corners, where my brother and I grew up, was closed because of the cold. I gave the eulogy. I think I did a pretty good job, considering how drunk I was.

– 35 –

Alcoholics build defenses like the Dutch build dikes. I spent the first twelve years or so of my married life assuring myself that I “just liked to drink.” I also employed the world-famous Hemingway Defense. Although never clearly articulated (it would not be manly to do so), the Hemingway Defense goes something like this: as a writer, I am a very sensitive fellow, but I am also a man, and real men don’t give in to their sensitivities. Only sissy- men do that. Therefore I drink. How else can I face the existential horror of it all and continue to work? Besides, come on, I can handle it. A real man always can.

Then, in the early eighties, Maine’s legislature enacted a returnable-bottle and -can law. Instead of going into the trash, my sixteen-ounce cans of Miller Lite started going into a plastic container in the garage. One Thursday night I went out there to toss in a few dead soldiers and saw that this container, which had been empty on Monday night, was now almost full. And since I was the only one in the house who drank Miller Lite—

Holy shit, I’m an alcoholic, I thought, and there was no dissenting opinion from inside my head—I was, after all, the guy who had written *The Shining* without even realizing (at least until that night) that I was writing about myself. My reaction to this idea wasn’t denial or disagreement; it was what I’d call frightened determination. *You have to be careful, then*, I clearly remember thinking. *Because if you fuck up—*

If I fucked up, rolled my car over on a back road some night or blew an interview on live TV, someone would tell me I ought to get control of my drinking, and telling an alcoholic to control his drinking is like telling a guy suffering the world’s most cataclysmic case of diarrhea to control his shitting. A friend of mine who has been through this tells an amusing story about his first tentative effort to get a grip on his increasingly slippery life. He went to a counsellor and said his wife was worried that he was drinking too much.

“How much do you drink?” the counsellor asked.

My friend looked at the counsellor with disbelief. “All of it,” he said, as if that should have been self-evident.

I know how he felt. It’s been almost twelve years since I took a drink, and I’m still struck by disbelief when I see someone in a restaurant with a half-finished glass of wine near at hand. I want to get up, go over, and yell “Finish that! Why don’t you finish that?” into his or her face. I found the idea of social drinking ludicrous—if you didn’t want to get drunk, why not just have a Coke?

My nights during the last five years of my drinking always ended with the same ritual: I’d pour any beers left in the refrigerator down the sink. If I didn’t, they’d talk to me as I lay in bed until I got up and had another. And another. And one more.

– 36 –

By 1985 I had added drug addiction to my alcohol problem, yet I continued to function, as a good many substance abusers do, on a marginally competent level. I was terrified not to; by then I had no idea of how to live any other life. I hid the drugs I was taking as well as I could, both out of terror—what would happen to me without dope? I had forgotten the trick of being straight—and out of shame. I was wiping my ass with poison ivy again, this time on a daily basis, but I couldn’t ask for help. That’s not the way you did things in my family. In my family what you did

was smoke your cigarettes and dance in the Jell-O and keep yourself to yourself.

Yet the part of me that writes the stories, the deep part that knew I was an alcoholic as early as 1975, when I wrote *The Shining*, wouldn't accept that. Silence isn't what that part is about. It began to scream for help in the only way it knew how, through my fiction and through my monsters. In late 1985 and early 1986 I wrote *Misery* (the title quite aptly described my state of mind), in which a writer is held prisoner and tortured by a psychotic nurse. In the spring and summer of 1986 I wrote *The Tommyknockers*, often working until midnight with my heart running at a hundred and thirty beats a minute and cotton swabs stuck up my nose to stem the coke-induced bleeding.

Tommyknockers is a forties-style science fiction tale in which the writer-heroine discovers an alien spacecraft buried in the ground. The crew is still on board, not dead but only hibernating. These alien creatures got into your head and just started ... well, tommyknocking around in there. What you got was energy and a kind of superficial intelligence (the writer, Bobbi Anderson, creates a telepathic typewriter and an atomic hot-water heater, among other things). What you gave up in exchange was your soul. It was the best metaphor for drugs and alcohol my tired, overstressed mind could come up with.

Not long after that my wife, finally convinced that I wasn't going to pull out of this ugly downward spiral on my own, stepped in. It couldn't have been easy—by then I was no longer within shouting distance of my right mind—but she did it. She organized an intervention group formed of family and friends, and I was treated to a kind of *This Is Your Life* in hell. Tabby began by dumping a trashbag full of stuff from my office out on the rug: beercans, cigarette butts, cocaine in gram bottles and cocaine in plastic Baggies, coke spoons caked with snot and blood, Valium, Xanax, bottles of Robitussin cough syrup and NyQuil cold medicine, even bottles of mouthwash. A year or so before, observing the rapidity with which huge bottles of Listerine were disappearing from the bathroom, Tabby asked me if I drank the stuff. I responded with self-righteous hauteur that I most certainly did not. Nor did I. I drank the Scope instead. It was tastier, had that hint of mint.

The point of this intervention, which was certainly as unpleasant for my wife and kids and friends as it was for me, was that I was dying in front of them. Tabby said I had my choice: I could get help at a rehab or I could get the hell out of the house. She said that she and the kids loved me, and for that very reason none of them wanted to witness my suicide.

I bargained, because that's what addicts do. I was charming, because that's what addicts are. In the end I got two weeks to think about it. In retrospect, this seems to summarize all the insanity of that time. Guy is standing on top of a burning building. Helicopter arrives, hovers, drops a rope ladder. *Climb up!* the man leaning out of the helicopter's door shouts. Guy on top of the burning building responds, *Give me two weeks to think about it.*

I did think, though—as well as I could in my addled state—and what finally decided me was Annie Wilkes, the psycho nurse in *Misery*. Annie was coke, Annie was booze, and I decided I was tired of being Annie's pet writer. I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to work anymore if I quit drinking and drugging, but I decided (again, so far as I was able to decide anything in my distraught and depressed state of mind) that I would trade writing for staying married and watching the kids grow up. If it came to that.

It didn't, of course. The idea that creative endeavor and mind-altering substances are entwined is

one of the great pop-intellectual myths of our time. The four twentieth-century writers whose work is most responsible for it are probably Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Sherwood Anderson, and the poet Dylan Thomas. They are the writers who largely formed our vision of an existential English-speaking wasteland where people have been cut off from one another and live in an atmosphere of emotional strangulation and despair. These concepts are very familiar to most alcoholics; the common reaction to them is amusement. Substance-abusing writers are just substance abusers—common garden-variety drunks and druggies, in other words. Any claims that the drugs and alcohol are necessary to dull a finer sensibility are just the usual self-serving bullshit. I've heard alcoholic snowplow drivers make the same claim, that they drink to still the demons. It doesn't matter if you're James Jones, John Cheever, or a stewbum snoozing in Penn Station; for an addict, the right to the drink or drug of choice must be preserved at all costs. Hemingway and Fitzgerald didn't drink because they were creative, alienated, or morally weak. They drank because it's what alkie's are wired up to do. Creative people probably *do* run a greater risk of alcoholism and addiction than those in some other jobs, but so what? We all look pretty much the same when we're puking in the gutter.

– 37 –

At the end of my adventures I was drinking a case of sixteen-ounce tallboys a night, and there's one novel, *Cujo*, that I barely remember writing at all. I don't say that with pride or shame, only with a vague sense of sorrow and loss. I like that book. I wish I could remember enjoying the good parts as I put them down on the page.

At the worst of it I no longer wanted to drink and no longer wanted to be sober, either. I felt evicted from life. At the start of the road back I just tried to believe the people who said that things would get better if I gave them time to do so. And I never stopped writing. Some of the stuff that came out was tentative and flat, but at least it was there. I buried those unhappy, lackluster pages in the bottom drawer of my desk and got on to the next project. Little by little I found the beat again, and after that I found the joy again. I came back to my family with gratitude, and back to my work with relief—I came back to it the way folks come back to a summer cottage after a long winter, checking first to make sure nothing has been stolen or broken during the cold season. Nothing had been. It was still all there, still all whole. Once the pipes were thawed out and the electricity was turned back on, everything worked fine.

– 38 –

The last thing I want to tell you in this part is about my desk. For years I dreamed of having the sort of massive oak slab that would dominate a room—no more child's desk in a trailer laundry-closet, no more cramped kneehole in a rented house. In 1981 I got the one I wanted and placed it in the middle of a spacious, skylighted study (it's a converted stable loft at the rear of the house). For six years I sat behind that desk either drunk or wrecked out of my mind, like a ship's captain in charge of a voyage to nowhere.

A year or two after I sobered up, I got rid of that monstrosity and put in a living-room suite where it had been, picking out the pieces and a nice Turkish rug with my wife's help. In the early nineties, before they moved on to their own lives, my kids sometimes came up in the evening to watch a basketball game or a movie and eat pizza. They usually left a boxful of crusts behind

when they moved on, but I didn't care. They came, they seemed to enjoy being with me, and I know I enjoyed being with them. I got another desk—it's handmade, beautiful, and half the size of the T. rex desk. I put it at the far west end of the office, in a corner under the eave. That eave is very like the one I slept under in Durham, but there are no rats in the walls and no senile grandmother downstairs yelling for someone to feed Dick the horse. I'm sitting under it now, a fifty-three-year-old man with bad eyes, a gimp leg, and no hangover. I'm doing what I know how to do, and as well as I know how to do it. I came through all the stuff I told you about (and plenty more that I didn't), and now I'm going to tell you as much as I can about the job. As promised, it won't take long.

It starts with this: put your desk in the corner, and every time you sit down there to write, remind yourself why it isn't in the middle of the room. Life isn't a support-system for art. It's the other way around.

What Writing Is

Telepathy, of course. It's amusing when you stop to think about it—for years people have argued about whether or not such a thing exists, folks like J. B. Rhine have busted their brains trying to create a valid testing process to isolate it, and all the time it's been right there, lying out in the open like Mr. Poe's Purloined Letter. All the arts depend upon telepathy to some degree, but I believe that writing offers the purest distillation. Perhaps I'm prejudiced, but even if I am we may as well stick with writing, since it's what we came here to think and talk about.

My name is Stephen King. I'm writing the first draft of this part at my desk (the one under the eave) on a snowy morning in December of 1997. There are things on my mind. Some are worries (bad eyes, Christmas shopping not even started, wife under the weather with a virus), some are good things (our younger son made a surprise visit home from college, I got to play Vince Taylor's "Brand New Cadillac" with The Wallflowers at a concert), but right now all that stuff is up top. I'm in another place, a basement place where there are lots of bright lights and clear images. This is a place I've built for myself over the years. It's a far-seeing place. I know it's a little strange, a little bit of a contradiction, that a far-seeing place should also be a basement place, but that's how it is with me. If you construct your own far-seeing place, you might put it in a treetop or on the roof of the World Trade Center or on the edge of the Grand Canyon. That's your little red wagon, as Robert McCammon says in one of his novels.

This book is scheduled to be published in the late summer or early fall of 2000. If that's how things work out, then you are somewhere downstream on the timeline from me ... but you're quite likely in your own far-seeing place, the one where you go to receive telepathic messages. Not that you *have* to be there; books are a uniquely portable magic. I usually listen to one in the car (always unabridged; I think abridged audio-books are the pits), and carry another wherever I go. You just never know when you'll want an escape hatch: mile-long lines at tollbooth plazas, the fifteen minutes you have to spend in the hall of some boring college building waiting for your advisor (who's got some yank-off in there threatening to commit suicide because he/she is flunking Custom Kurmfurling 101) to come out so you can get his signature on a drop-card, airport boarding lounges, laundromats on rainy afternoons, and the absolute worst, which is the doctor's office when the guy is running late and you have to wait half an hour in order to have something sensitive mauled. At such times I find a book vital. If I have to spend time in purgatory before going to one place or the other, I guess I'll be all right as long as there's a lending library (if there is it's probably stocked with nothing but novels by Danielle Steel and *Chicken Soup* books, ha-ha, joke's on you, Steve).

So I read where I can, but I have a favorite place and probably you do, too—a place where the light is good and the vibe is usually strong. For me it's the blue chair in my study. For you it might be the couch on the sunporch, the rocker in the kitchen, or maybe it's propped up in your bed—reading in bed can be heaven, assuming you can get just the right amount of light on the page and aren't prone to spilling your coffee or cognac on the sheets.

So let's assume that you're in your favorite receiving place just as I am in the place where I do my best transmitting. We'll have to perform our mentalist routine not just over distance but over

time as well, yet that presents no real problem; if we can still read Dickens, Shakespeare, and (with the help of a footnote or two) Herodotus, I think we can manage the gap between 1997 and 2000. And here we go—actual telepathy in action. You'll notice I have nothing up my sleeves and that my lips never move. Neither, most likely, do yours.

Look—here's a table covered with a red cloth. On it is a cage the size of a small fish aquarium. In the cage is a white rabbit with a pink nose and pink-rimmed eyes. In its front paws is a carrot-stub upon which it is contentedly munching. On its back, clearly marked in blue ink, is the numeral 8.

Do we see the same thing? We'd have to get together and compare notes to make absolutely sure, but I think we do. There will be necessary variations, of course: some receivers will see a cloth which is turkey red, some will see one that's scarlet, while others may see still other shades. (To colorblind receivers, the red tablecloth is the dark gray of cigar ashes.) Some may see scalloped edges, some may see straight ones. Decorative souls may add a little lace, and welcome—my tablecloth is your tablecloth, knock yourself out.

Likewise, the matter of the cage leaves quite a lot of room for individual interpretation. For one thing, it is described in terms of *rough comparison*, which is useful only if you and I see the world and measure the things in it with similar eyes. It's easy to become careless when making rough comparisons, but the alternative is a prissy attention to detail that takes all the fun out of writing. What am I going to say, "on the table is a cage three feet, six inches in length, two feet in width, and fourteen inches high"? That's not prose, that's an instruction manual. The paragraph also doesn't tell us what sort of material the cage is made of—wire mesh? steel rods? glass?—but does it really matter? We all understand the cage is a see-through medium; beyond that, we don't care. The most interesting thing here isn't even the carrot-munching rabbit in the cage, but the number on its back. Not a six, not a four, not nineteen-point-five. It's an eight. This is what we're looking at, and we all see it. I didn't tell you. You didn't ask me. I never opened my mouth and you never opened yours. We're not even in the same *year* together, let alone the same room ... except we *are* together. We're close.

We're having a meeting of the minds.

I sent you a table with a red cloth on it, a cage, a rabbit, and the number eight in blue ink. You got them all, especially that blue eight. We've engaged in an act of telepathy. No mythy-mountain shit; real telepathy. I'm not going to belabor the point, but before we go any further you have to understand that I'm not trying to be cute; there is a point to be made.

You can approach the act of writing with nervousness, excitement, hopefulness, or even despair—the sense that you can never completely put on the page what's in your mind and heart. You can come to the act with your fists clenched and your eyes narrowed, ready to kick ass and take down names. You can come to it because you want a girl to marry you or because you want to change the world. Come to it any way but lightly. Let me say it again: *you must not come lightly to the blank page*.

I'm not asking you to come reverently or unquestioningly; I'm not asking you to be politically correct or cast aside your sense of humor (please God you have one). This isn't a popularity contest, it's not the moral Olympics, and it's not church. But it's *writing*, damn it, not washing the car or putting on eyeliner. If you can take it seriously, we can do business. If you can't or won't, it's time for you to close the book and do something else.

Wash the car, maybe.

TOOLBOX

*Grandpa was a carpenter,
he built houses, stores and banks,
he chain-smoked Camel cigarettes
and hammered nails in planks.
He was level-on-the-level,
shaved even every door,
and voted for Eisenhower
'cause Lincoln won the war.*

That's one of my favorite John Prine lyrics, probably because my grandpa was also a carpenter. I don't know about stores and banks, but Guy Pillsbury built his share of houses and spent a good many years making sure the Atlantic Ocean and the harsh seacoast winters didn't wash away the Winslow Homer estate in Prout's Neck. Fazza smoked cigars, though, not Camels. It was my Uncle Oren, also a carpenter, who smoked the Camels. And when Fazza retired, it was Uncle Oren who inherited the old fellow's toolbox. I don't remember its being there in the garage on the day I dropped the cinderblock on my foot, but it probably was sitting in its accustomed place just outside the nook where my cousin Donald kept his hockey sticks, ice skates, and baseball glove.

The toolbox was what we called a big 'un. It had three levels, the top two removable, all three containing little drawers as cunning as Chinese boxes. It was handmade, of course. Dark wooden slats were bound together by tiny nails and strips of brass. The lid was held down by big latches; to my child's eye they looked like the latches on a giant's lunchbox. Inside the top was a silk lining, rather odd in such a context and made more striking still by the pattern, which was pinkish-red cabbage roses fading into a smog of grease and dirt. On the sides were great big grabhandles. You never saw a toolbox like this one for sale at Wal-Mart or Western Auto, believe me. When my uncle first got it, he found a brass etching of a famous Homer painting—I believe it was *The Undertow*—lying in the bottom. Some years later Uncle Oren had it authenticated by a Homer expert in New York, and a few years after that I believe he sold it for a good piece of money. Exactly how or why Fazza came by the engraving in the first place is a mystery, but there was no mystery about the origins of the toolbox—he made it himself.

One summer day I helped Uncle Oren replace a broken screen on the far side of the house. I might have been eight or nine at the time. I remember following him with the replacement screen balanced on my head, like a native bearer in a Tarzan movie. He had the toolbox by the grabhandles, horsing it along at thigh level. As always, Uncle Oren was wearing khaki pants and a clean white tee-shirt. Sweat gleamed in his graying Army crewcut. A Camel hung from his lower lip. (When I came in years later with a pack of Chesterfields in my breast pocket, Uncle Oren sneered at them and called them “stockade cigarettes.”)

We finally reached the window with the broken screen and he set the toolbox down with an audible sigh of relief. When Dave and I tried to lift it from its place on the garage floor, each of us holding one of the handles, we could barely budge it. Of course we were just little kids back

then, but even so I'd guess that Fazza's fully loaded toolbox weighed between eighty and a hundred and twenty pounds.

Uncle Oren let me undo the big latches. The common tools were all on the top layer of the box. There was a hammer, a saw, the pliers, a couple of sized wrenches and an adjustable; there was a level with that mystic yellow window in the middle, a drill (the various bits were neatly drawered farther down in the depths), and two screwdrivers. Uncle Oren asked me for a screwdriver.

"Which one?" I asked.

"Either-or," he replied.

The broken screen was held on by loophead screws, and it really didn't matter whether he used a regular screwdriver or the Phillips on them; with loopheads you just stuck the screwdriver's barrel through the hole at the top of the screw and then spun it the way you spin a tire iron once you've got the lugnuts loose.

Uncle Oren took the screws out—there were eight, which he handed to me for safekeeping—and then removed the old screen. He set it against the house and held up the new one. The holes in the screen's frame mated up neatly with the holes in the window-frame. Uncle Oren grunted with approval when he saw this. He took the loophead screws back from me, one after the other, got them started with his fingers, then tightened them down just as he'd loosened them, by inserting the screwdriver's barrel through the loops and turning them.

When the screen was secure, Uncle Oren gave me the screwdriver and told me to put it back in the toolbox and "latch her up." I did, but I was puzzled. I asked him why he'd lugged Fazza's toolbox all the way around the house, if all he'd needed was that one screwdriver. He could have carried a screwdriver in the back pocket of his khakis.

"Yeah, but Stevie," he said, bending to grasp the handles, "I didn't know what else I might find to do once I got out here, did I? It's best to have your tools with you. If you don't, you're apt to find something you didn't expect and get discouraged."

I want to suggest that to write to your best abilities, it behooves you to construct your own toolbox and then build up enough muscle so you can carry it with you. Then, instead of looking at a hard job and getting discouraged, you will perhaps seize the correct tool and get immediately to work.

Fazza's toolbox had three levels. I think that yours should have at least four. You could have five or six, I suppose, but there comes a point where a toolbox becomes too large to be portable and thus loses its chief virtue. You'll also want all those little drawers for your screws and nuts and bolts, but where you put those drawers and what you put in them ... well, that's your little red wagon, isn't it? You'll find you have most of the tools you need already, but I advise you to look at each one again as you load it into your box. Try to see each one new, remind yourself of its function, and if some are rusty (as they may be if you haven't done this seriously in awhile), clean them off.

Common tools go on top. The commonest of all, the bread of writing, is vocabulary. In this case, you can happily pack what you have without the slightest bit of guilt and inferiority. As the whore said to the bashful sailor, "It ain't how much you've got, honey, it's how you use it."

Some writers have enormous vocabularies; these are folks who'd know if there really is such a thing as an insalubrious dithyramb or a cozening raconteur, people who haven't missed a

multiple-choice answer in Wilfred Funk's *It Pays to Increase Your Word Power* in oh, thirty years or so. For example:

The leathery, undeteriorative, and almost indestructible quality was an inherent attribute of the thing's form of organization, and pertained to some paleogean cycle of invertebrate evolution utterly beyond our powers of speculation.

—H. P. Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness*

Like it? Here's another:

In some [of the cups] there was no evidence whatever that anything had been planted; in others, wilted brown stalks gave testimony to some inscrutable depredation.

—T. Coraghessan Boyle, *Budding Prospects*

And yet a third—this is a good one, you'll like it:

Someone snatched the old woman's blindfold from her and she and the juggler were clouted away and when the company turned in to sleep and the low fire was roaring in the blast like a thing alive these four yet crouched at the edge of the firelight among their strange chattels and watched how the ragged flames fled down the wind as if sucked by some maelstrom out there in the void, some vortex in that waste apposite to which man's transit and his reckonings alike lay abrogate.

—Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*

Other writers use smaller, simpler vocabularies. Examples of this hardly seem necessary, but I'll offer a couple of my favorites, just the same:

He came to the river. The river was there.

—Ernest Hemingway, "Big Two-Hearted River"

They caught the kid doing something nasty under the bleachers.

—Theodore Sturgeon, *Some of Your Blood*

This is what happened.

—Douglas Fairbairn, *Shoot*

Some of the owner men were kind because they hated what they had to do, and some of them were angry because they hated to be cruel, and some of them were cold because they had long ago found that one could not be an owner unless one were cold.

—John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*

The Steinbeck sentence is especially interesting. It's fifty words long. Of those fifty words, thirty-nine have but one syllable. That leaves eleven, but even that number is deceptive; Steinbeck uses because three times, owner twice, and hated twice. There is no word longer than two syllables in the entire sentence. The structure is complex; the vocabulary is not far removed from the old Dick and Jane primers. *The Grapes of Wrath* is, of course, a fine novel. I believe that *Blood Meridian* is another, although there are great whacks of it that I don't fully

understand. What of that? I can't decipher the words to many of the popular songs I love, either. There's also stuff you'll never find in the dictionary, but it's still vocabulary. Check out the following:

—Tom Wolfe, *Bonfire of the Vanities*

“Egggh, whaddaya? Whaddaya want from me?”

“Here come Hymie!”

“Unnh! Unnnh! Unnnhh!”

“Chew my willie, Yo’ Honor.”

“Yeggghhh, fuck you, too, man!” This last is phonetically rendered street vocabulary. Few writers have Wolfe’s ability to translate such stuff to the page. (Elmore Leonard is another writer who can do it.) Some street-rap gets into the dictionary eventually, but not until it’s safely dead. And I don’t think you’ll ever find Yeggghhh in Webster’s Unabridged.

Put your vocabulary on the top shelf of your toolbox, and don’t make any conscious effort to improve it. (You’ll be doing that as you read, of course ... but that comes later.) One of the really bad things you can do to your writing is to dress up the vocabulary, looking for long words because you’re maybe a little bit ashamed of your short ones. This is like dressing up a household pet in evening clothes. The pet is embarrassed and the person who committed this act of premeditated cuteness should be even more embarrassed. Make yourself a solemn promise right now that you’ll never use “emolument” when you mean “tip” and you’ll never say **John stopped long enough to perform an act of excretion** when you mean **John stopped long enough to take a shit**. If you believe “take a shit” would be considered offensive or inappropriate by your audience, feel free to say **John stopped long enough to move his bowels** (or perhaps John stopped long enough to “push”). I’m not trying to get you to talk dirty, only plain and direct. Remember that the basic rule of vocabulary is *use the first word that comes to your mind, if it is appropriate and colorful*. If you hesitate and cogitate, you will come up with another word—of course you will, there’s always another word—but it probably won’t be as good as your first one, or as close to what you really mean.

This business of meaning is a very big deal. If you doubt it, think of all the times you’ve heard someone say “I just can’t describe it” or “That isn’t what I mean.” Think of all the times you’ve said those things yourself, usually in a tone of mild or serious frustration. The word is only a representation of the meaning; even at its best, writing almost always falls short of full meaning. Given that, why in God’s name would you want to make things worse by choosing a word which is only cousin to the one you really wanted to use?

And *do* feel free to take appropriateness into account; as George Carlin once observed, in some company it’s perfectly all right to prick your finger, but very bad form to finger your prick.

– 2 –

You’ll also want grammar on the top shelf of your toolbox, and don’t annoy me with your moans of exasperation or your cries that you *don’t understand* grammar, you *never did understand* grammar, you flunked that *whole semester* in Sophomore English, writing is fun but grammar sucks the big one.

Relax. Chill. We won't spend much time here because we don't need to. One either absorbs the grammatical principles of one's native language in conversation and in reading or one does not. What Sophomore English does (or tries to do) is little more than the naming of parts.

And this isn't high school. Now that you're not worried that (a) your skirt is too short or too long and the other kids will laugh at you, (b) you're not going to make the varsity swimming team, (c) you're still going to be a pimple-studded virgin when you graduate (probably when you die, for that matter), (d) the physics teacher won't grade the final on a curve, or (e) nobody really likes you anyway AND THEY NEVER DID ... now that all that extraneous shit is out of the way, you can study certain academic matters with a degree of concentration you could never manage while attending the local textbook loonybin. And once you start, you'll find you know almost all of the stuff anyway—it is, as I said, mostly a matter of cleaning the rust off the drillbits and sharpening the blade of your saw.

Plus ... oh, to hell with it. If you can remember all the accessories that go with your best outfit, the contents of your purse, the starting lineup of the New York Yankees or the Houston Oilers, or what label "Hang On Sloopy" by The McCoys was on, you are capable of remembering the difference between a gerund (verb form used as a noun) and a participle (verb form used as an adjective).

I thought long and hard about whether or not to include a detailed section on grammar in this little book. Part of me would actually like to; I taught it successfully at high school (where it hid under the name Business English), and I enjoyed it as a student. American grammar doesn't have the sturdiness of British grammar (a British advertising man with a proper education can make magazine copy for ribbed condoms sound like the Magna goddam Carta), but it has its own scruffy charm.

In the end I decided against it, probably for the same reason William Strunk decided not to recap the basics when he wrote the first edition of *The Elements of Style*: if you don't know, it's too late. And those really incapable of grasping grammar—as I am incapable of playing certain guitar riffs and progressions—will have little or no use for a book like this, anyway. In that sense I am preaching to the converted. Yet allow me to go on just a little bit further—will you indulge me?

Vocabulary used in speech or writing organizes itself in seven parts of speech (eight, if you count interjections such as **Oh!** and **Gosh!** and **Fuhgeddaboutit!**). Communication composed of these parts of speech must be organized by rules of grammar upon which we agree. When these rules break down, confusion and misunderstanding result. Bad grammar produces bad sentences. My favorite example from Strunk and White is this one: **"As a mother of five, with another one on the way, my ironing board is always up."**

Nouns and verbs are the two indispensable parts of writing. Without one of each, no group of words can be a sentence, since a sentence is, by definition, a group of words containing a subject (noun) and a predicate (verb); these strings of words begin with a capital letter, end with a period, and combine to make a complete thought which starts in the writer's head and then leaps to the reader's.

Must you write complete sentences each time, every time? Perish the thought. If your work consists only of fragments and floating clauses, the Grammar Police aren't going to come and take you away. Even William Strunk, that Mussolini of rhetoric, recognized the delicious

pliability of language. “It is an old observation,” he writes, “that the best writers sometimes disregard the rules of rhetoric.” Yet he goes on to add this thought, which I urge you to consider: “Unless he is certain of doing well, [the writer] will probably do best to follow the rules.”

The telling clause here is *Unless he is certain of doing well*. If you don’t have a rudimentary grasp of how the parts of speech translate into coherent sentences, how can you be certain that you *are* doing well? How will you know if you’re doing ill, for that matter? The answer, of course, is that you can’t, you won’t. One who does grasp the rudiments of grammar finds a comforting simplicity at its heart, where there need be only nouns, the words that name, and verbs, the words that act.

Take any noun, put it with any verb, and you have a sentence. It never fails. **Rocks explode. Jane transmits. Mountains float.** These are all perfect sentences. Many such thoughts make little rational sense, but even the stranger ones (**Plums deify!**) have a kind of poetic weight that’s nice. The simplicity of noun-verb construction is useful—at the very least it can provide a safety net for your writing. Strunk and White caution against too many simple sentences in a row, but simple sentences provide a path you can follow when you fear getting lost in the tangles of rhetoric—all those restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses, those modifying phrases, those appositives and compound-complex sentences. If you start to freak out at the sight of such unmapped territory (unmapped by you, at least), just remind yourself that rocks explode, Jane transmits, mountains float, and plums deify. Grammar is not just a pain in the ass; it’s the pole you grab to get your thoughts up on their feet and walking. Besides, all those simple sentences worked for Hemingway, didn’t they? Even when he was drunk on his ass, he was a fucking genius.

If you want to refurbish your grammar, go to your local used-book store and find a copy of *Warriner’s English Grammar and Composition*—the same book most of us took home and dutifully covered with brown paper shopping-bags when we were sophomores and juniors in high school. You’ll be relieved and delighted, I think, to find that almost all you need is summarized on the front and back endpapers of the book.

– 3 –

Despite the brevity of his style manual, William Strunk found room to discuss his own dislikes in matters of grammar and usage. He hated the phrase “student body,” for instance, insisting that “studentry” was both clearer and without the ghoulish connotations he saw in the former term. He thought “personalize” a pretentious word. (Strunk suggests “Get up a letterhead” to replace “Personalize your stationery.”) He hated phrases such as “the fact that” and “along these lines.”

I have my own dislikes—I believe that anyone using the phrase “That’s so cool” should have to stand in the corner and that those using the far more odious phrases “at this point in time” and “at the end of the day” should be sent to bed without supper (or writing-paper, for that matter). Two of my other pet peeves have to do with this most basic level of writing, and I want to get them off my chest before we move along.

Verbs come in two types, active and passive. With an active verb, the subject of the sentence is doing something. With a passive verb, something is being done *to* the subject of the sentence. The subject is just letting it happen. *You should avoid the passive tense.* I’m not the only one

who says so; you can find the same advice in *The Elements of Style*.

Messrs. Strunk and White don't speculate as to why so many writers are attracted to passive verbs, but I'm willing to; I think timid writers like them for the same reason timid lovers like passive partners. The passive voice is safe. There is no troublesome action to contend with; the subject just has to close its eyes and think of England, to paraphrase Queen Victoria. I think unsure writers also feel the passive voice somehow lends their work authority, perhaps even a quality of majesty. If you find instruction manuals and lawyers' torts majestic, I guess it does.

The timid fellow writes The meeting will be held at seven o'clock because that somehow says to him, "Put it this way and people will believe *you really know*." Purge this quisling thought! Don't be a muggle! Throw back your shoulders, stick out your chin, and put that meeting in charge! Write **The meeting's at seven**. There, by God! Don't you feel better?

I won't say there's no place for the passive tense. Suppose, for instance, a fellow dies in the kitchen but ends up somewhere else. **The body was carried from the kitchen and placed on the parlor sofa** is a fair way to put this, although "was carried" and "was placed" still irk the shit out of me. I accept them but I don't embrace them. What I would embrace is **Freddy and Myra carried the body out of the kitchen and laid it on the parlor sofa**. Why does the body have to be the subject of the sentence, anyway? It's dead, for Christ's sake! Fuhgeddaboutit!

Two pages of the passive voice—just about any business document ever written, in other words, not to mention reams of bad fiction—make me want to scream. It's weak, it's circuitous, and it's frequently tortuous, as well. How about this: **My first kiss will always be recalled by me as how my romance with Shayna was begun**. Oh, man—who farted, right? A simpler way to express this idea—sweeter and more forceful, as well—might be this: **My romance with Shayna began with our first kiss. I'll never forget it**. I'm not in love with this because it uses *with* twice in four words, but at least we're out of that awful passive voice.

You might also notice how much simpler the thought is to understand when it's broken up into *two* thoughts. This makes matters easier for the reader, and the reader must always be your main concern; without Constant Reader, you are just a voice quacking in the void. And it's no walk in the park being the guy on the receiving end. "[Will Strunk] felt the reader was in serious trouble most of the time," E. B. White writes in his introduction to *The Elements of Style*, "a man floundering in a swamp, and that it was the duty of anyone trying to write English to drain this swamp quickly and get his man up on dry ground, or at least throw him a rope." And remember: *The writer threw the rope, not The rope was thrown by the writer*. Please oh please.

The other piece of advice I want to give you before moving on to the next level of the toolbox is this: *The adverb is not your friend*.

Adverbs, you will remember from your own version of Business English, are words that modify verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs. They're the ones that usually end in -ly. Adverbs, like the passive voice, seem to have been created with the timid writer in mind. With the passive voice, the writer usually expresses fear of not being taken seriously; it is the voice of little boys wearing shoepolish mustaches and little girls clumping around in Mommy's high heels. With adverbs, the writer usually tells us he or she is afraid he/she isn't expressing himself/herself clearly, that he or she is not getting the point or the picture across.

Consider the sentence **He closed the door firmly**. It's by no means a terrible sentence (at least it's got an active verb going for it), but ask yourself if firmly really has to be there. You can

argue that it expresses a degree of difference between **He closed the door** and **He slammed the door**, and you'll get no argument from me ... but what about context? What about all the enlightening (not to say emotionally moving) prose which came *before* **He closed the door firmly**? Shouldn't this tell us how he closed the door? And if the foregoing prose *does* tell us, isn't firmly an extra word? Isn't it redundant?

Someone out there is now accusing me of being tiresome and anal-retentive. I deny it. I believe the road to hell is paved with adverbs, and I will shout it from the rooftops. To put it another way, they're like dandelions. If you have one on your lawn, it looks pretty and unique. If you fail to root it out, however, you find five the next day ... fifty the day after that ... and then, my brothers and sisters, your lawn is totally, completely, and profligately covered with dandelions. By then you see them for the weeds they really are, but by then it's—*GASP!!*—too late.

I can be a good sport about adverbs, though. Yes I can. With one exception: dialogue attribution. I insist that you use the adverb in dialogue attribution only in the rarest and most special of occasions ... and not even then, if you can avoid it. Just to make sure we all know what we're talking about, examine these three sentences:

"Put it down!" she shouted.

"Give it back," he pleaded, "it's mine."

"Don't be such a fool, Jekyll," Utterson said.

In these sentences, shouted, pleaded, and said are verbs of dialogue attribution. Now look at these dubious revisions:

"Put it down!" she shouted menacingly.

"Give it back," he pleaded abjectly, "it's mine."

"Don't be such a fool, Jekyll," Utterson said contemptuously.

The three latter sentences are all weaker than the three former ones, and most readers will see why immediately. **"Don't be such a fool, Jekyll," Utterson said contemptuously** is the best of the lot; it is only a cliché, while the other two are actively ludicrous. Such dialogue attributions are sometimes known as "Swifties," after Tom Swift, the brave inventor-hero in a series of boys' adventure novels written by Victor Appleton II. Appleton was fond of such sentences as **"Do your worst!" Tom cried bravely** and **"My father helped with the equations," Tom said modestly**. When I was a teenager there was a party-game based on one's ability to create witty (or half-witty) Swifties. **"You got a nice butt, lady," he said cheekily** is one I remember; another is **"I'm the plumber," he said, with a flush**. (In this case the modifier is an adverbial phrase.) When debating whether or not to make some pernicious dandelion of an adverb part of your dialogue attribution, I suggest you ask yourself if you really want to write the sort of prose that might wind up in a party-game.

Some writers try to evade the no-adverb rule by shooting the attribution verb full of steroids. The result is familiar to any reader of pulp fiction or paperback originals:

"Put down the gun, Utterson!" Jekyll grated.

"Never stop kissing me!" Shayna gasped.

“You damned tease!” Bill jerked out.

Don’t do these things. Please oh please.

The best form of dialogue attribution is **said**, as in **he said, she said, Bill said, Monica said**. If you want to see this put stringently into practice, I urge you to read or reread a novel by Larry McMurtry, the Shane of dialogue attribution. That looks damned snide on the page, but I’m speaking with complete sincerity. McMurtry has allowed few adverbial dandelions to grow on his lawn. He believes in he-said/she-said even in moments of emotional crisis (and in Larry McMurtry novels there are a lot of those). Go and do thou likewise.

Is this a case of “Do as I say, not as I do?” The reader has a perfect right to ask the question, and I have a duty to provide an honest answer. Yes. It is. You need only look back through some of my own fiction to know that I’m just another ordinary sinner. I’ve been pretty good about avoiding the passive tense, but I’ve spilled out my share of adverbs in my time, including some (it shames me to say it) in dialogue attribution. (I have never fallen so low as “he grated” or “Bill jerked out,” though.) When I do it, it’s usually for the same reason any writer does it: because I am afraid the reader won’t understand me if I don’t.

I’m convinced that fear is at the root of most bad writing. If one is writing for one’s own pleasure, that fear may be mild—*timidity* is the word I’ve used here. If, however, one is working under deadline—a school paper, a newspaper article, the SAT writing sample—that fear may be intense. Dumbo got airborne with the help of a magic feather; you may feel the urge to grasp a passive verb or one of those nasty adverbs for the same reason. Just remember before you do that Dumbo didn’t need the feather; the magic was in him.

You probably *do* know what you’re talking about, and can safely energize your prose with active verbs. And you probably *have* told your story well enough to believe that when you use he said, the reader will know how he said it—fast or slowly, happily or sadly. Your man may be floundering in a swamp, and by all means throw him a rope if he is ... but there’s no need to knock him unconscious with ninety feet of steel cable.

Good writing is often about letting go of fear and affectation. Affectation itself, beginning with the need to define some sorts of writing as “good” and other sorts as “bad,” is fearful behavior. Good writing is also about making good choices when it comes to picking the tools you plan to work with.

No writer is entirely without sin in these matters. Although William Strunk got E. B. White in his clutches when White was but a naive undergraduate at Cornell (give them to me when they’re young and they’re mine forever, heh-heh-heh), and although White both understood and shared Strunk’s prejudice against loose writing and the loose thinking which prompts it, he admits, “I suppose I have written *the fact that* a thousand times in the heat of composition, revised it out maybe five hundred times in the cool aftermath. To be batting only .500 this late in the season, to fail half the time to connect with this fat pitch, saddens me ...” Yet E. B. White went on to write for a good many years following his initial revisions of Strunk’s “little book” in 1957. I will go on writing in spite of such stupid lapses as **“You can’t be serious,” Bill said unbelievably**. I expect you to do the same thing. There is a core simplicity to the English language and its American variant, but it’s a slippery core. All I ask is that you do as well as you can, and remember that, while to write adverbs is human, to write he said or she said is divine.

– 4 –

Lift out the top layer of your toolbox—your vocabulary and all the grammar stuff. On the layer beneath go those elements of style upon which I’ve already touched. Strunk and White offer the best tools (and the best rules) you could hope for, describing them simply and clearly. (They are offered with a refreshing strictness, beginning with the rule on how to form possessives: you always add ’s, even when the word you’re modifying ends in s—always write **Thomas’s bike** and never **Thomas’ bike**—and ending with ideas about where it’s best to place the most important parts of a sentence. They say at the end, and everyone’s entitled to his/her opinion, but I don’t believe **With a hammer he killed Frank** will ever replace **He killed Frank with a hammer**.)

Before leaving the basic elements of form and style, we ought to think for a moment about the paragraph, the form of organization which comes after the sentence. To that end, grab a novel—preferably one you haven’t yet read—down from your shelf (the stuff I’m telling you applies to most prose, but since I’m a fiction writer, it’s fiction I usually think about when I think about writing). Open the book in the middle and look at any two pages. Observe the pattern—the lines of type, the margins, and most particularly the blocks of white space where paragraphs begin or leave off.

You can tell *without even reading* if the book you’ve chosen is apt to be easy or hard, right? Easy books contain lots of short paragraphs—including dialogue paragraphs which may only be a word or two long—and lots of white space. They’re as airy as Dairy Queen ice cream cones. Hard books, ones full of ideas, narration, or description, have a stouter look. A *packed* look. Paragraphs are almost as important for how they look as for what they say; they are maps of intent.

In expository prose, paragraphs can (and should) be neat and utilitarian. The ideal expository graf contains a topic sentence followed by others which explain or amplify the first. Here are two paragraphs from the ever-popular “informal essay” which illustrate this simple but powerful form of writing:

When I was ten, I feared my sister Megan. It was impossible for her to come into my room without breaking at least one of my favorite toys, usually the favorite of favorites. Her gaze had some magical tape-destroying quality; any poster she looked at seemed to fall off the wall only seconds later. Well-loved articles of clothing disappeared from the closet. She didn’t take them (at least I don’t think so), only made them vanish. I’d usually find that treasured tee-shirt or my favorite Nikes deep under the bed months later, looking sad and abandoned among the dust kitties. When Megan was in my room, stereo speakers blew, window-shades flew up with a bang, and the lamp on my desk usually went dead.

She could be consciously cruel, too. On one occasion, Megan poured orange juice into my cereal. On another, she squirted toothpaste into the toes of my socks while I was taking a shower. And although she never admitted it, I am positive that whenever I fell asleep on the couch during half-time of the Sunday afternoon pro football games on TV, she rubbed boogers in my hair.

Informal essays are, by and large, silly and insubstantial things; unless you get a job as a columnist at your local newspaper, writing such fluffery is a skill you'll never use in the actual mall-and-filling-station world. Teachers assign them when they can't think of any other way to waste your time. The most notorious subject, of course, is "How I Spent My Summer Vacation." I taught writing for a year at the University of Maine in Orono and had one class loaded with athletes and cheerleaders. They liked informal essays, greeting them like the old high school friends they were. I spent one whole semester fighting the urge to ask them to write two pages of well-turned prose on the subject of "If Jesus Were My Teammate." What held me back was the sure and terrible knowledge that most of them would take to the task with enthusiasm. Some might actually weep while in the throes of composition.

Even in the informal essay, however, it's possible to see how strong the basic paragraph form can be. Topic-sentence-followed-by-support-and-description insists that the writer organize his/her thoughts, and it also provides good insurance against wandering away from the topic. Wandering isn't a big deal in an informal essay, is practically *de rigueur*, as a matter of fact—but it's a very bad habit to get into when working on more serious subjects in a more formal manner. Writing is refined thinking. If your master's thesis is no more organized than a high school essay titled "Why Shania Twain Turns Me On," you're in big trouble.

In fiction, the paragraph is less structured—it's the beat instead of the actual melody. The more fiction you read and write, the more you'll find your paragraphs forming on their own. And that's what you want. When composing it's best not to think too much about where paragraphs begin and end; the trick is to let nature take its course. If you don't like it later on, fix it then. That's what rewrite is all about. Now check out the following:

Big Tony's room wasn't what Dale had expected. The light had an odd yellowish cast that reminded him of cheap motels he'd stayed in, the ones where he always seemed to end up with a scenic view of the parking lot. The only picture was Miss May hanging askew on a push-pin. One shiny black shoe stuck out from under the bed.

"I dunno why you keep askin me about O'Leary," Big Tony said. "You think my story's gonna change?"

"Is it?" Dale asked.

"When your story's true it don't change. The truth is always the same boring shit, day in and day out.

" Big Tony sat down, lit a cigarette, ran a hand through his hair.

"I ain't seen that fuckin mick since last summer. I let him hang around because he made me laugh, once showed me this thing he wrote about what it woulda been like if Jesus was on his high school football team, had a picture of Christ in a helmet and kneepads and everythin, but what a troublesome little fuck he turned out to be! I wish I'd never seen him!"

We could have a fifty-minute writing class on just this brief passage. It would encompass dialogue attribution (not necessary if we know who's speaking; Rule 17, omit needless words, in action), phonetically rendered language (dunno, gonna), the use of the comma (there is none in the line **When your story's true it don't change** because I want you to hear it coming out all in one breath, without a pause), the decision not to use the apostrophe where the speaker has

dropped a *g* ... and all that stuff is just from the top level of the toolbox.

Let's stick with the paragraphs, though. Notice how easily they flow, with the turns and rhythms of the story dictating where each one begins and ends. The opening graf is of the classic type, beginning with a topic sentence that is supported by the sentences which follow. Others, however, exist solely to differentiate between Dale's dialogue and Big Tony's.

The most interesting paragraph is the fifth one: **Big Tony sat down, lit a cigarette, ran a hand through his hair.** It's only a single sentence long, and expository paragraphs almost never consist of a single sentence. It's not even a very *good* sentence, technically speaking; to make it perfect in the *Warriner's* sense, there should be a conjunction (and). Also, what exactly is the purpose of this paragraph?

First, the sentence may be flawed in a technical sense, but it's a good one in terms of the entire passage. Its brevity and telegraphic style vary the pace and keep the writing fresh. Suspense novelist Jonathan Kellerman uses this technique very successfully. In *Survival of the Fittest*, he writes: **The boat was thirty feet of sleek white fiberglass with gray trim. Tall masts, the sails tied. Satori painted on the hull in black script edged with gold.**

It is possible to overuse the well-turned fragment (and Kellerman sometimes does), but frags can also work beautifully to streamline narration, create clear images, and create tension as well as to vary the prose-line. A series of grammatically proper sentences can stiffen that line, make it less pliable. Purists hate to hear that and will deny it to their dying breath, but it's true. Language does not always have to wear a tie and lace-up shoes. The object of fiction isn't grammatical correctness but to make the reader welcome and then tell a story ... to make him/her forget, whenever possible, that he/she is reading a story at all. The single-sentence paragraph more closely resembles talk than writing, and that's good. Writing is seduction. Good talk is part of seduction. If not so, why do so many couples who start the evening at dinner wind up in bed?

The other uses of this paragraph include stage direction, minor but useful enhancement of character and setting, and a vital moment of transition. From protesting that his story is true, Big Tony moves on to his memories of O'Leary. Since the source of dialogue doesn't change, Tony's sitting down and lighting up could take place in the same paragraph, with the dialogue picking up again afterward, but the writer doesn't elect to do it that way. Because Big Tony takes a new tack, the writer breaks the dialogue into two paragraphs. It's a decision made instantaneously in the course of writing, one based entirely on the beat the writer hears in his/her own head. That beat is part of the genetic hardwiring (Kellerman writes a lot of frags because he *hears* a lot of frags), but it's also the result of the thousands of hours that writer has spent composing, and the *tens* of thousands of hours he/she may have spent reading the compositions of others.

I would argue that the paragraph, not the sentence, is the basic unit of writing—the place where coherence begins and words stand a chance of becoming more than mere words. If the moment of quickening is to come, it comes at the level of the paragraph. It is a marvellous and flexible instrument that can be a single word long or run on for pages (one paragraph in Don Robertson's historical novel *Paradise Falls* is sixteen pages long; there are paragraphs in Ross Lockridge's *Raintree County* which are nearly that). You must learn to use it well if you are to write well. What this means is lots of practice; you have to learn the beat.

– 5 –

Grab that book you were looking at off the shelf again, would you? The weight of it in your hands tells you other stuff that you can take in without reading a single word. The book's length, naturally, but more: the commitment the writer shouldered in order to create the work, the commitment Constant Reader must make to digest it. Not that length and weight alone indicate excellence; many epic tales are pretty much epic crap—just ask my critics, who will moan about entire Canadian forests massacred in order to print my drivel. Conversely, short doesn't always mean sweet. In some cases (*The Bridges of Madison County*, for instance), short means far too sweet. But there is that matter of commitment, whether a book is good or bad, a failure or a success. Words have weight. Ask anyone who works in the shipping department of a book company warehouse, or in the storage room of a large bookstore.

Words create sentences; sentences create paragraphs; sometimes paragraphs quicken and begin to breathe. Imagine, if you like, Frankenstein's monster on its slab. Here comes lightning, not from the sky but from a humble paragraph of English words. Maybe it's the first really good paragraph you ever wrote, something so fragile and yet full of possibility that you are frightened. You feel as Victor Frankenstein must have when the dead conglomeration of sewn-together spare parts suddenly opened its watery yellow eyes. *Oh my God, it's breathing*, you realize. *Maybe it's even thinking. What in hell's name do I do next?*

You go on to the third level, of course, and begin to write real fiction. Why shouldn't you? Why should you fear? Carpenters don't build monsters, after all; they build houses, stores, and banks. They build some of wood a plank at a time and some of brick a brick at a time. You will build a paragraph at a time, constructing these of your vocabulary and your knowledge of grammar and basic style. As long as you stay level-on-the-level and shave even every door, you can build whatever you like—whole mansions, if you have the energy.

Is there any rationale for building entire mansions of words? I think there is, and that the readers of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* and Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* understand it: sometimes even a monster is no monster. Sometimes it's beautiful and we fall in love with all that story, more than any film or TV program could ever hope to provide. Even after a thousand pages we don't want to leave the world the writer has made for us, or the make-believe people who live there. You wouldn't leave after two thousand pages, if there were two thousand. The *Rings* trilogy of J. R. R. Tolkien is a perfect example of this. A thousand pages of hobbits hasn't been enough for three generations of post-World War II fantasy fans; even when you add in that clumsy, galumphing dirigible of an epilogue, *The Silmarillion*, it hasn't been enough. Hence Terry Brooks, Piers Anthony, Robert Jordan, the questing rabbits of *Watership Down*, and half a hundred others. The writers of these books are creating the hobbits they still love and pine for; they are trying to bring Frodo and Sam back from the Grey Havens because Tolkien is no longer around to do it for them.

At its most basic we are only discussing a learned skill, but do we not agree that sometimes the most basic skills can create things far beyond our expectations? We are talking about tools and carpentry, about words and style ... but as we move along, you'd do well to remember that we are also talking about magic.

ON WRITING

There are no bad dogs, according to the title of a popular training manual, but don't tell that to the parent of a child mauled by a pit bull or a rottweiler; he or she is apt to bust your beak for you. And no matter how much I want to encourage the man or woman trying for the first time to write seriously, I can't lie and say there are no bad writers. Sorry, but there are *lots* of bad writers. Some are on-staff at your local newspaper, usually reviewing little-theater productions or pontificating about the local sports teams. Some have scribbled their way to homes in the Caribbean, leaving a trail of pulsing adverbs, wooden characters, and vile passive-voice constructions behind them. Others hold forth at open-mike poetry slams, wearing black turtlenecks and wrinkled khaki pants; they spout doggerel about "my angry lesbian breasts" and "the tilted alley where I cried my mother's name."

Writers form themselves into the pyramid we see in all areas of human talent and human creativity. At the bottom are the bad ones. Above them is a group which is slightly smaller but still large and welcoming; these are the competent writers. They may also be found on the staff of your local newspaper, on the racks at your local bookstore, and at poetry readings on Open Mike Night. These are folks who somehow understand that although a lesbian may be angry, her breasts will remain breasts.

The next level is much smaller. These are the really good writers. Above them—above almost all of us—are the Shakespeares, the Faulkners, the Yeatses, Shaws, and Eudora Weltys. They are geniuses, divine accidents, gifted in a way which is beyond our ability to understand, let alone attain. Shit, most geniuses aren't able to understand themselves, and many of them lead miserable lives, realizing (at least on some level) that they are nothing but fortunate freaks, the intellectual version of runway models who just happen to be born with the right cheekbones and with breasts which fit the image of an age.

I am approaching the heart of this book with two theses, both simple. The first is that good writing consists of mastering the fundamentals (vocabulary, grammar, the elements of style) and then filling the third level of your toolbox with the right instruments. The second is that while it is impossible to make a competent writer out of a bad writer, and while it is equally impossible to make a great writer out of a good one, it is possible, with lots of hard work, dedication, and timely help, to make a good writer out of a merely competent one.

I'm afraid this idea is rejected by lots of critics and plenty of writing teachers, as well. Many of these are liberals in their politics but crustaceans in their chosen fields. Men and women who would take to the streets to protest the exclusion of African-Americans or Native Americans (I can imagine what Mr. Strunk would have made of these politically correct but clunky terms) from the local country club are often the same men and women who tell their classes that writing ability is fixed and immutable; once a hack, always a hack. Even if a writer rises in the estimation of an influential critic or two, he/she always carries his/her early reputation along, like a respectable married woman who was a wild child as a teenager. Some people never forget, that's all, and a good deal of literary criticism serves only to reinforce a caste system which is as old as the intellectual snobbery which nurtured it. Raymond Chandler may be recognized now as

an important figure in twentieth-century American literature, an early voice describing the anomie of urban life in the years after World War II, but there are plenty of critics who will reject such a judgment out of hand. He's a hack! they cry indignantly. A hack with pretensions! The worst kind! The kind who thinks he can pass for one of *us*!

Critics who try to rise above this intellectual hardening of the arteries usually meet with limited success. Their colleagues may accept Chandler into the company of the great, but are apt to seat him at the foot of the table. And there are always those whispers: *Came out of the pulp tradition, you know ... carries himself well for one of those, doesn't he? ... did you know he wrote for Black Mask in the thirties ... yes, regrettable ...*

Even Charles Dickens, the Shakespeare of the novel, has faced a constant critical attack as a result of his often sensational subject matter, his cheerful fecundity (when he wasn't creating novels, he and his wife were creating children), and, of course, his success with the book-reading groundlings of his time and ours. Critics and scholars have always been suspicious of popular success. Often their suspicions are justified. In other cases, these suspicions are used as an excuse not to think. No one can be as intellectually slothful as a really smart person; give smart people half a chance and they will ship their oars and drift ... dozing to Byzantium, you might say.

So yes—I expect to be accused by some of promoting a brainless and happy Horatio Alger philosophy, defending my own less-than-spotless reputation while I'm at it, and of encouraging people who are “just not our sort, old chap” to apply for membership at the country club. I guess I can live with that. But before we go on, let me repeat my basic premise: if you're a bad writer, no one can help you become a good one, or even a competent one. If you're good and want to be great ... fuhgeddaboutit.

What follows is everything I know about how to write good fiction. I'll be as brief as possible, because your time is valuable and so is mine, and we both understand that the hours we spend talking about writing is time we don't spend actually *doing* it. I'll be as encouraging as possible, because it's my nature and because I love this job. I want you to love it, too. But if you don't want to work your ass off, you have no business trying to write well—settle back into competency and be grateful you have even that much to fall back on. There is a muse,* but he's not going to come fluttering down into your writing room and scatter creative fairy-dust all over your typewriter or computer station. He lives in the ground. He's a basement guy. You have to descend to his level, and once you get down there you have to furnish an apartment for him to live in. You have to do all the grunt labor, in other words, while the muse sits and smokes cigars and admires his bowling trophies and pretends to ignore you. Do you think this is fair? *I* think it's fair. He may not be much to look at, that muse-guy, and he may not be much of a conversationalist (what I get out of mine is mostly surly grunts, unless he's on duty), but he's got the inspiration. It's right that you should do all the work and burn all the midnight oil, because the guy with the cigar and the little wings has got a bag of magic. There's stuff in there that can change your life.

Believe me, I know.

If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot. There's no way around these two things that I'm aware of, no shortcut.

I'm a slow reader, but I usually get through seventy or eighty books a year, mostly fiction. I don't read in order to study the craft; I read because I like to read. It's what I do at night, kicked back in my blue chair. Similarly, I don't read fiction to study the art of fiction, but simply because I like stories. Yet there is a learning process going on. Every book you pick up has its own lesson or lessons, and quite often the bad books have more to teach than the good ones.

When I was in the eighth grade, I happened upon a paperback novel by Murray Leinster, a science fiction pulp writer who did most of his work during the forties and fifties, when magazines like *Amazing Stories* paid a penny a word. I had read other books by Mr. Leinster, enough to know that the quality of his writing was uneven. This particular tale, which was about mining in the asteroid belt, was one of his less successful efforts. Only that's too kind. It was terrible, actually, a story populated by paper-thin characters and driven by outlandish plot developments. Worst of all (or so it seemed to me at the time), Leinster had fallen in love with the word *zestful*. Characters watched the approach of ore-bearing asteroids with *zestful smiles*. Characters sat down to supper aboard their mining ship with *zestful anticipation*. Near the end of the book, the hero swept the large-breasted, blonde heroine into a *zestful embrace*. For me, it was the literary equivalent of a smallpox vaccination: I have never, so far as I know, used the word *zestful* in a novel or a story. God willing, I never will.

Asteroid Miners (which wasn't the title, but that's close enough) was an important book in my life as a reader. Almost everyone can remember losing his or her virginity, and most writers can remember the first book he/she put down thinking: *I can do better than this. Hell, I am doing better than this!* What could be more encouraging to the struggling writer than to realize his/her work is unquestionably better than that of someone who actually got paid for his/her stuff?

One learns most clearly what not to do by reading bad prose—one novel like *Asteroid Miners* (or *Valley of the Dolls*, *Flowers in the Attic*, and *The Bridges of Madison County*, to name just a few) is worth a semester at a good writing school, even with the superstar guest lecturers thrown in.

Good writing, on the other hand, teaches the learning writer about style, graceful narration, plot development, the creation of believable characters, and truth-telling. A novel like *The Grapes of Wrath* may fill a new writer with feelings of despair and good old-fashioned jealousy—"I'll never be able to write anything that good, not if I live to be a thousand"—but such feelings can also serve as a spur, goading the writer to work harder and aim higher. Being swept away by a combination of great story and great writing—of being flattened, in fact—is part of every writer's necessary formation. You cannot hope to sweep someone else away by the force of your writing until it has been done to you.

So we read to experience the mediocre and the outright rotten; such experience helps us to recognize those things when they begin to creep into our own work, and to steer clear of them. We also read in order to measure ourselves against the good and the great, to get a sense of all that can be done. And we read in order to experience different styles.

You may find yourself adopting a style you find particularly exciting, and there's nothing wrong with that. When I read Ray Bradbury as a kid, I wrote like Ray Bradbury—everything green and wondrous and seen through a lens smeared with the grease of nostalgia. When I read James M.

Cain, everything I wrote came out clipped and stripped and hardboiled. When I read Lovecraft, my prose became luxurious and Byzantine. I wrote stories in my teenage years where all these styles merged, creating a kind of hilarious stew. This sort of stylistic blending is a necessary part of developing one's own style, but it doesn't occur in a vacuum. You have to read widely, constantly refining (and redefining) your own work as you do so. It's hard for me to believe that people who read very little (or not at all in some cases) should presume to write and expect people to like what they have written, but I know it's true. If I had a nickel for every person who ever told me he/she wanted to become a writer but "didn't have time to read," I could buy myself a pretty good steak dinner. Can I be blunt on this subject? If you don't have time to read, you don't have the time (or the tools) to write. Simple as that.

Reading is the creative center of a writer's life. I take a book with me everywhere I go, and find there are all sorts of opportunities to dip in. The trick is to teach yourself to read in small sips as well as in long swallows. Waiting rooms were made for books—of course! But so are theater lobbies before the show, long and boring checkout lines, and everyone's favorite, the john. You can even read while you're driving, thanks to the audiobook revolution. Of the books I read each year, anywhere from six to a dozen are on tape. As for all the wonderful radio you will be missing, come on—how many times can you listen to Deep Purple sing "Highway Star"?

Reading at meals is considered rude in polite society, but if you expect to succeed as a writer, rudeness should be the second-to-least of your concerns. The least of all should be polite society and what it expects. If you intend to write as truthfully as you can, your days as a member of polite society are numbered, anyway.

Where else can you read? There's always the treadmill, or whatever you use down at the local health club to get aerobic. I try to spend an hour doing that every day, and I think I'd go mad without a good novel to keep me company. Most exercise facilities (at home as well as outside it) are now equipped with TVs, but TV—while working out or anywhere else—really is about the last thing an aspiring writer needs. If you feel you must have the news analyst blowhards on CNN while you exercise, or the stock market blowhards on MSNBC, or the sports blowhards on ESPN, it's time for you to question how serious you really are about becoming a writer. You must be prepared to do some serious turning inward toward the life of the imagination, and that means, I'm afraid, that Geraldo, Keith Obermann, and Jay Leno must go. Reading takes time, and the glass teat takes too much of it.

Once weaned from the ephemeral craving for TV, most people will find they enjoy the time they spend reading. I'd like to suggest that turning off that endlessly quacking box is apt to improve the quality of your life as well as the quality of your writing. And how much of a sacrifice are we talking about here? How many *Frasier* and *ER* reruns does it take to make one American life complete? How many Richard Simmons infomercials? How many whiteboy/fatboy Beltway insiders on CNN? Oh man, don't get me started. Jerry-Springer-Dr.-Dre-Judge-Judy-Jerry-Falwell-Donny-and-Marie, I rest my case.

When my son Owen was seven or so, he fell in love with Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band, particularly with Clarence Clemons, the band's burly sax player. Owen decided he wanted to learn to play like Clarence. My wife and I were amused and delighted by this ambition. We were also hopeful, as any parent would be, that our kid would turn out to be talented, perhaps even some sort of prodigy. We got Owen a tenor saxophone for Christmas and lessons with Gordon Bowie, one of the local music men. Then we crossed our fingers and hoped for the best.

Seven months later I suggested to my wife that it was time to discontinue the sax lessons, if Owen concurred. Owen did, and with palpable relief—he hadn’t wanted to say it himself, especially not after asking for the sax in the first place, but seven months had been long enough for him to realize that, while he might love Clarence Clemons’s big sound, the saxophone was simply not for him—God had not given him that particular talent.

I knew, not because Owen stopped practicing, but because he was practicing only during the periods Mr. Bowie had set for him: half an hour after school four days a week, plus an hour on the weekends. Owen mastered the scales and the notes—nothing wrong with his memory, his lungs, or his eye-hand coordination—but we never heard him taking off, surprising himself with something new, blissing himself out. And as soon as his practice time was over, it was back into the case with the horn, and there it stayed until the next lesson or practice-time. What this suggested to me was that when it came to the sax and my son, there was never going to be any real play-time; it was all going to be rehearsal. That’s no good. If there’s no joy in it, it’s just no good. It’s best to go on to some other area, where the deposits of talent may be richer and the fun quotient higher.

Talent renders the whole idea of rehearsal meaningless; when you find something at which you are talented, you do it (whatever *it* is) until your fingers bleed or your eyes are ready to fall out of your head. Even when no one is listening (or reading, or watching), every outing is a bravura performance, because you as the creator are happy. Perhaps even ecstatic. That goes for reading and writing as well as for playing a musical instrument, hitting a baseball, or running the four-forty. The sort of strenuous reading and writing program I advocate—four to six hours a day, every day—will not seem strenuous if you really enjoy doing these things and have an aptitude for them; in fact, you may be following such a program already. If you feel you need permission to do all the reading and writing your little heart desires, however, consider it hereby granted by yours truly.

The real importance of reading is that it creates an ease and intimacy with the process of writing; one comes to the country of the writer with one’s papers and identification pretty much in order. Constant reading will pull you into a place (a mind-set, if you like the phrase) where you can write eagerly and without self-consciousness. It also offers you a constantly growing knowledge of what has been done and what hasn’t, what is trite and what is fresh, what works and what just lies there dying (or dead) on the page. The more you read, the less apt you are to make a fool of yourself with your pen or word processor.

– 2 –

If “read a lot, write a lot” is the Great Commandment—and I assure you that it is—how much writing constitutes a lot? That varies, of course, from writer to writer. One of my favorite stories on the subject—probably more myth than truth—concerns James Joyce.* According to the story, a friend came to visit him one day and found the great man sprawled across his writing desk in a posture of utter despair.

“James, what’s wrong?” the friend asked. “Is it the work?”

Joyce indicated assent without even raising his head to look at the friend. Of course it was the work; isn’t it always?

“How many words did you get today?” the friend pursued.

Joyce (still in despair, still sprawled facedown on his desk): “Seven.”

“Seven? But James ... that’s *good*, at least for you!”

“Yes,” Joyce said, finally looking up. “I suppose it is ... but I don’t know what *order* they go in!”

At the other end of the spectrum, there are writers like Anthony Trollope. He wrote humongous novels (*Can You Forgive Her?* is a fair enough example; for modern audiences it might be retitled *Can You Possibly Finish It?*), and he pumped them out with amazing regularity. His day job was as a clerk in the British Postal Department (the red public mailboxes all over Britain were Anthony Trollope’s invention); he wrote for two and a half hours each morning before leaving for work. This schedule was ironclad. If he was in mid-sentence when the two and a half hours expired, he left that sentence unfinished until the next morning. And if he happened to finish one of his six-hundred-page heavyweights with fifteen minutes of the session remaining, he wrote **The End**, set the manuscript aside, and began work on the next book.

John Creasey, a British mystery novelist, wrote five hundred (yes, you read it correctly) novels under ten different names. I’ve written thirty-five or so—some of Trollopian length—and am considered prolific, but I look positively blocked next to Creasey. Several other contemporary novelists (they include Ruth Rendell/Barbara Vine, Evan Hunter/Ed McBain, Dean Koontz, and Joyce Carol Oates) have written easily as much as I have; some have written a good deal more.

On the other hand—the James Joyce hand—there is Harper Lee, who wrote only one book (the brilliant *To Kill a Mockingbird*). Any number of others, including James Agee, Malcolm Lowry, and Thomas Harris (so far), wrote under five. Which is okay, but I always wonder two things about these folks: how long did it take them to write the books they *did* write, and what did they do the rest of their time? Knit afghans? Organize church bazaars? Deify plums? I’m probably being snotty here, but I am also, believe me, honestly curious. If God gives you something you can do, why in God’s name wouldn’t you do it?

My own schedule is pretty clear-cut. Mornings belong to whatever is new—the current composition. Afternoons are for naps and letters. Evenings are for reading, family, Red Sox games on TV, and any revisions that just cannot wait. Basically, mornings are my prime writing time.

Once I start work on a project, I don’t stop and I don’t slow down unless I absolutely have to. If I don’t write every day, the characters begin to stale off in my mind—they begin to *seem* like characters instead of real people. The tale’s narrative cutting edge starts to rust and I begin to lose my hold on the story’s plot and pace. Worst of all, the excitement of spinning something new begins to fade. The work starts to *feel* like work, and for most writers that is the smooch of death. Writing is at its best—always, always, always—when it is a kind of inspired play for the writer. I can write in cold blood if I have to, but I like it best when it’s fresh and almost too hot to handle.

I used to tell interviewers that I wrote every day except for Christmas, the Fourth of July, and my birthday. That was a lie. I told them that because if you agree to an interview you have to say *something*, and it plays better if it’s something at least half-clever. Also, I didn’t want to sound like a workaholic dweeb (just a workaholic, I guess). The truth is that when I’m writing, I write every day, workaholic dweeb or not. That *includes* Christmas, the Fourth, and my birthday (at

my age you try to ignore your goddam birthday anyway). And when I'm not working, I'm not working at all, although during those periods of full stop I usually feel at loose ends with myself and have trouble sleeping. For me, not working is the real work. When I'm writing, it's all the playground, and the worst three hours I ever spent there were still pretty damned good.

I used to be faster than I am now; one of my books (*The Running Man*) was written in a single week, an accomplishment John Creasey would perhaps have appreciated (although I have read that Creasey wrote several of his mysteries in *two days*). I think it was quitting smoking that slowed me down; nicotine is a great synapse enhancer. The problem, of course, is that it's killing you at the same time it's helping you compose. Still, I believe the first draft of a book—even a long one—should take no more than three months, the length of a season. Any longer and—for me, at least—the story begins to take on an odd foreign feel, like a dispatch from the Romanian Department of Public Affairs, or something broadcast on high-band shortwave during a period of severe sunspot activity.

I like to get ten pages a day, which amounts to 2,000 words. That's 180,000 words over a three-month span, a goodish length for a book—something in which the reader can get happily lost, if the tale is done well and stays fresh. On some days those ten pages come easily; I'm up and out and doing errands by eleven-thirty in the morning, perky as a rat in liverwurst. More frequently, as I grow older, I find myself eating lunch at my desk and finishing the day's work around one-thirty in the afternoon. Sometimes, when the words come hard, I'm still fiddling around at teatime. Either way is fine with me, but only under dire circumstances do I allow myself to shut down before I get my 2,000 words.

The biggest aid to regular (Trollopian?) production is working in a serene atmosphere. It's difficult for even the most naturally productive writer to work in an environment where alarms and excursions are the rule rather than the exception. When I'm asked for "the secret of my success" (an absurd idea, that, but impossible to get away from), I sometimes say there are two: I stayed physically healthy (at least until a van knocked me down by the side of the road in the summer of 1999), and I stayed married. It's a good answer because it makes the question go away, and because there is an element of truth in it. The combination of a healthy body and a stable relationship with a self-reliant woman who takes zero shit from me or anyone else has made the continuity of my working life possible. And I believe the converse is also true: that my writing and the pleasure I take in it has contributed to the stability of my health and my home life.

– 3 –

You can read anywhere, almost, but when it comes to writing, library carrels, park benches, and rented flats should be courts of last resort—Truman Capote said he did his best work in motel rooms, but he is an exception; most of us do our best in a place of our own. Until you get one, you'll find your new resolution to write a lot hard to take seriously.

Your writing room doesn't have to sport a Playboy Philosophy decor, and you don't need an Early American rolltop desk in which to house your writing implements. I wrote my first two published novels, *Carrie* and *'Salem's Lot*, in the laundry room of a doublewide trailer, pounding away on my wife's portable Olivetti typewriter and balancing a child's desk on my thighs; John

Cheever reputedly wrote in the basement of his Park Avenue apartment building, near the furnace. The space can be humble (probably *should* be, as I think I have already suggested), and it really needs only one thing: a door which you are willing to shut. The closed door is your way of telling the world and yourself that you mean business; you have made a serious commitment to write and intend to walk the walk as well as talk the talk.

By the time you step into your new writing space and close the door, you should have settled on a daily writing goal. As with physical exercise, it would be best to set this goal low at first, to avoid discouragement. I suggest a thousand words a day, and because I'm feeling magnanimous, I'll also suggest that you can take one day a week off, at least to begin with. No more; you'll lose the urgency and immediacy of your story if you do. With that goal set, resolve to yourself that the door stays closed until that goal is met. Get busy putting those thousand words on paper or on a floppy disk. In an early interview (this was to promote *Carrie*, I think), a radio talk-show host asked me how I wrote. My reply—"One word at a time"—seemingly left him without a reply. I think he was trying to decide whether or not I was joking. I wasn't. In the end, it's always that simple. Whether it's a vignette of a single page or an epic trilogy like *The Lord of the Rings*, the work is always accomplished one word at a time. The door closes the rest of the world out; it also serves to close you in and keep you focused on the job at hand.

If possible, there should be no telephone in your writing room, certainly no TV or videogames for you to fool around with. If there's a window, draw the curtains or pull down the shades unless it looks out at a blank wall. For any writer, but for the beginning writer in particular, it's wise to eliminate every possible distraction. If you continue to write, you will begin to filter out these distractions naturally, but at the start it's best to try and take care of them before you write. I work to loud music—hard-rock stuff like AC/DC, Guns 'n Roses, and Metallica have always been particular favorites—but for me the music is just another way of shutting the door. It surrounds me, keeps the mundane world out. When you write, you want to get rid of the world, do you not? Of course you do. When you're writing, you're creating your own worlds.

I think we're actually talking about creative sleep. Like your bedroom, your writing room should be private, a place where you go to dream. Your schedule—in at about the same time every day, out when your thousand words are on paper or disk—exists in order to habituate yourself, to make yourself ready to dream just as you make yourself ready to sleep by going to bed at roughly the same time each night and following the same ritual as you go. In both writing and sleeping, we learn to be physically still at the same time we are encouraging our minds to unlock from the humdrum rational thinking of our daytime lives. And as your mind and body grow accustomed to a certain amount of sleep each night—six hours, seven, maybe the recommended eight—so can you train your waking mind to sleep creatively and work out the vividly imagined waking dreams which are successful works of fiction.

But you need the room, you need the door, and you need the determination to shut the door. You need a concrete goal, as well. The longer you keep to these basics, the easier the act of writing will become. Don't wait for the muse. As I've said, he's a hardheaded guy who's not susceptible to a lot of creative fluttering. This isn't the Ouija board or the spirit-world we're talking about here, but just another job like laying pipe or driving long-haul trucks. Your job is to make sure the muse knows where you're going to be every day from nine 'til noon or seven 'til three. If he does know, I assure you that sooner or later he'll start showing up, chomping his cigar and making his magic.

– 4 –

So okay—there you are in your room with the shade down and the door shut and the plug pulled out of the base of the telephone. You’ve blown up your TV and committed yourself to a thousand words a day, come hell or high water. Now comes the big question: What are you going to write about? And the equally big answer: Anything you damn well want. Anything at all ... *as long as you tell the truth.*

The dictum in writing classes used to be “write what you know.” Which sounds good, but what if you want to write about starships exploring other planets or a man who murders his wife and then tries to dispose of her body with a wood-chipper? How does the writer square either of these, or a thousand other fanciful ideas, with the “write-what-you-know” directive?

I think you begin by interpreting “write what you know” as broadly and inclusively as possible. If you’re a plumber, you know plumbing, but that is far from the extent of your knowledge; the heart also knows things, and so does the imagination. Thank God. If not for heart and imagination, the world of fiction would be a pretty seedy place. It might not even exist at all.

In terms of genre, it’s probably fair to assume that you will begin by writing what you love to read—certainly I have recounted my early love affair with the EC horror comics until the tale has gone stale. But I *did* love them, ditto horror movies like *I Married a Monster from Outer Space*, and the result was stories like “I Was a Teenage Graverobber.” Even today I’m not above writing slightly more sophisticated versions of that tale; I was built with a love of the night and the unquiet coffin, that’s all. If you disapprove, I can only shrug my shoulders. It’s what I have.

If you happen to be a science fiction fan, it’s natural that you should want to write science fiction (and the more sf you’ve read, the less likely it is that you’ll simply revisit the field’s well-mined conventions, such as space opera and dystopian satire). If you’re a mystery fan, you’ll want to write mysteries, and if you enjoy romances, it’s natural for you to want to write romances of your own. There’s nothing wrong with writing any of these things. What would be very wrong, I think, is to turn away from what you know and like (or love, the way I loved those old ECs and black-and-white horror flicks) in favor of things you believe will impress your friends, relatives, and writing-circle colleagues. What’s equally wrong is the deliberate turning toward some genre or type of fiction in order to make money. It’s morally wonky, for one thing—the job of fiction is to find the truth inside the story’s web of lies, not to commit intellectual dishonesty in the hunt for the buck. Also, brothers and sisters, it doesn’t work.

When I’m asked why I decided to write the sort of thing I do write, I always think the question is more revealing than any answer I could possibly give. Wrapped within it, like the chewy stuff in the center of a Tootsie Pop, is the assumption that the writer controls the material instead of the other way around.* The writer who is serious and committed is incapable of sizing up story material the way an investor might size up various stock offerings, picking out the ones which seem likely to provide a good return. If it could indeed be done that way, every novel published would be a best-seller and the huge advances paid to a dozen or so “big-name writers” would not exist (publishers would like that).

Grisham, Clancy, Crichton, and myself—among others—are paid these large sums of money because we are selling uncommonly large numbers of books to uncommonly large audiences. A critical assumption is sometimes made that we have access to some mystical vulgate that other

(and often better) writers either cannot find or will not deign to use. I doubt if this is true. Nor do I believe the contention of some popular novelists (although she was not the only one, I am thinking of the late Jacqueline Susann) that their success is based on literary merit—that the public understands true greatness in ways the tight-assed, consumed-by-jealousy literary establishment cannot. This idea is ridiculous, a product of vanity and insecurity.

Book-buyers aren't attracted, by and large, by the literary merits of a novel; book-buyers want a good story to take with them on the airplane, something that will first fascinate them, then pull them in and keep them turning the pages. This happens, I think, when readers recognize the people in a book, their behaviors, their surroundings, and their talk. When the reader hears strong echoes of his or her own life and beliefs, he or she is apt to become more invested in the story. I'd argue that it's impossible to make this sort of connection in a premeditated way, gauging the market like a racetrack tout with a hot tip.

Stylistic imitation is one thing, a perfectly honorable way to get started as a writer (and impossible to avoid, really; some sort of imitation marks each new stage of a writer's development), but one cannot imitate a writer's approach to a particular genre, no matter how simple what that writer is doing may seem. You can't aim a book like a cruise missile, in other words. People who decide to make a fortune writing like John Grisham or Tom Clancy produce nothing but pale imitations, by and large, because vocabulary is not the same thing as feeling and plot is light-years from the truth as it is understood by the mind and the heart. When you see a novel with "**In the tradition of** (John Grisham/Patricia Cornwell/Mary Higgins Clark/Dean Koontz)" on the cover, you know you are looking at one of these overcalculated (and likely boring) imitations.

Write what you like, then imbue it with life and make it unique by blending in your own personal knowledge of life, friendship, relationships, sex, and work. Especially work. People love to read about work. God knows why, but they do. If you're a plumber who enjoys science fiction, you might well consider a novel about a plumber aboard a starship or on an alien planet. Sound ludicrous? The late Clifford D. Simak wrote a novel called *Cosmic Engineers* which is close to just that. And it's a terrific read. What you need to remember is that there's a difference between lecturing about what you know and using it to enrich the story. The latter is good. The former is not.

Consider John Grisham's breakout novel, *The Firm*. In this story, a young lawyer discovers that his first job, which seemed too good to be true, really is—he's working for the Mafia. Suspenseful, involving, and paced at breakneck speed, *The Firm* sold roughly nine gazillion copies. What seemed to fascinate its audience was the moral dilemma in which the young lawyer finds himself: working for the mob is bad, no argument there, but the frocking pay is *great*! You can drive a Beemer, and that's just for openers!

Audiences also enjoyed the lawyer's resourceful efforts to extricate himself from his dilemma. It might not be the way most people would behave, and the *deus ex machina* clanks pretty steadily in the last fifty pages, but it is the way most of us would *like* to behave. And wouldn't we also like to have a *deus ex machina* in our lives?

Although I don't know for sure, I'd bet my dog and lot that John Grisham never worked for the mob. All of that is total fabrication (and total fabrication is the fiction-writer's purest delight). He was once a young lawyer, though, and he has clearly forgotten none of the struggle. Nor has he

forgotten the location of the various financial pitfalls and honey-traps that make the field of corporate law so difficult. Using plainspun humor as a brilliant counterpoint and never substituting cant for story, he sketches a world of Darwinian struggle where all the savages wear three-piece suits. And— here’s the good part—*this is a world impossible not to believe*. Grisham has been there, spied out the land and the enemy positions, and brought back a full report. He told the truth of what he knew, and for that if nothing else, he deserves every buck *The Firm* made.

Critics who dismissed *The Firm* and Grisham’s later books as poorly written and who profess themselves to be mystified by his success are either missing the point because it’s so big and obvious or because they are being deliberately obtuse. Grisham’s make-believe tale is solidly based in a reality he knows, has personally experienced, and which he wrote about with total (almost naive) honesty. The result is a book which is—cardboard characters or no, we could argue about that— both brave and uniquely satisfying. You as a beginning writer would do well not to imitate the lawyers-in-trouble genre Grisham seems to have created but to emulate Grisham’s openness and inability to do anything other than get right to the point.

John Grisham, of course, knows lawyers. What *you* know makes you unique in some other way. Be brave. Map the enemy’s positions, come back, tell us all you know. And remember that plumbers in space is not such a bad setup for a story.

– 5 –

In my view, stories and novels consist of three parts: narration, which moves the story from point A to point B and finally to point Z; description, which creates a sensory reality for the reader; and dialogue, which brings characters to life through their speech.

You may wonder where plot is in all this. The answer—my answer, anyway—is nowhere. I won’t try to convince you that I’ve never plotted any more than I’d try to convince you that I’ve never told a lie, but I do both as infrequently as possible. I distrust plot for two reasons: first, because our *lives* are largely plotless, even when you add in all our reasonable precautions and careful planning; and second, because I believe plotting and the spontaneity of real creation aren’t compatible. It’s best that I be as clear about this as I can—I want you to understand that my basic belief about the making of stories is that they pretty much make themselves. The job of the writer is to give them a place to grow (and to transcribe them, of course). If you can see things this way (or at least try to), we can work together comfortably. If, on the other hand, you decide I’m crazy, that’s fine. You won’t be the first.

When, during the course of an interview for *The New Yorker*, I told the interviewer (Mark Singer) that I believed stories are found things, like fossils in the ground, he said that he didn’t believe me. I replied that that was fine, as long as he believed that *I* believe it. And I do. Stories aren’t souvenir tee-shirts or GameBoys. Stories are relics, part of an undiscovered pre-existing world. The writer’s job is to use the tools in his or her toolbox to get as much of each one out of the ground intact as possible. Sometimes the fossil you uncover is small; a seashell. Sometimes it’s enormous, a *Tyrannosaurus Rex* with all those gigantic ribs and grinning teeth. Either way, short story or thousand-page whopper of a novel, the techniques of excavation remain basically the same.

No matter how good you are, no matter how much experience you have, it's probably impossible to get the entire fossil out of the ground without a few breaks and losses. To get even *most* of it, the shovel must give way to more delicate tools: airhose, palm-pick, perhaps even a toothbrush. Plot is a far bigger tool, the writer's jackhammer. You can liberate a fossil from hard ground with a jackhammer, no argument there, but you know as well as I do that the jackhammer is going to break almost as much stuff as it liberates. It's clumsy, mechanical, anticreative. Plot is, I think, the good writer's last resort and the dullard's first choice. The story which results from it is apt to feel artificial and labored.

I lean more heavily on intuition, and have been able to do that because my books tend to be based on situation rather than story. Some of the ideas which have produced those books are more complex than others, but the majority start out with the stark simplicity of a department store window display or a waxwork tableau. I want to put a group of characters (perhaps a pair; perhaps even just one) in some sort of predicament and then watch them try to work themselves free. My job isn't to *help* them work their way free, or manipulate them to safety—those are jobs which require the noisy jackhammer of plot—but to watch what happens and then write it down.

The situation comes first. The characters—always flat and unfeatured, to begin with—come next. Once these things are fixed in my mind, I begin to narrate. I often have an idea of what the outcome may be, but I have never demanded of a set of characters that they do things my way. On the contrary, I want them to do things *their* way. In some instances, the outcome is what I visualized. In most, however, it's something I never expected. For a suspense novelist, this is a great thing. I am, after all, not just the novel's creator but its first reader. And if *I'm* not able to guess with any accuracy how the damned thing is going to turn out, even with my inside knowledge of coming events, I can be pretty sure of keeping the reader in a state of page-turning anxiety. And why worry about the ending anyway? Why be such a control freak? Sooner or later every story comes out *somewhere*.

In the early 1980s, my wife and I went to London on a combined business/pleasure trip. I fell asleep on the plane and had a dream about a popular writer (it may or may not have been me, but it sure to God wasn't James Caan) who fell into the clutches of a psychotic fan living on a farm somewhere out in the back of the beyond. The fan was a woman isolated by her growing paranoia. She kept some livestock in the barn, including her pet pig, Misery. The pig was named after the continuing main character in the writer's best-selling bodice-rippers. My clearest memory of this dream upon waking was something the woman said to the writer, who had a broken leg and was being kept prisoner in the back bedroom. I wrote it on an American Airlines cocktail napkin so I wouldn't forget it, then put it in my pocket. I lost it somewhere, but can remember most of what I wrote down:

She speaks earnestly but never quite makes eye contact. A big woman and solid all through; she is an absence of hiatus. (Whatever that means; remember, I'd just woken up.) "I wasn't trying to be funny in a mean way when I named my pig Misery, no sir. Please don't think that. No, I named her in the spirit of fan love, which is the purest love there is. You should be flattered."

Tabby and I stayed at Brown's Hotel in London, and on our first night there I was unable to sleep. Some of it was what sounded like a trio of little-girl gymnasts in the room directly above ours, some of it was undoubtedly jet lag, but a lot of it was that airline cocktail napkin. Jotted on it was the seed of what I thought could be a really excellent story, one that might turn out funny and satiric as well as scary. I thought it was just too rich not to write.

I got up, went downstairs, and asked the concierge if there was a quiet place where I could work longhand for a bit. He led me to a gorgeous desk on the second-floor stair landing. It had been Rudyard Kipling's desk, he told me with perhaps justifiable pride. I was a little intimidated by this intelligence, but the spot was quiet and the desk seemed hospitable enough; it featured about an acre of cherrywood working surface, for one thing. Stoked on cup after cup of tea (I drank it by the gallon when I wrote ... unless I was drinking beer, that is), I filled sixteen pages of a steno notebook. I like to work longhand, actually; the only problem is that, once I get jazzed, I can't keep up with the lines forming in my head and I get frazzled.

When I called it quits, I stopped in the lobby to thank the concierge again for letting me use Mr. Kipling's beautiful desk. "I'm so glad you enjoyed it," he replied. He was wearing a misty, reminiscent little smile, as if he had known the writer himself. "Kipling died there, actually. Of a stroke. While he was writing."

I went back upstairs to catch a few hours' sleep, thinking of how often we are given information we really could have done without.

The working title of my story, which I thought would be a novella of about 30,000 words, was "The Annie Wilkes Edition." When I sat down at Mr. Kipling's beautiful desk I had the basic situation—crippled writer, psycho fan—firmly fixed in my mind. The actual *story* did not as then exist (well, it did, but as a relic buried—except for sixteen handwritten pages, that is—in the earth), but knowing the story wasn't necessary for me to begin work. I had located the fossil; the rest, I knew, would consist of careful excavation.

I'd suggest that what works for me may work equally well for you. If you are enslaved to (or intimidated by) the tiresome tyranny of the outline and the notebook filled with "Character Notes," it may liberate you. At the very least, it will turn your mind to something more interesting than Developing the Plot.

(An amusing sidelight: the century's greatest supporter of Developing the Plot may have been Edgar Wallace, a bestselling potboiler novelist of the 1920s. Wallace invented—and patented—a device called the Edgar Wallace Plot Wheel. When you got stuck for the next Plot Development or needed an Amazing Turn of Events in a hurry, you simply spun the Plot Wheel and read what came up in the window: **a fortuitous arrival**, perhaps, or **Heroine declares her love**. These gadgets apparently sold like hotcakes.)

By the time I had finished that first Brown's Hotel session, in which Paul Sheldon wakes up to find himself Annie Wilkes's prisoner, I thought I knew what was going to happen. Annie would demand that Paul write another novel about his plucky continuing character, Misery Chastain, one just for her. After first demurring, Paul would of course agree (a psychotic nurse, I thought, could be very persuasive). Annie would tell him she intended to sacrifice her beloved pig, Misery, to this project. *Misery's Return* would, she'd say, consist of but one copy: a holographic manuscript bound in pigskin!

Here we'd fade out, I thought, and return to Annie's remote Colorado retreat six or eight months later for the surprise ending.

Paul is gone, his sickroom turned into a shrine to Misery Chastain, but Misery the pig is still very much in evidence, grunting serenely away in her sty beside the barn. On the walls of the "Misery Room" are book covers, stills from the Misery movies, pictures of Paul Sheldon, perhaps a newspaper headline reading FAMED ROMANCE NOVELIST STILL MISSING. In the center of the room,

carefully spotlighted, is a single book on a small table (a cherrywood table, of course, in honor of Mr. Kipling). It is the Annie Wilkes Edition of *Misery's Return*. The binding is beautiful, and it should be; it is the skin of Paul Sheldon. And Paul himself? His bones might be buried behind the barn, but I thought it likely that the pig would have eaten the tasty parts.

Not bad, and it would have made a pretty good story (not such a good novel, however; no one likes to root for a guy over the course of three hundred pages only to discover that between chapters sixteen and seventeen the pig ate him), but that wasn't the way things eventually went. Paul Sheldon turned out to be a good deal more resourceful than I initially thought, and his efforts to play Scheherazade and save his life gave me a chance to say some things about the redemptive power of writing that I had long felt but never articulated. Annie also turned out to be more complex than I'd first imagined her, and she was great fun to write about—here was a woman pretty much stuck with “cockadoodie brat” when it came to profanity, but who felt absolutely no qualms about chopping off her favorite writer's foot when he tried to get away from her. In the end, I felt that Annie was almost as much to be pitied as to be feared. And none of the story's details and incidents proceeded from plot; they were organic, each arising naturally from the initial situation, each an uncovered part of the fossil. And I'm writing all this with a smile. As sick with drugs and alcohol as I was much of the time, I had such fun with that one.

Gerald's Game and *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon* are two other purely situational novels. If *Misery* is “two characters in a house,” then *Gerald* is “one woman in a bedroom” and *The Girl Who* is “one kid lost in the woods.” As I told you, I *have* written plotted novels, but the results, in books like *Insomnia* and *Rose Madder*, have not been particularly inspiring. These are (much as I hate to admit it) stiff, trying-too-hard novels. The only plot-driven novel of mine which I really like is *The Dead Zone* (and in all fairness, I must say I like that one a great deal). One book which *seems* plotted—*Bag of Bones*—is actually another situation: “widowed writer in a haunted house.” The back story of *Bag of Bones* is satisfyingly gothic (at least I think so) and very complex, but none of the details were premeditated. The history of TR-90 and the story of what widowed writer Mike Noonan's wife was really up to during the last summer of her life arose spontaneously—all those details were parts of the fossil, in other words.

A strong enough situation renders the whole question of plot moot, which is fine with me. The most interesting situations can usually be expressed as a *What-if* question:

What if vampires invaded a small New England village? (*'Salem's Lot*)

What if a policeman in a remote Nevada town went berserk and started killing everyone in sight? (*Desperation*)

What if a cleaning woman suspected of a murder she got away with (her husband) fell under suspicion for a murder she did not commit (her employer)? (*Dolores Claiborne*)

What if a young mother and her son became trapped in their stalled car by a rabid dog? (*Cujo*)

These were all situations which occurred to me—while showering, while driving, while taking my daily walk—and which I eventually turned into books. In no case were they plotted, not even to the extent of a single note jotted on a single piece of scrap paper, although some of the stories (*Dolores Claiborne*, for instance) are almost as complex as those you find in murder mysteries. Please remember, however, that there is a huge difference between story and plot. Story is honorable and trustworthy; plot is shifty, and best kept under house arrest.

Each of the novels summarized above was smoothed out and detailed by the editorial process, of

course, but most of the elements existed to begin with. “A movie should be there in rough cut,” the film editor Paul Hirsch once told me. The same is true of books. I think it’s rare that incoherence or dull storytelling can be solved by something so minor as a second draft.

This isn’t a textbook, and so there aren’t a lot of exercises, but I want to offer you one now, in case you feel that all this talk about situation replacing plot is so much woolly-headed bullshit. I am going to show you the location of a fossil. Your job is to write five or six pages of unplotted narration concerning this fossil. Put another way, I want you to dig for the bones and see what they look like. I think you may be quite surprised and delighted with the results. Ready? Here we go.

Everyone is familiar with the basic details of the following story; with small variations, it seems to pop up in the Police Beat section of metropolitan daily papers every other week or so. A woman—call her Jane—marries a man who is bright, witty, and pulsing with sexual magnetism. We’ll call the guy Dick; it’s the world’s most Freudian name. Unfortunately, Dick has a dark side. He’s short-tempered, a control freak, perhaps even (you’ll find this out as he speaks and acts) a paranoid. Jane tries mightily to overlook Dick’s faults and make the marriage work (why she tries so hard is something you will also find out; she will come onstage and tell you). They have a child, and for awhile things seem better. Then, when the little girl is three or so, the abuse and the jealous tirades begin again. The abuse is verbal at first, then physical. Dick is convinced that Jane is sleeping with someone, perhaps someone from her job. Is it someone specific? I don’t know and don’t care. Eventually Dick may tell you who he suspects. If he does, we’ll both know, won’t we?

At last poor Jane can’t take it anymore. She divorces the schmuck and gets custody of their daughter, Little Nell. Dick begins to stalk her. Jane responds by getting a restraining order, a document about as useful as a parasol in a hurricane, as many abused women will tell you. Finally, after an incident which you will write in vivid and scary detail—a public beating, perhaps—Richard the Schmuck is arrested and jailed. All of this is back story. How you work it in—and *how much* of it you work in—is up to you. In any case, it’s not the situation. What follows is the situation.

One day shortly after Dick’s incarceration in the city jail, Jane picks up Little Nell at the daycare center and ferries her to a friend’s house for a birthday party. Jane then takes herself home, looking forward to two or three hours’ unaccustomed peace and quiet. Perhaps, she thinks, I’ll take a nap. It’s a house she’s going to, even though she’s a young working woman—the situation sort of demands it. How she came by this house and why she has the afternoon off are things the story will tell you and which will look neatly plotted if you come up with good reasons (perhaps the house belongs to her parents; perhaps she’s house-sitting; perhaps another thing entirely).

Something pings at her, just below the level of consciousness, as she lets herself in, something that makes her uneasy. She can’t isolate it and tells herself it’s just nerves, a little fallout from her five years of hell with Mr. Congeniality. What else *could* it be? Dick is under lock and key, after all.

Before taking her nap, Jane decides to have a cup of herbal tea and watch the news. (Can you use that pot of boiling water on the stove later on? Perhaps, perhaps.) The lead item on *Action News at Three* is a shocker: that morning, three men escaped from the city jail, killing a guard in the process. Two of the three bad guys were recaptured almost at once, but the third is still at large.

None of the prisoners are identified by name (not in *this* newscast, at least), but Jane, sitting in her empty house (which you will now have plausibly explained), knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that one of them was Dick. She knows because she has finally identified that ping of unease she felt in the foyer. It was the smell, faint and fading, of Vitalis hair-tonic. *Dick's* hair-tonic. Jane sits in her chair, her muscles lax with fright, unable to get up. And as she hears Dick's footfalls begin to descend the stairs, she thinks: *Only Dick would make sure he had hair-tonic, even in jail.* She must get up, must run, but she can't move ...

It's a pretty good story, yes? I think so, but not exactly unique. As I've already pointed out, *ESTRANGED HUBBY BEATS UP (or MURDERS) EX-WIFE* makes the paper every other week, sad but true. What I want you to do in this exercise is *change the sexes of the antagonist and protagonist* before beginning to work out the situation in your narrative—make the ex-wife the stalker, in other words (perhaps it's a mental institution she's escaped from instead of the city jail), the husband the victim. Narrate this without plotting—let the situation and that one unexpected inversion carry you along. I predict you will succeed swimmingly ... if, that is, you are honest about how your characters speak and behave. Honesty in storytelling makes up for a great many stylistic faults, as the work of wooden-prose writers like Theodore Dreiser and Ayn Rand shows, but lying is the great unrepairable fault. Liars prosper, no question about it, but only in the grand sweep of things, never down in the jungles of actual composition, where you must take your objective one bloody word at a time. If you begin to lie about what you know and feel while you're down there, everything falls down.

When you finish your exercise, drop me a line at www.stephenking.com and tell me how it worked for you. I can't promise to vet every reply, but I *can* promise to read at least some of your adventures with great interest. I'm curious to know what kind of fossil you dig up, and how much of it you are able to retrieve from the ground intact.

– 6 –

Description is what makes the reader a sensory participant in the story. Good description is a learned skill, one of the prime reasons why you cannot succeed unless you read a lot and write a lot. It's not just a question of *how-to*, you see; it's also a question of *how much to*. Reading will help you answer how much, and only reams of writing will help you with the how. You can learn only by doing.

Description begins with visualization of what it is you want the reader to experience. It ends with your translating what you see in your mind into words on the page. It's far from easy. As I've said, we've all heard someone say, "Man, it was so great (or so horrible/strange/funny) ... I just can't describe it!" If you want to be a successful writer, you *must* be able to describe it, and in a way that will cause your reader to prickle with recognition. If you can do this, you will be paid for your labors, and deservedly so. If you can't, you're going to collect a lot of rejection slips and perhaps explore a career in the fascinating world of telemarketing.

Thin description leaves the reader feeling bewildered and nearsighted. Overdescription buries him or her in details and images. The trick is to find a happy medium. It's also important to know *what* to describe and what can be left alone while you get on with your main job, which is telling a story.

I'm not particularly keen on writing which exhaustively describes the physical characteristics of the people in the story and what they're wearing (I find wardrobe inventory particularly irritating; if I want to read descriptions of clothes, I can always get a J. Crew catalogue). I can't remember many cases where I felt I had to describe what the people in a story of mine looked like—I'd rather let the reader supply the faces, the builds, and the clothing as well. If I tell you that Carrie White is a high school outcast with a bad complexion and a fashion-victim wardrobe, I think you can do the rest, can't you? I don't need to give you a pimple-by-pimple, skirt-by-skirt rundown. We all remember one or more high school losers, after all; if I describe mine, it freezes out yours, and I lose a little bit of the bond of understanding I want to forge between us. Description begins in the writer's imagination, but should finish in the reader's. When it comes to actually pulling this off, the writer is much more fortunate than the filmmaker, who is almost always doomed to show too much ... including, in nine cases out of ten, the zipper running up the monster's back.

I think locale and texture are much more important to the reader's sense of actually being *in* the story than any physical description of the players. Nor do I think that physical description should be a shortcut to character. So spare me, if you please, the hero's **sharply intelligent blue eyes** and **outthrust determined chin**; likewise the heroine's **arrogant cheekbones**. This sort of thing is bad technique and lazy writing, the equivalent of all those tiresome adverbs.

For me, good description usually consists of a few well-chosen details that will stand for everything else. In most cases, these details will be the first ones that come to mind. Certainly they will do for a start. If you decide later on that you'd like to change, add, or delete, you can do so—it's what rewrite was invented for. But I think you will find that, in most cases, your first visualized details will be the truest and best. You should remember (and your reading will prove it over and over again should you begin to doubt) that it's as easy to overdescribe as to underdescribe. Probably easier.

One of my favorite restaurants in New York is the steak-house Palm Too on Second Avenue. If I decide to set a scene in Palm Too, I'll certainly be writing about what I know, as I've been there on a number of occasions. Before beginning to write, I'll take a moment to call up an image of the place, drawing from my memory and filling my mind's eye, an eye whose vision grows sharper the more it is used. I call it a mental eye because that's the phrase with which we're all familiar, but what I actually want to do is open *all* my senses. This memory search will be brief but intense, a kind of hypnotic recall. And, as with actual hypnosis, you'll find it easier to accomplish the more you attempt it.

The first four things which come to my mind when I think of Palm Too are: (a) the darkness of the bar and the contrasting brightness of the backbar mirror, which catches and reflects light from the street; (b) the sawdust on the floor; (c) the funky cartoon caricatures on the walls; (d) the smells of cooking steak and fish.

If I think longer I can come up with more stuff (what I don't remember I'll make up—during the visualization process, fact and fiction become entwined), but there's no need for more. This isn't the Taj Mahal we're visiting, after all, and I don't want to sell you the place. It's also important to remember it's not about the setting, anyway—it's about the story, and it's *always* about the story. It will not behoove me (or you) to wander off into thickets of description just because it would be easy to do. We have other fish (and steak) to fry.

Bearing that in mind, here's a sample bit of narration which takes a character into Palm Too:

The cab pulled up in front of Palm Too at quarter to four on a bright summer afternoon. Billy paid the driver, stepped out onto the sidewalk, and took a quick look around for Martin. Not in sight. Satisfied, Billy went inside.

After the hot clarity of Second Avenue, Palm Too was as dark as a cave. The backbar mirror picked up some of the street-glare and glimmered in the gloom like a mirage. For a moment it was all Billy could see, and then his eyes began to adjust. There were a few solitary drinkers at the bar. Beyond them, the maître d', his tie undone and his shirt cuffs rolled back to show his hairy wrists, was talking with the bartender. There was still sawdust sprinkled on the floor, Billy noted, as if this were a twenties speakeasy instead of a millennium eatery where you couldn't smoke, let alone spit a gob of tobacco between your feet. And the cartoons dancing across the walls—gossip-column caricatures of downtown political hustlers, newsmen who had long since retired or drunk themselves to death, celebrities you couldn't quite recognize—still gambolled all the way to the ceiling. The air was redolent of steak and fried onions. All of it the same as it ever was.

The maître d' stepped forward. "Can I help you, sir? We don't open for dinner until six, but the bar—"

"I'm looking for Richie Martin," Billy said.

Billy's arrival in the cab is narration—action, if you like that word better. What follows after he steps through the door of the restaurant is pretty much straight description. I got in almost all of the details which first came to mind when I accessed my memories of the real Palm Too, and I added a few other things, as well—the maître d' between shifts is pretty good, I think; I love the undone tie and the cuffs rolled up to expose the hairy wrists. It's like a photograph. The smell of fish is the only thing not here, and that's because the smell of the onions was stronger.

We come back to actual storytelling with a bit of narration (the maître d' steps forward to center stage) and then the dialogue. By now we see our location clearly. There are plenty of details I could have added—the narrowness of the room, Tony Bennett on the sound system, the Yankees bumper-sticker on the cash register—but what would be the point? When it comes to scene-setting and all sorts of description, a meal is as good as a feast. We want to know if Billy has located Richie Martin—that's the story we paid our twenty-four bucks to read. More about the restaurant would slow the pace of that story, perhaps annoying us enough to break the spell good fiction can weave. In many cases when a reader puts a story aside because it "got boring," the boredom arose because the writer grew enchanted with his powers of description and lost sight of his priority, which is to keep the ball rolling. If the reader wants to know more about Palm Too than can be found above, he or she can either visit the next time he or she is in New York, or send for a brochure. I've already spilled enough ink here for me to indicate Palm Too will be a major setting for my story. If it turns out not to be, I'd do well to revise the descriptive stuff down by a few lines in the next draft. Certainly I couldn't keep it in on the grounds that it's good; it *should* be good, if I'm being paid to do it. What I'm not being paid to do is be self-indulgent.

There is straight description ("a few solitary drinkers at the bar") and a bit of rather more poetic description ("The backbar mirror ... glimmered in the gloom like a mirage") in my central

descriptive paragraph about Palm Too. Both are okay, but I like the figurative stuff. The use of simile and other figurative language is one of the chief delights of fiction—reading it and writing it, as well. When it’s on target, a simile delights us in much the same way meeting an old friend in a crowd of strangers does. By comparing two seemingly unrelated objects—a restaurant bar and a cave, a mirror and a mirage—we are sometimes able to see an old thing in a new and vivid way.* Even if the result is mere clarity instead of beauty, I think writer and reader are participating together in a kind of miracle. Maybe that’s drawing it a little strong, but yeah—it’s what I believe.

When a simile or metaphor *doesn’t* work, the results are sometimes funny and sometimes embarrassing. Recently I read this sentence in a forthcoming novel I prefer not to name: “He sat stolidly beside the corpse, waiting for the medical examiner as patiently as a man waiting for a turkey sandwich.” If there is a clarifying connection here, I wasn’t able to make it. I consequently closed the book without reading further. If a writer knows what he or she is doing, I’ll go along for the ride. If he or she doesn’t ... well, I’m in my fifties now, and there are a lot of books out there. I don’t have time to waste with the poorly written ones.

The Zen simile is only one potential pitfall of figurative language. The most common—and again, landing in this trap can usually be traced back to not enough reading—is the use of clichéd similes, metaphors, and images. He ran **like a madman**, she was pretty **as a summer day**, the guy was **a hot ticket**, Bob fought **like a tiger** ... don’t waste my time (or anyone’s) with such chestnuts. It makes you look either lazy or ignorant. Neither description will do your reputation as a writer much good.

My all-time favorite similes, by the way, come from the hardboiled-detective fiction of the forties and fifties, and the literary descendants of the dime-dreadful writers. These favorites include “It was darker than a carload of assholes” (George V. Higgins) and “I lit a cigarette [that] tasted like a plumber’s handkerchief” (Raymond Chandler).

The key to good description begins with clear seeing and ends with clear writing, the kind of writing that employs fresh images and simple vocabulary. I began learning my lessons in this regard by reading Chandler, Hammett, and Ross MacDonald; I gained perhaps even more respect for the power of compact, descriptive language from reading T. S. Eliot (those ragged claws scuttling across the ocean floor; those coffee spoons), and William Carlos Williams (white chickens, red wheelbarrow, the plums that were in the ice box, so sweet and so cold).

As with all other aspects of the narrative art, you will improve with practice, but practice will never make you perfect. Why should it? What fun would that be? And the harder you try to be clear and simple, the more you will learn about the complexity of our American dialect. It be slippery, precious; aye, it be very slippery, indeed. Practice the art, always reminding yourself that your job is to say what you see, and then to get on with your story.

– 7 –

Let us now talk a little bit about dialogue, the audio portion of our programme. It’s dialogue that gives your cast their voices, and is crucial in defining their characters—only what people do tells us more about what they’re like, and talk is sneaky: what people say often conveys their character to others in ways of which they—the speakers—are completely unaware.

You can tell me via straight narration that your main character, Mistuh Butts, never did well in school, never even *went* much to school, but you can convey the same thing, and much more vividly, by his speech ... and one of the cardinal rules of good fiction is never tell us a thing if you can show us, instead:

“What you reckon?” the boy asked. He doodled a stick in the dirt without looking up. What he drew could have been a ball, or a planet, or nothing but a circle. “You reckon the earth goes around the sun like they say?”

“I don’t know what they say,” Mistuh Butts replied. “I ain’t never studied what thisun or thatun says, because eachun says a different thing until your head is finally achin and you lose your aminite.”

“What’s aminite?” the boy asked.

“You don’t never shut up the questions!” Mistuh Butts cried. He seized the boy’s stick and snapped it. “Aminite is in your belly when it’s time to eat! Less you sick! And folks say *I’m ignorant!*”

“Oh, *appetite*,” the boy said placidly, and began drawing again, this time with his finger.

Well-crafted dialogue will indicate if a character is smart or dumb (Mistuh Butts isn’t necessarily a moron just because he can’t say *appetite*; we must listen to him awhile longer before making up our minds on that score), honest or dishonest, amusing or an old sobersides. Good dialogue, such as that written by George V. Higgins, Peter Straub, or Graham Greene, is a delight to read; bad dialogue is deadly.

Writers have different skill levels when it comes to dialogue. Your skills in this area can be improved, but, as a great man once said (actually it was Clint Eastwood), “A man’s got to know his limitations.” H. P. Lovecraft was a genius when it came to tales of the macabre, but a terrible dialogue writer. He seems to have known it, too, because in the millions of words of fiction he wrote, fewer than *five thousand* are dialogue. The following passage from “The Colour Out of Space,” in which a dying farmer describes the alien presence which has invaded his well, showcases Lovecraft’s dialogue problems. Folks, people just don’t talk like this, even on their deathbeds:

“Nothin’ ... nothin’ ... the colour ... it burns ... cold an’ wet ... but it burns ... it lived in the well ... I seen it ... a kind o’ smoke ... jest like the flowers last spring ... the well shone at night ... everything alive ... sucked the life out of everything ... in the stone ... it must a’come in that stone ... pizened the whole place ... dun’t know what it wants ... that round thing the men from the college dug out’n the stone ... it was that same colour ... jest the same, like the flowers an’ plants ... seeds ... I seen it the fust time this week ... it beats down your mind an’ then gets ye ... burns ye up ... It come from some place whar things ain’t as they is here ... one o’ them professors said so ...”

And so on and so forth, in carefully constructed elliptical bursts of information. It’s hard to say exactly what’s wrong with Lovecraft’s dialogue, other than the obvious: it’s stilted and lifeless, brimming with country cornpone (“some place whar things ain’t as they is here”). When dialogue is right, we know. When it’s wrong we also know—it jags on the ear like a badly tuned musical instrument.

Lovecraft was, by all accounts, both snobbish and painfully shy (a galloping racist as well, his stories full of sinister Africans and the sort of scheming Jews my Uncle Oren always worried about after four or five beers), the kind of writer who maintains a voluminous correspondence but gets along poorly with others in person—were he alive today, he'd likely exist most vibrantly in various Internet chatrooms. Dialogue is a skill best learned by people who enjoy talking and listening to others—particularly listening, picking up the accents, rhythms, dialect, and slang of various groups. Loners such as Lovecraft often write it badly, or with the care of someone who is composing in a language other than his or her native tongue.

I don't know if contemporary novelist John Katzenbach is a loner or not, but his novel *Hart's War* contains some memorably bad dialogue. Katzenbach is the sort of novelist who drives creative-writing teachers mad, a wonderful storyteller whose art is marred by self-repetition (a fault which is curable) and an ear for talk that is pure tin (a fault which probably isn't). *Hart's War* is a murder mystery set in a World War II POW camp—a neat idea, but problematic in Katzenbach's hands once he really gets the pot boiling. Here is Wing Commander Phillip Pryce talking to his friends just before the Germans in charge of Stalag Luft 13 take him away, not to be repatriated as they claim, but probably to be shot in the woods.

Pryce grabbed at Tommy once again. "Tommy," he whispered, "this is not a coincidence! Nothing is what it seems! Dig deeper! Save him, lad, save him! For more than ever, now, I believe Scott is innocent! ... You're on your own now, boys. And remember, I'm counting on you to live through this! Survive! Whatever happens!"

He turned back to the Germans. "All right, *Hauptmann*," he said with a sudden, exceedingly calm determination. "I'm ready now. Do with me what you will."

Either Katzenbach does not realize that every line of the Wing Commander's dialogue is a cliché from a late-forties war movie or he's trying to use that similarity deliberately to awaken feelings of pity, sadness, and perhaps nostalgia in his audience. Either way, it doesn't work. The only feeling the passage evokes is a kind of impatient incredulity. You wonder if any editor ever saw it, and if so, what stayed his or her blue pencil. Given Katzenbach's considerable talents in other areas, his failure here tends to reinforce my idea that writing good dialogue is art as well as craft.

Many good dialogue writers simply seem to have been born with a well-tuned ear, just as some musicians and singers have perfect or near-perfect pitch. Here's a passage from Elmore Leonard's novel *Be Cool*. You might compare it to the Lovecraft and Katzenbach passages above, noting first of all that here we've got an honest-to-God exchange going on, and not a stilted soliloquy:

Chili ... looked up again as Tommy said, "You doing okay?"

"You want to know if I'm making out?"

"I mean in your business. How's it going? I know you did okay with *Get Leo*, a terrific picture, terrific. And you know what else? It was good. But the sequel—what was it called?"

"*Get Lost*."

"Yeah, well that's what happened before I got a chance to see it, it disappeared."

"It didn't open big so the studio walked away. I was against doing a sequel to begin with."

But the guy running production at Tower says they're making the picture, with me or without me. I thought, well, if I can come up with a good story ..."

Two guys at lunch in Beverly Hills, and right away we know they're both players. They may be phonies (and maybe they're not), but they're an instant buy within the context of Leonard's story; in fact, we welcome them with open arms. Their talk is so real that part of what we feel is the guilty pleasure of anyone first tuning in and then eavesdropping on an interesting conversation. We're getting a sense of character, as well, although only in faint strokes. This is early on in the novel (page two, actually), and Leonard is an old pro. He knows he doesn't have to do it all at once. Still, don't we learn something about Tommy's character when he assures Chili that *Get Leo* is not only terrific, but also good?

We could ask ourselves if such dialogue is true to life or only to a certain *idea* of life, a certain stereotyped image of Hollywood players, Hollywood lunches, Hollywood deals. This is a fair enough question, and the answer is, perhaps not. Yet the dialogue *does* ring true to our ear; at his best (and although *Be Cool* is quite entertaining, it is far from Leonard's best), Elmore Leonard is capable of a kind of street poetry. The skill necessary to write such dialogue comes from years of practice; the art comes from a creative imagination which is working hard and having fun.

As with all other aspects of fiction, the key to writing good dialogue is honesty. And if you *are* honest about the words coming out of your characters' mouths, you'll find that you've let yourself in for a fair amount of criticism. Not a week goes by that I don't receive at least one pissed-off letter (most weeks there are more) accusing me of being foul-mouthed, bigoted, homophobic, murderous, frivolous, or downright psychopathic. In the majority of cases what my correspondents are hot under the collar about relates to something in the dialogue: "Let's get the fuck out of Dodge" or "We don't cotton much to niggers around here" or "What do you think you're doing, you fucking faggot?"

My mother, God rest her, didn't approve of profanity or any such talk; she called it "the language of the ignorant." This did not, however, keep her from yelling "Oh shit!" if she burned the roast or nailed her thumb a good one while hammering a picture-hook in the wall. Nor does it preclude most people, Christian as well as heathen, from saying something similar (or even stronger) when the dog barfs on the shag carpet or the car slips off the jack. It's important to tell the truth; so much depends upon it, as William Carlos Williams almost said when he was writing about that red wheelbarrow. The Legion of Decency might not like the word *shit*, and you might not like it much, either, but sometimes you're just stuck with it—no kid ever ran to his mother and said that his little sister just *defecated* in the tub. I suppose he might say *pushed* or *went woowoo*, but *took a shit* is, I fear, very much in the ballpark (little pitchers have big ears, after all).

You *must* tell the truth if your dialogue is to have the resonance and realism that *Hart's War*, good story though it is, so sadly lacks—and that holds true all the way down to what folks say when they hit their thumb with the hammer. If you substitute "Oh sugar!" for "Oh shit!" because you're thinking about the Legion of Decency, you are breaking the unspoken contract that exists between writer and reader— your promise to express the truth of how people act and talk through the medium of a made-up story.

On the other hand, one of your characters (the protagonist's old maid aunt, for instance) really *might* say *Oh sugar* instead of *Oh shit* after pounding her thumb with the hammer. You'll know which to use if you know your character, and we'll learn something about the speaker that will

make him or her more vivid and interesting. The point is to let each character speak freely, without regard to what the Legion of Decency or the Christian Ladies' Reading Circle may approve of. To do otherwise would be cowardly as well as dishonest, and believe me, writing fiction in America as we enter the twenty-first century is no job for intellectual cowards. There are lots of would-be censors out there, and although they may have different agendas, they all want basically the same thing: for you to see the world they see ... or to at least shut up about what you *do* see that's different. They are agents of the status quo. Not necessarily bad guys, but dangerous guys if you happen to believe in intellectual freedom.

As it happens, I agree with my mother: profanity and vulgarity is the language of the ignorant and the verbally challenged. *Mostly*, that is; there are exceptions, including profane aphorisms of great color and vitality. *They always fuck you at the drive-thru; I'm busier than a one-legged man in an ass-kicking contest; wish in one hand, shit in the other, see which one fills up first*—these phrases and others like them aren't for the drawing-room, but they are striking and pungent. Or consider this passage from *Brain Storm*, by Richard Dooling, where vulgarity becomes poetry:

“Exhibit A: One loutish, headstrong penis, a barbarous cuntivore without a flyspeck of decency in him. The capscallion of all rapsCALLIONS. A scurvy, vermiform scug with a serpentine twinkle in his solitary eye. An orgulous Turk who strikes in the dark vaults of flesh like a penile thunderbolt. A greedy cur seeking shadows, slick crevices, tuna fish ecstasy, and sleep ...”

Although not offered as dialogue, I want to reproduce another passage from Dooling here, because it speaks to the converse: that one can be quite admirably graphic without resorting to vulgarity or profanity at all:

She straddled him and prepared to make the necessary port connections, male and female adapters ready, I/O enabled, server/client, master/slave. Just a couple of high-end biological machines preparing to hot-dock with cable modems and access each other's front-end processors.

If I were a Henry James or Jane Austen sort of guy, writing only about toffs or smart college folks, I'd hardly ever have to use a dirty word or a profane phrase; I might never have had a book banned from America's school libraries or gotten a letter from some helpful fundamentalist fellow who wants me to know that I'm going to burn in hell, where all my millions of dollars won't buy me so much as a single drink of water. I did not, however, grow up among folks of that sort. I grew up as a part of America's lower middle class, and they're the people I can write about with the most honesty and knowledge. It means that they say shit more often than sugar when they bang their thumbs, but I've made my peace with that. Was never much at war with it in the first place, as a matter of fact.

When I get one of Those Letters, or face another review that accuses me of being a vulgar lowbrow—which to some extent I am—I take comfort from the words of turn-of-the-century social realist Frank Norris, whose novels include *The Octopus*, *The Pit*, and *McTeague*, an authentically great book. Norris wrote about working-class guys on ranches, in city laboring jobs, in factories. *McTeague*, the main character of Norris's finest work, is an unschooled dentist. Norris's books provoked a good deal of public outrage, to which Norris responded coolly

and disdainfully: “What do I care for their opinions? I never truckled. I told them the truth.”

Some people don’t want to hear the truth, of course, but that’s not your problem. What would be is wanting to be a writer without wanting to shoot straight. Talk, whether ugly or beautiful, is an index of character; it can also be a breath of cool, refreshing air in a room some people would prefer to keep shut up. In the end, the important question has nothing to do with whether the talk in your story is sacred or profane; the only question is how it rings on the page and in the ear. If you expect it to ring true, then you must talk yourself. Even more important, you must shut up and listen to others talk.

– 8 –

Everything I’ve said about dialogue applies to building characters in fiction. The job boils down to two things: paying attention to how the real people around you behave and then telling the truth about what you see. You may notice that your next-door neighbor picks his nose when he thinks no one is looking. This is a great detail, but noting it does you no good as a writer unless you’re willing to dump it into a story at some point.

Are fictional characters drawn directly from life? Obviously not, at least on a one-to-one basis—you’d *better* not, unless you want to get sued or shot on your way to the mailbox some fine morning. In many cases, such as *roman à clef* novels like *Valley of the Dolls*, characters are drawn *mostly* from life, but after readers get done playing the inevitable guessing game about who’s who, these stories tend to be unsatisfying, stuffed with shadowbox celebrities who bonk each other and then fade quickly from the reader’s mind. I read *Valley of the Dolls* shortly after it came out (I was a cook’s boy at a western Maine resort that summer), gobbling it up as eagerly as everyone else who bought it, I suppose, but I can’t remember much of what it was about. On the whole, I think I prefer the weekly codswallop served up by *The National Enquirer*, where I can get recipes and cheesecake photographs as well as scandal.

For me, what happens to characters as a story progresses depends solely on what I discover about them as I go along—how they grow, in other words. Sometimes they grow a little. If they grow a lot, they begin to influence the course of the story instead of the other way around. I almost always start with something that’s situational. I don’t say that’s right, only that it’s the way I’ve always worked. If a story ends up that same way, however, I count it something of a failure no matter how interesting it may be to me or to others. I think the best stories always end up being about the people rather than the event, which is to say character-driven. Once you get beyond the short story, though (two to four thousand words, let’s say), I’m not much of a believer in the so-called character study; I think that in the end, the story should always be the boss. Hey, if you want a character study, buy a biography or get season tickets to your local college’s theater-lab productions. You’ll get all the character you can stand.

It’s also important to remember that no one is “the bad guy” or “the best friend” or “the whore with a heart of gold” in real life; in real life we each of us regard ourselves as the main character, the protagonist, the big cheese; the camera is on *us*, baby. If you can bring this attitude into your fiction, you may not find it easier to create *brilliant* characters, but it will be harder for you to create the sort of one-dimensional dopes that populate so much pop fiction.

Annie Wilkes, the nurse who holds Paul Sheldon prisoner in *Misery*, may seem psychopathic to us, but it’s important to remember that she seems perfectly sane and reasonable to herself—

heroic, in fact, a beleaguered woman trying to survive in a hostile world filled with cockadoodie brats. We see her go through dangerous mood-swings, but I tried never to come right out and say “Annie was depressed and possibly suicidal that day” or “Annie seemed particularly happy that day.” If I have to tell you, I lose. If, on the other hand, I can show you a silent, dirty-haired woman who compulsively gobbles cake and candy, then have you draw the conclusion that Annie is in the depressive part of a manic-depressive cycle, I win. And if I am able, even briefly, to give you a Wilkes’-eye-view of the world—if I can make you understand her madness—then perhaps I can make her someone you sympathize with or even identify with. The result? She’s more frightening than ever, because she’s close to real. If, on the other hand, I turn her into a cackling old crone, she’s just another pop-up bogeylady. In that case I lose bigtime, and so does the reader. Who would want to visit with such a stale shrew? That version of Annie was old when *The Wizard of Oz* was in its first run.

It would be fair enough to ask, I suppose, if Paul Sheldon in *Misery* is me. Certainly *parts* of him are ... but I think you will find that, if you continue to write fiction, every character you create is partly you. When you ask yourself what a certain character will do given a certain set of circumstances, you’re making the decision based on what you yourself would (or, in the case of a bad guy, wouldn’t) do. Added to these versions of yourself are the character traits, both lovely and unlovely, which you observe in others (a guy who picks his nose when he thinks no one is looking, for instance). There is also a wonderful third element: pure blue-sky imagination. This is the part which allowed me to be a psychotic nurse for a little while when I was writing *Misery*. And being Annie was not, by and large, hard at all. In fact, it was sort of fun. I think being Paul was harder. He was sane, I’m sane, no four days at Disneyland there.

My novel *The Dead Zone* arose from two questions: Can a political assassin ever be right? And if he is, could you make him the protagonist of a novel? The good guy? These ideas called for a dangerously unstable politician, it seemed to me—a fellow who could climb the political ladder by showing the world a jolly, jes’-folks face and charming the voters by refusing to play the game in the usual way. (Greg Stillson’s campaign tactics as I imagined them twenty years ago were very similar to the ones Jesse Ventura used in his successful campaign for the governor’s seat in Minnesota. Thank goodness Ventura doesn’t seem like Stillson in any other ways.)

The Dead Zone’s protagonist, Johnny Smith, is also an everyday, jes’-folks sort of guy, only with Johnny it’s no act. The one thing that sets him apart is a limited ability to see the future, gained as the result of a childhood accident. When Johnny shakes Greg Stillson’s hand at a political rally, he has a vision of Stillson becoming the President of the United States and subsequently starting World War III. Johnny comes to the conclusion that the only way he can keep this from happening—the only way he can save the world, in other words—is by putting a bullet in Stillson’s head. Johnny is different from other violent, paranoid mystics in only one way: he really *can* see the future. Only don’t they all say that?

The situation had an edgy, outlaw feel to it that appealed to me. I thought the story would work if I could make Johnny a genuinely decent guy without turning him into a plaster saint. Same thing with Stillson, only backwards: I wanted him to be authentically nasty and really scare the reader, not just because Stillson is always boiling with potential violence but because he is so goddam *persuasive*. I wanted the reader to constantly be thinking: “This guy is out of control—how come somebody can’t see through him?” The fact that Johnny *does* see through him would, I thought, put the reader even more firmly in Johnny’s corner.

When we first meet the potential assassin, he's taking his girl to the county fair, riding the rides and playing the games. What could be more normal or likable? The fact that he's on the verge of proposing to Sarah makes us like him even more. Later, when Sarah suggests they cap a perfect date by sleeping together for the first time, Johnny tells her he wants to wait until they're married. I felt I was walking a fine line on that one—I wanted readers to see Johnny as sincere and sincerely in love, a straight shooter but not a tight-assed prude. I was able to cut his principled behavior a bit by giving him a childish sense of humor; he greets Sarah wearing a glow-in-the-dark Halloween mask (the mask hopefully works in a symbolic way, too; certainly Johnny is perceived as a monster when he points a gun at candidate Stillson). "Same old Johnny," Sarah says, laughing, and by the time the two of them are headed back from the fair in Johnny's old Volkswagen Bug, I think Johnny Smith has become our friend, just an average American guy who's hoping to live happily ever after. The sort of guy who'd return your wallet with the money still in it if he found it on the street or stop and help you change your flat tire if he came upon you broke down by the side of the road. Ever since John F. Kennedy was shot in Dallas, the great American bogeyman has been the guy with the rifle in a high place. I wanted to make this guy into the reader's friend.

Johnny was hard. Taking an average guy and making him vivid and interesting always is. Greg Stillson (like most villains) was easier and a lot more fun. I wanted to nail his dangerous, divided character in the first scene of the book. Here, several years before he runs for the U.S. House of Representatives in New Hampshire, Stillson is a young travelling salesman hawking Bibles to midwest country folk. When he stops at one farm, he is menaced by a snarling dog. Stillson remains friendly and smiling—Mr. Jes' Folks—until he's positive no one's home at the farm. Then he sprays teargas into the dog's eyes and kicks it to death.

If one is to measure success by reader response, the opening scene of *The Dead Zone* (my first number-one hardcover best-seller) was one of my most successful ever. Certainly it struck a raw nerve; I was deluged with letters, most of them protesting my outrageous cruelty to animals. I wrote back to these folks, pointing out the usual things: (a) Greg Stillson wasn't real; (b) the *dog* wasn't real; (c) I myself had never in my life put the boot to one of my pets, or anyone else's. I also pointed out what might have been a little less obvious—it was important to establish, right up front, that Gregory Ammas Stillson was an extremely dangerous man, and very good at camouflage.

I continued to build the characters of Johnny and Greg in alternating scenes until the confrontation at the end of the book, when things resolve themselves in what I hoped would be an unexpected way. The characters of my protagonist and antagonist were determined by the story I had to tell—by the fossil, the found object, in other words. My job (and yours, if you decide this is a viable approach to storytelling) is to make sure these fictional folks behave in ways that will both help the story and seem reasonable to us, given what we know about them (and what we know about real life, of course). Sometimes villains feel self-doubt (as Greg Stillson does); sometimes they feel pity (as Annie Wilkes does). And sometimes the good guy tries to turn away from doing the right thing, as Johnny Smith does ... as Jesus Christ himself did, if you think about that prayer ("take this cup from my lips") in the Garden of Gethsemane. And if you do your job, your characters will come to life and start doing stuff on their own. I know that sounds a little creepy if you haven't actually experienced it, but it's terrific fun when it happens. And it will solve a lot of your problems, believe me.

- 9 -

We've covered some basic aspects of good storytelling, all of which return to the same core ideas: that practice is invaluable (and should feel good, really not like practice at all) and that honesty is indispensable. Skills in description, dialogue, and character development all boil down to seeing or hearing clearly and then transcribing what you see or hear with equal clarity (and without using a lot of tiresome, unnecessary adverbs).

There are lots of bells and whistles, too—onomatopoeia, incremental repetition, stream of consciousness, interior dialogue, changes of verbal tense (it has become quite fashionable to tell stories, especially shorter ones, in the present tense), the sticky question of back story (how do you get it in and how much of it belongs), theme, pacing (we'll touch on these last two), and a dozen other topics, all of which are covered—sometimes at exhausting length—in writing courses and standard writing texts.

My take on all these things is pretty simple. It's all on the table, every bit of it, and you should use anything that improves the quality of your writing and doesn't get in the way of your story. If you like an alliterative phrase—the knights of nowhere battling the nabobs of nullity—by all means throw it in and see how it looks on paper. If it seems to work, it can stay. If it doesn't (and to me this one sounds pretty bad, like Spiro Agnew crossed with Robert Jordan), well, that DELETE key is on your machine for a good reason.

There is absolutely no need to be hidebound and conservative in your work, just as you are under no obligation to write experimental, nonlinear prose because *The Village Voice* or *The New York Review of Books* says the novel is dead. Both the traditional and the modern are available to you. Shit, write upside down if you want to, or do it in Crayola pictographs. But no matter how you do it, there comes a point when you must judge what you've written and how well you wrote it. I don't believe a story or a novel should be allowed outside the door of your study or writing room unless you feel confident that it's reasonably reader-friendly. You can't please all of the readers all of the time; you can't please even some of the readers all of the time, but you really ought to try to please at least some of the readers some of the time. I think William Shakespeare said that. And now that I've waved that caution flag, duly satisfying all OSHA, MENSA, NASA, and Writers' Guild guidelines, let me reiterate that it's all on the table, all up for grabs. Isn't that an intoxicating thought? I think it is. Try any goddam thing you like, no matter how boringly normal or outrageous. If it works, fine. If it doesn't, toss it. Toss it even if you love it. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch once said, "Murder your darlings," and he was right.

I most often see chances to add the grace-notes and ornamental touches after my basic storytelling job is done. Once in awhile it comes earlier; not long after I began *The Green Mile* and realized my main character was an innocent man likely to be executed for the crime of another, I decided to give him the initials J.C., after the most famous innocent man of all time. I first saw this done in *Light in August* (still my favorite Faulkner novel), where the sacrificial lamb is named Joe Christmas. Thus death-row inmate John Bowes became John Coffey. I wasn't sure, right up to the end of the book, if my J.C. would live or die. I *wanted* him to live because I liked and pitied him, but I figured those initials couldn't hurt, one way or the other.*

Mostly I don't see stuff like that until the story's done. Once it is, I'm able to kick back, read over what I've written, and look for underlying patterns. If I see some (and I almost always do), I can work at bringing them out in a second, more fully realized, draft of the story. Two examples

of the sort of work second drafts were made for are symbolism and theme.

If in school you ever studied the symbolism of the color white in *Moby-Dick* or Hawthorne's symbolic use of the forest in such stories as "Young Goodman Brown" and came away from those classes feeling like a stupidnik, you may even now be backing off with your hands raised protectively in front of you, shaking your head and saying *gee, no thanks, I gave at the office*.

But wait. Symbolism doesn't have to be difficult and relentlessly brainy. Nor does it have to be consciously crafted as a kind of ornamental Turkish rug upon which the furniture of the story stands. If you can go along with the concept of the story as a pre-existing thing, a fossil in the ground, then symbolism must also be pre-existing, right? Just another bone (or set of them) in your new discovery. That's if it's there. If it isn't, so what? You've still got the story itself, don't you?

If it is there and if you notice it, I think you should bring it out as well as you can, polishing it until it shines and then cutting it the way a jeweler would cut a precious or semiprecious stone.

Carrie, as I've already noted, is a short novel about a picked-on girl who discovers a telekinetic ability within herself—she can move objects by thinking about them. To atone for a vicious shower-room prank in which she has participated, Carrie's classmate Susan Snell persuades her boyfriend to invite Carrie to the Senior Prom. They are elected King and Queen. During the celebration, another of Carrie's classmates, the unpleasant Christine Hargensen, pulls a second prank on Carrie, this one deadly. Carrie takes her revenge by using her telekinetic power to kill most of her classmates (and her atrocious mother) before dying herself. That's the whole deal, really; it's as simple as a fairy-tale. There was no need to mess it up with bells and whistles, although I *did* add a number of epistolary interludes (passages from fictional books, a diary entry, letters, teletype bulletins) between narrative segments. This was partly to inject a greater sense of realism (I was thinking of Orson Welles's radio adaptation of *War of the Worlds*) but mostly because the first draft of the book was so damned short it barely seemed like a novel.

When I read *Carrie* over prior to starting the second draft, I noticed there was blood at all three crucial points of the story: beginning (Carrie's paranormal ability is apparently brought on by her first menstrual period), climax (the prank which sets Carrie off at the prom involves a bucket of pig's blood—"pig's blood for a pig," Chris Hargensen tells her boyfriend), and end (Sue Snell, the girl who tries to help Carrie, discovers she is not pregnant as she had half-hoped and half-feared when she gets her own period).

There's plenty of blood in most horror stories, of course—it is our stock-in-trade, you might say. Still, the blood in *Carrie* seemed more than just splatter to me. It seemed to *mean* something. That meaning wasn't consciously created, however. While writing *Carrie* I never once stopped to think: "Ah, all this blood symbolism will win me Brownie Points with the critics" or "Boy oh boy, *this* should certainly get me in a college bookstore or two!" For one thing, a writer would have to be a lot crazier than I am to think of *Carrie* as anyone's intellectual treat.

Intellectual treat or not, the significance of all that blood was hard to miss once I started reading over my beer- and tea-splattered first-draft manuscript. So I started to play with the idea, image, and emotional connotations of blood, trying to think of as many associations as I could. There were lots, most of them pretty heavy. Blood is strongly linked to the idea of sacrifice; for young women it's associated with reaching physical maturity and the ability to bear children; in the Christian religion (plenty of others, as well), it's symbolic of both sin and salvation. Finally, it is

associated with the handing down of family traits and talents. We are said to look like this or behave like that because “it’s in our blood.” We know this isn’t very scientific, that those things are really in our genes and DNA patterns, but we use the one to summarize the other.

It is that ability to summarize and encapsulate that makes symbolism so interesting, useful, and—when used well—arresting. You could argue that it’s really just another kind of figurative language.

Does that make it necessary to the success of your story or novel? Indeed not, and it can actually hurt, especially if you get carried away. Symbolism exists to adorn and enrich, not to create a sense of artificial profundity. *None* of the bells and whistles are about story, all right? Only *story* is about story. (Are you tired of hearing that yet? I hope not, ’cause I’m not even *close* to getting tired of saying it.)

Symbolism (and the other adornments, too) *does* serve a useful purpose, though—it’s more than just chrome on the grille. It can serve as a focusing device for both you and your reader, helping to create a more unified and pleasing work. I think that, when you read your manuscript over (and when you *talk* it over), you’ll see if symbolism, or the potential for it, exists. If it doesn’t, leave well enough alone. If it does, however—if it’s clearly a part of the fossil you’re working to unearth—go for it. Enhance it. You’re a monkey if you don’t.

– 10 –

The same things are true of theme. Writing and literature classes can be annoyingly preoccupied by (and pretentious about) theme, approaching it as the most sacred of sacred cows, but (don’t be shocked) it’s really no big deal. If you write a novel, spend weeks and then months catching it word by word, you owe it both to the book and to yourself to lean back (or take a long walk) when you’ve finished and ask yourself why you bothered—why you spent all that time, why it seemed so important. In other words, what’s it all about, Alfie?

When you write a book, you spend day after day scanning and identifying the trees. When you’re done, you have to step back and look at the forest. Not every book has to be loaded with symbolism, irony, or musical language (they call it prose for a reason, y’know), but it seems to me that every book—at least every one worth reading—is about *something*. Your job during or just after the first draft is to decide what something or somethings yours is about. Your job in the second draft—one of them, anyway—is to make that something even more clear. This may necessitate some big changes and revisions. The benefits to you and your reader will be clearer focus and a more unified story. It hardly ever fails.

The book that took me the longest to write was *The Stand*. This is also the one my longtime readers still seem to like the best (there’s something a little depressing about such a united opinion that you did your best work twenty years ago, but we won’t go into that just now, thanks). I finished the first draft about sixteen months after I started it. *The Stand* took an especially long time because it nearly died going into the third turn and heading for home.

I’d wanted to write a sprawling, multi-character sort of novel—a fantasy epic, if I could manage it—and to that end I employed a shifting-perspective narrative, adding a major character in each chapter of the long first section. Thus Chapter One concerned itself with Stuart Redman, a blue-collar factory worker from Texas; Chapter Two first concerned itself with Fran Goldsmith, a

pregnant college girl from Maine, and then returned to Stu; Chapter Three began with Larry Underwood, a rock-and-roll singer in New York, before going back first to Fran, then to Stu Redman again.

My plan was to link all these characters, the good, the bad, and the ugly, in two places: Boulder and Las Vegas. I thought they'd probably end up going to war against one another. The first half of the book also told the story of a man-made virus which sweeps America and the world, wiping out ninety-nine per cent of the human race and utterly destroying our technology-based culture.

I was writing this story near the end of the so-called Energy Crisis in the 1970s, and I had an absolutely marvellous time envisioning a world that went smash during the course of one horrified, infected summer (really not much more than a month). The view was panoramic, detailed, nationwide, and (to me, at least) breathtaking. Rarely have I seen so clearly with the eye of my imagination, from the traffic jam plugging the dead tube of New York's Lincoln Tunnel to the sinister, Nazi-ish rebirth of Las Vegas under the watchful (and often amused) red eye of Randall Flagg. All this sounds terrible, *is* terrible, but to me the vision was also strangely optimistic. No more energy crisis, for one thing, no more famine, no more massacres in Uganda, no more acid rain or hole in the ozone layer. *Finito* as well to saber-rattling nuclear superpowers, and certainly no more overpopulation. Instead, there was a chance for humanity's remaining shred to start over again in a God-centered world to which miracles, magic, and prophecy had returned. I liked my story. I liked my characters. And still there came a point when I couldn't write any longer because I didn't know what to write. Like Pilgrim in John Bunyan's epic, I had come to a place where the straight way was lost. I wasn't the first writer to discover this awful place, and I'm a long way from being the last; this is the land of writer's block.

If I'd had two or even three hundred pages of single-spaced manuscript instead of more than five hundred, I think I would have abandoned *The Stand* and gone on to something else—God knows I had done it before. But five hundred pages was too great an investment, both in time and in creative energy; I found it impossible to let go. Also, there was this little voice whispering to me that the book was really good, and if I didn't finish I would regret it forever. So instead of moving on to another project, I started taking long walks (a habit which would, two decades later, get me in a lot of trouble). I took a book or magazine on these walks but rarely opened it, no matter how bored I felt looking at the same old trees and the same old chattering, ill-natured jays and squirrels. Boredom can be a very good thing for someone in a creative jam. I spent those walks being bored and thinking about my gigantic boondoggle of a manuscript.

For weeks I got exactly nowhere in my thinking—it all just seemed too hard, too fucking complex. I had run out too many plotlines, and they were in danger of becoming snarled. I circled the problem again and again, beat my fists on it, knocked my head against it ... and then one day when I was thinking of nothing much at all, the answer came to me. It arrived whole and complete—gift-wrapped, you could say—in a single bright flash. I ran home and jotted it down on paper, the only time I've done such a thing, because I was terrified of forgetting.

What I saw was that the America in which *The Stand* took place might have been depopulated by the plague, but the world of my story had become dangerously overcrowded—a veritable Calcutta. The solution to where I was stuck, I saw, could be pretty much the same as the situation that got me going—an explosion instead of a plague, but still one quick, hard slash of the Gordian knot. I would send the survivors west from Boulder to Las Vegas on a redemptive quest — they would go at once, with no supplies and no plan, like Biblical characters seeking a vision

or to know the will of God. In Vegas they would meet Randall Flagg, and good guys and bad guys alike would be forced to make their stand.

At one moment I had none of this; at the next I had all of it. If there is any one thing I love about writing more than the rest, it's that sudden flash of insight when you see how everything connects. I have heard it called "thinking above the curve," and it's that; I've heard it called "the over-logic," and it's that, too. Whatever you call it, I wrote my page or two of notes in a frenzy of excitement and spent the next two or three days turning my solution over in my mind, looking for flaws and holes (also working out the actual narrative flow, which involved two supporting characters placing a bomb in a major character's closet), but that was mostly out of a sense of this-is-too-good-to-be-true unbelief. Too good or not, I knew it *was* true at the moment of revelation: that bomb in Nick Andros's closet was going to solve all my narrative problems. It did, too. The rest of the book ran itself off in nine weeks.

Later, when my first draft of *The Stand* was done, I was able to get a better fix on what had stopped me so completely in mid-course; it was a lot easier to think without that voice in the middle of my head constantly yammering "*I'm losing my book! Ah shit, five hundred pages and I'm losing my book! Condition red! CONDITION RED!!*" I was also able to analyze what got me going again and appreciate the irony of it: I saved my book by blowing approximately half its major characters to smithereens (there actually ended up being *two* explosions, the one in Boulder balanced by a similar act of sabotage in Las Vegas).

The real source of my malaise, I decided, had been that in the wake of the plague, my Boulder characters—the good guys—were starting up the same old technological deathtrip. The first hesitant CB broadcasts, beckoning people to Boulder, would soon lead to TV; infomercials and 900 numbers would be back in no time. Same deal with the power plants. It certainly didn't take my Boulder folks long to decide that seeking the will of the God who spared them was a lot less important than getting the refrigerators and air conditioners up and running again. In Vegas, Randall Flagg and his friends were learning how to fly jets and bombers as well as getting the lights back on, but that was okay—to be expected—because they were the bad guys. What had stopped me was realizing, on some level of my mind, that the good guys and bad guys were starting to look perilously alike, and what got me going again was realizing the good guys were worshipping an electronic golden calf and needed a wake-up call. A bomb in the closet would do just fine.

All this suggested to me that violence as a solution is woven through human nature like a damning red thread. That became the theme of *The Stand*, and I wrote the second draft with it fixed firmly in my mind. Again and again characters (the bad ones like Lloyd Henreid as well as the good ones like Stu Redman and Larry Underwood) mention the fact that "all that stuff [i.e., weapons of mass destruction] is just lying around, waiting to be picked up." When the Boulderites propose—innocently, meaning only the best—to rebuild the same old neon Tower of Babel, they are wiped out by more violence. The folks who plant the bomb are doing what Randall Flagg told them to, but Mother Abigail, Flagg's opposite number, says again and again that "all things serve God." If this is true—and within the context of *The Stand* it certainly is—then the bomb is actually a stern message from the guy upstairs, a way of saying "I didn't bring you all this way just so you could start up the same old shit."

Near the end of the novel (it *was* the end of the first, shorter version of the story), Fran asks Stuart Redman if there's any hope at all, if people ever learn from their mistakes. Stu replies, "I

don't know," and then pauses. In story-time, that pause lasts only as long as it takes the reader to flick his or her eye to the last line. In the writer's study, it went on a lot longer. I searched my mind and heart for something else Stu could say, some clarifying statement. I wanted to find it because at that moment if at no other, Stu was speaking for me. In the end, however, Stu simply repeats what he has already said: *I don't know*. It was the best I could do. Sometimes the book gives you answers, but not always, and I didn't want to leave the readers who had followed me through hundreds of pages with nothing but some empty platitude I didn't believe myself. There is no *moral* to *The Stand*, no "We'd *better* learn or we'll probably destroy the whole damned planet next time"—but if the theme stands out clearly enough, those discussing it may offer their own morals and conclusions. Nothing wrong with that; such discussions are one of the great pleasures of the reading life.

Although I'd used symbolism, imagery, and literary homage before getting to my novel about the big plague (without *Dracula*, for instance, I think there is no 'Salem's Lot), I'm quite sure that I never thought much about theme before getting roadblocked on *The Stand*. I suppose I thought such things were for Better Minds and Bigger Thinkers. I'm not sure I would have gotten to it as soon as I did, had I not been desperate to save my story.

I was astounded at how really useful "thematic thinking" turned out to be. It wasn't just a vaporous idea that English professors made you write about on midterm essay exams ("Discuss the thematic concerns of *Wise Blood* in three well-reasoned paragraphs—30 pts"), but another handy gadget to keep in the toolbox, this one something like a magnifying glass.

Since my revelation on the road concerning the bomb in the closet, I have never hesitated to ask myself, either before starting the second draft of a book or while stuck for an idea in the first draft, just what it is I'm writing about, why I'm spending the time when I could be playing my guitar or riding my motorcycle, what got my nose down to the grindstone in the first place and then kept it there. The answer doesn't always come right away, but there usually is one, and it's usually not too hard to find, either.

I don't believe any novelist, even one who's written forty-plus books, has too many thematic concerns; I have many interests, but only a few that are deep enough to power novels. These deep interests (I won't quite call them obsessions) include how difficult it is—perhaps impossible!—to close Pandora's technobox once it's open (*The Stand*, *The Tommy-knockers*, *Firestarter*); the question of why, if there is a God, such terrible things happen (*The Stand*, *Desperation*, *The Green Mile*); the thin line between reality and fantasy (*The Dark Half*, *Bag of Bones*, *The Drawing of the Three*); and most of all, the terrible attraction violence sometimes has for fundamentally good people (*The Shining*, *The Dark Half*). I've also written again and again about the fundamental differences between children and adults, and about the healing power of the human imagination.

And I repeat: *no big deal*. These are just interests which have grown out of my life and thought, out of my experiences as a boy and a man, out of my roles as a husband, a father, a writer, and a lover. They are questions that occupy my mind when I turn out the lights for the night and I'm alone with myself, looking up into the darkness with one hand tucked beneath the pillow.

You undoubtedly have your own thoughts, interests, and concerns, and they have arisen, as mine have, from your experiences and adventures as a human being. Some are likely similar to those I've mentioned above and some are likely very different, but you have them, and you should use

them in your work. That's not all those ideas are there for, perhaps, but surely it's one of the things they are good for.

I should close this little sermonette with a word of warning—starting with the questions and thematic concerns is a recipe for bad fiction. Good fiction always begins with story and progresses to theme; it almost never begins with theme and progresses to story. The only possible exceptions to this rule that I can think of are allegories like George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (and I have a sneaking suspicion that with *Animal Farm* the story idea may indeed have come first; if I see Orwell in the afterlife, I mean to ask him).

But once your basic story is on paper, you need to think about what it means and enrich your following drafts with your conclusions. To do less is to rob your work (and eventually your readers) of the vision that makes each tale you write uniquely your own.

– 11 –

So far, so good. Now let's talk about revising the work—how much and how many drafts? For me the answer has always been two drafts and a polish (with the advent of word-processing technology, my polishes have become closer to a third draft).

You should realize that I'm only talking about my own personal mode of writing here; in actual practice, rewriting varies greatly from writer to writer. Kurt Vonnegut, for example, rewrote each page of his novels until he got them exactly the way he wanted them. The result was days when he might only manage a page or two of finished copy (and the wastebasket would be full of crumpled, rejected page seventy-ones and seventy-twos), but when the manuscript was finished, the *book* was finished, by gum. You could set it in type. Yet I think certain things hold true for most writers, and those are the ones I want to talk about now. If you've been writing awhile, you won't need me to help you much with this part; you'll have your own established routine. If you're a beginner, though, let me urge that you take your story through at least two drafts; the one you do with the study door closed and the one you do with it open.

With the door shut, downloading what's in my head directly to the page, I write as fast as I can and still remain comfortable. Writing fiction, especially a long work of fiction, can be a difficult, lonely job; it's like crossing the Atlantic Ocean in a bathtub. There's plenty of opportunity for self-doubt. If I write rapidly, putting down my story exactly as it comes into my mind, only looking back to check the names of my characters and the relevant parts of their back stories, I find that I can keep up with my original enthusiasm and at the same time outrun the self-doubt that's always waiting to settle in.

This first draft—the All-Story Draft—should be written with no help (or interference) from anyone else. There may come a point when you want to show what you're doing to a close friend (very often the close friend you think of first is the one who shares your bed), either because you're proud of what you're doing or because you're doubtful about it. My best advice is to resist this impulse. Keep the pressure on; don't lower it by exposing what you've written to the doubt, the praise, or even the well-meaning questions of someone from the Outside World. Let your hope of success (and your fear of failure) carry you on, difficult as that can be. There'll be time to show off what you've done when you finish ... but even after finishing I think you must be cautious and give yourself a chance to think while the story is still like a field of freshly fallen

snow, absent of any tracks save your own.

The great thing about writing with the door shut is that you find yourself forced to concentrate on story to the exclusion of practically everything else. No one can ask you “What were you trying to express with Garfield’s dying words?” or “What’s the significance of the green dress?” You may not have been trying to express *anything* with Garfield’s dying words, and Maura could be wearing green only because that’s what you saw when she came into sight in your mind’s eye. On the other hand, perhaps those things *do* mean something (or will, when you get a chance to look at the forest instead of the trees). Either way, the first draft is the wrong place to think about it.

Here’s something else—if no one says to you, “Oh Sam (or Amy)! This is *wonderful!*,” you are a lot less apt to slack off or to start concentrating on the wrong thing ... *being wonderful*, for instance, instead of *telling the goddam story*.

Now let’s say you’ve finished your first draft. Congratulations! Good job! Have a glass of champagne, send out for pizza, do whatever it is you do when you’ve got something to celebrate. If you have someone who has been impatiently waiting to read your novel—a spouse, let’s say, someone who has perhaps been working nine to five and helping to pay the bills while you chase your dream—then this is the time to give up the goods ... if, that is, your first reader or readers will promise not to talk to you about the book until *you* are ready to talk to *them* about it.

This may sound a little high-handed, but it’s really not. You’ve done a lot of work and you need a period of time (how much or how little depends on the individual writer) to rest. Your mind and imagination—two things which are related, but not really the same—have to recycle themselves, at least in regard to this one particular work. My advice is that you take a couple of days off—go fishing, go kayaking, do a jigsaw puzzle—and then go to work on something else. Something shorter, preferably, and something that’s a complete change of direction and pace from your newly finished book. (I wrote some pretty good novellas, “The Body” and “Apt Pupil” among them, between drafts of longer works like *The Dead Zone* and *The Dark Half*.)

How long you let your book rest—sort of like bread dough between kneadings—is entirely up to you, but I think it should be a minimum of six weeks. During this time your manuscript will be safely shut away in a desk drawer, aging and (one hopes) mellowing. Your thoughts will turn to it frequently, and you’ll likely be tempted a dozen times or more to take it out, if only to re-read some passage that seems particularly fine in your memory, something you’d like to go back to so you can re-experience what a really excellent writer you are.

Resist temptation. If you don’t, you’ll very likely decide you didn’t do as well on that passage as you thought and you’d better retool it on the spot. This is bad. The only thing worse would be for you to decide the passage is even *better* than you remembered—why not drop everything and read the whole book over right then? Get back to work on it! Hell, you’re ready! You’re fuckin’ Shakespeare!

You’re not, though, and you’re not ready to go back to the old project until you’ve gotten so involved in a new one (or re-involved in your day-to-day life) that you’ve almost forgotten the unreal estate that took up three hours of your every morning or afternoon for a period of three or five or seven months.

When you come to the correct evening (which you well may have marked on your office calendar), take your manuscript out of the drawer. If it looks like an alien relic bought at a junk-

shop or yard sale where you can hardly remember stopping, you're ready. Sit down with your door shut (you'll be opening it to the world soon enough), a pencil in your hand, and a legal pad by your side. Then read your manuscript over.

Do it all in one sitting, if that's possible (it won't be, of course, if your book is a four- or five-hundred-pager). Make all the notes you want, but concentrate on the mundane housekeeping jobs, like fixing misspellings and picking up inconsistencies. There'll be plenty; only God gets it right the first time and only a slob says, "Oh well, let it go, that's what copyeditors are for."

If you've never done it before, you'll find reading your book over after a six-week layoff to be a strange, often exhilarating experience. It's yours, you'll recognize it as yours, even be able to remember what tune was on the stereo when you wrote certain lines, and yet it will also be like reading the work of someone else, a soul-twin, perhaps. This is the way it should be, the reason you waited. It's always easier to kill someone else's darlings than it is to kill your own.

With six weeks' worth of recuperation time, you'll also be able to see any glaring holes in the plot or character development. I'm talking about holes big enough to drive a truck through. It's amazing how some of these things can elude the writer while he or she is occupied with the daily work of composition. And listen—if you spot a few of these big holes, you are *forbidden* to feel depressed about them or to beat up on yourself. Screw-ups happen to the best of us. There's a story that the architect of the Flatiron Building committed suicide when he realized, just before the ribbon-cutting ceremony, that he had neglected to put any men's rooms in his prototypical skyscraper. Probably not true, but remember this: someone *really did* design the *Titanic* and then label it unsinkable.

For me, the most glaring errors I find on the re-read have to do with character motivation (related to character development but not quite the same). I'll smack myself upside the head with the heel of my palm, then grab my legal pad and write something like **p. 91: Sandy Hunter filches a buck from Shirley's stash in the dispatch office. Why? God's sake, Sandy would NEVER do anything like this!** I also mark the page in the manuscript with a big symbol, meaning that cuts and/or changes are needed on this page, and reminding myself to check my notes for the exact details if I don't remember them.

I love this part of the process (well, I love *all* the parts of the process, but this one is especially nice) because I'm rediscovering my own book, and usually liking it. That changes. By the time a book is actually in print, I've been over it a dozen times or more, can quote whole passages, and only wish the damned old smelly thing would go away. That's later, though; the first read-through is usually pretty fine.

During that reading, the top part of my mind is concentrating on story and toolbox concerns: knocking out pronouns with unclear antecedents (I hate and mistrust pronouns, every one of them as slippery as a fly-by-night personal-injury lawyer), adding clarifying phrases where they seem necessary, and of course, deleting all the adverbs I can bear to part with (never all of them; never enough).

Underneath, however, I'm asking myself the Big Questions. The biggest: Is this story coherent? And if it is, what will turn coherence into a song? What are the recurring elements? Do they entwine and make a theme? I'm asking myself What's it all about, Stevie, in other words, and what I can do to make those underlying concerns even clearer. What I want most of all is *resonance*, something that will linger for a little while in Constant Reader's mind (and heart)

after he or she has closed the book and put it up on the shelf. I'm looking for ways to do that without spoon-feeding the reader or selling my birthright for a plot of message. Take all those messages and those morals and stick em where the sun don't shine, all right? I want resonance. Most of all, *I'm looking for what I meant*, because in the second draft I'll want to add scenes and incidents that reinforce that meaning. I'll also want to delete stuff that goes in other directions. There's apt to be a lot of that stuff, especially near the beginning of a story, when I have a tendency to flail. All that thrashing around has to go if I am to achieve anything like a unified effect. When I've finished reading and making all my little anal-retentive revisions, it's time to open the door and show what I've written to four or five close friends who have indicated a willingness to look.

Someone—I can't remember who, for the life of me—once wrote that all novels are really letters aimed at one person. As it happens, I believe this. I think that every novelist has a single ideal reader; that at various points during the composition of a story, the writer is thinking, "I wonder what he/she will think when he/she reads *this* part?" For me that first reader is my wife, Tabitha.

She has always been an extremely sympathetic and supportive first reader. Her positive reaction to difficult books like *Bag of Bones* (my first novel with a new publisher after twenty good years with Viking that came to an end in a stupid squabble about money) and relatively controversial ones like *Gerald's Game* meant the world to me. But she's also unflinching when she sees something she thinks is wrong. When she does, she lets me know loud and clear.

In her role as critic and first reader, Tabby often makes me think of a story I read about Alfred Hitchcock's wife, Alma Reville. Ms. Reville was the equivalent of Hitch's first reader, a sharp-eyed critic who was totally unimpressed with the suspense-master's growing reputation as an *auteur*. Lucky for him. Hitch say he want to fly, Alma say, "First eat your eggs."

Not long after finishing *Psycho*, Hitchcock screened it for a few friends. They raved about it, declaring it to be a suspense masterpiece. Alma was quiet until they'd all had their say, then spoke very firmly: "You can't send it out like that."

There was a thunderstruck silence, except for Hitchcock himself, who only asked why not. "Because," his wife responded, "Janet Leigh swallows when she's supposed to be dead." It was true. Hitchcock didn't argue any more than I do when Tabby points out one of my lapses. She and I may argue about many aspects of a book, and there have been times when I've gone against her judgment on subjective matters, but when she catches me in a goof, I know it, and thank God I've got someone around who'll tell me my fly's unzipped before I go out in public that way.

In addition to Tabby's first read, I usually send manuscripts to between four and eight other people who have critiqued my stories over the years. Many writing texts caution against asking friends to read your stuff, suggesting you're not apt to get a very unbiased opinion from folks who've eaten dinner at your house and sent their kids over to play with your kids in your backyard. It's unfair, according to this view, to put a pal in such a position. What happens if he/she feels he/she has to say, "I'm sorry, good buddy, you've written some great yarns in the past but this one sucks like a vacuum cleaner"?

The idea has some validity, but I don't think an unbiased opinion is exactly what I'm looking for. And I believe that most people smart enough to read a novel are also tactful enough to find a

gentler mode of expression than “This sucks.” (Although most of us know that “I think this has a few problems” actually means “This sucks,” don’t we?) Besides, if you really did write a stinker—it happens; as the author of *Maximum Overdrive* I’m qualified to say so—wouldn’t you rather hear the news from a friend while the entire edition consists of a half-dozen Xerox copies?

When you give out six or eight copies of a book, you get back six or eight highly subjective opinions about what’s good and what’s bad in it. If all your readers think you did a pretty good job, you probably did. This sort of unanimity does happen, but it’s rare, even with friends. More likely, they’ll think that some parts are good and some parts are ... well, not so good. Some will feel Character A works but Character B is far-fetched. If others feel that Character B is believable but Character A is overdrawn, it’s a wash. You can safely relax and leave things the way they are (in baseball, tie goes to the runner; for novelists, it goes to the writer). If some people love your ending and others hate it, same deal—it’s a wash, and tie goes to the writer.

Some first readers specialize in pointing out factual errors, which are the easiest to deal with. One of my first-reader smart guys, the late Mac McCutcheon, a wonderful high school English teacher, knew a lot about guns. If I had a character toting a Winchester .330, Mac might jot in the margin that Winchester didn’t make that caliber but Remington did. In such cases you’ve got two for the price of one—the error and the fix. It’s a good deal, because you come off looking like you’re an expert and your first reader will feel flattered to have been of help. And the best catch Mac ever made for me had nothing to do with guns. One day while reading a piece of a manuscript in the teachers’ room, he burst out laughing—laughed so hard, in fact, that tears went rolling down his bearded cheeks. Because the story in question, *’Salem’s Lot*, had not been intended as a laff riot, I asked him what he had found. I had written a line that went something like this: **Although deer season doesn’t start until November in Maine, the fields of October are often alive with gunshots; the locals are shooting as many peasants as they think their families will eat.** A copyeditor would no doubt have picked up the mistake, but Mac spared me that embarrassment.

Subjective evaluations are, as I say, a little harder to deal with, but listen: if everyone who reads your book says you have a problem (Connie comes back to her husband too easily, Hal’s cheating on the big exam seems unrealistic given what we know about him, the novel’s conclusion seems abrupt and arbitrary), you’ve got a problem and you better do something about it.

Plenty of writers resist this idea. They feel that revising a story according to the likes and dislikes of an audience is somehow akin to prostitution. If you *really* feel that way, I won’t try to change your mind. You’ll save on charges at Copy Cop, too, because you won’t have to show anyone your story in the first place. In fact (he said snottily), if you really feel that way, why bother to publish at all? Just finish your books and then pop them in a safe-deposit box, as J. D. Salinger is reputed to have been doing in his later years.

And yes, I can relate, at least a bit, to that sort of resentment. In the film business, where I have had a quasi-professional life, first-draft showings are called “test screenings.” These have become standard practice in the industry, and they drive most filmmakers absolutely bugshit. Maybe they should. The studio shells out somewhere between fifteen and a hundred million dollars to make a film, then asks the director to recut it based on the opinions of a Santa Barbara multiplex audience composed of hairdressers, meter maids, shoe-store clerks, and out-of-work pizza-delivery guys. And the worst, most maddening thing about it? If you get the demographic

right, test screenings seem to work.

I'd hate to see novels revised on the basis of test audiences—a lot of good books would never see the light of day if it was done that way—but come on, we're talking about half a dozen people you know and respect. If you ask the right ones (and if they agree to read your book), they can tell you a lot.

Do all opinions weigh the same? Not for me. In the end I listen most closely to Tabby, because she's the one I write for, the one I want to wow. If you're writing primarily for one person besides yourself, I'd advise you to pay very close attention to that person's opinion (I know one fellow who says he writes mostly for someone who's been dead fifteen years, but the majority of us aren't in that position). And if what you hear makes sense, then make the changes. You can't let the whole world into your story, but you can let in the ones that matter the most. And you should.

Call that one person you write for Ideal Reader. He or she is going to be in your writing room all the time: in the flesh once you open the door and let the world back in to shine on the bubble of your dream, in spirit during the sometimes troubling and often exhilarating days of the first draft, when the door is closed. And you know what? You'll find yourself bending the story even before Ideal Reader glimpses so much as the first sentence. I.R. will help you get outside yourself a little, to actually read your work in progress as an audience would while you're still working. This is perhaps the best way of all to make sure you stick to story, a way of playing to the audience even while there's no audience there and you're totally in charge.

When I write a scene that strikes me as funny (like the pie-eating contest in “The Body” or the execution rehearsal in *The Green Mile*), I am also imagining my I.R. finding it funny. I love it when Tabby laughs out of control—she puts her hands up as if to say *I surrender* and these big tears go rolling down her cheeks. I love it, that's all, fucking adore it, and when I get hold of something with that potential, I twist it as hard as I can. During the actual writing of such a scene (door closed), the thought of making her laugh—or cry—is in the back of my mind. During the rewrite (door open), the question—*is it funny enough yet? scary enough?*—is right up front. I try to watch her when she gets to a particular scene, hoping for at least a smile or—jackpot, baby!—that big belly-laugh with the hands up, waving in the air.

This isn't always easy on her. I gave her the manuscript of my novella *Hearts in Atlantis* while we were in North Carolina, where we'd gone to see a Cleveland Rockers-Charlotte Sting WNBA game. We drove north to Virginia the following day, and it was during this drive that Tabby read my story. There are some funny parts in it—at least I thought so—and I kept peeking over at her to see if she was chuckling (or at least smiling). I didn't think she'd notice, but of course she did. On my eighth or ninth peek (I guess it *could* have been my fifteenth), she looked up and snapped: “Pay attention to your driving before you crack us up, will you? Stop being so god-dam needy!”

I paid attention to my driving and stopped sneaking peeks (well ... almost). About five minutes later, I heard a snort of laughter from my right. Just a little one, but it was enough for me. The truth is that most writers *are* needy. Especially between the first draft and the second, when the study door swings open and the light of the world shines in.

Ideal Reader is also the best way for you to gauge whether or not your story is paced correctly and if you've handled the back story in satisfactory fashion.

Pace is the speed at which your narrative unfolds. There is a kind of unspoken (hence undefended and unexamined) belief in publishing circles that the most commercially successful stories and novels are fast-paced. I guess the underlying thought is that people have so many things to do today, and are so easily distracted from the printed word, that you'll lose them unless you become a kind of short-order cook, serving up sizzling burgers, fries, and eggs over easy just as fast as you can.

Like so many unexamined beliefs in the publishing business, this idea is largely bullshit ... which is why, when books like Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* or Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain* suddenly break out of the pack and climb the best-seller lists, publishers and editors are astonished. I suspect that most of them ascribe these books' unexpected success to unpredictable and deplorable lapses into good taste on the part of the reading public.

Not that there's anything wrong with rapidly paced novels. Some pretty good writers—Nelson DeMille, Wilbur Smith, and Sue Grafton, to name just three—have made millions writing them. But you can overdo the speed thing. Move too fast and you risk leaving the reader behind, either by confusing or by wearing him/her out. And for myself, I *like* a slower pace and a bigger, higher build. The leisurely luxury-liner experience of a long, absorbing novel like *The Far Pavilions* or *A Suitable Boy* has been one of the form's chief attractions since the first examples—endless, multipart epistolary tales like *Clarissa*. I believe each story should be allowed to unfold at its own pace, and that pace is not always double time. Nevertheless, you need to beware—if you slow the pace down too much, even the most patient reader is apt to grow restive.

The best way to find the happy medium? Ideal Reader, of course. Try to imagine whether he or she will be bored by a certain scene—if you know the tastes of your I.R. even half as well as I know the tastes of mine, that shouldn't be too hard. Is I.R. going to feel there's too much pointless talk in this place or that? That you've underexplained a certain situation ... or overexplained it, which is one of my chronic failings? That you forgot to resolve some important plot point? Forgot an entire *character*, as Raymond Chandler once did? (When asked about the murdered chauffeur in *The Big Sleep*, Chandler—who liked his tippie—replied, “Oh, him. You know, I forgot all about him.”) These questions should be in your mind even with the door closed. And once it's open—once your Ideal Reader has actually read your manuscript—you should ask your questions out loud. Also, needy or not, you might want to watch and see when your I.R. puts your manuscript down to do something else. What scene was he or she reading? What was so easy to put down?

Mostly when I think of pacing, I go back to Elmore Leonard, who explained it so perfectly by saying he just left out the boring parts. This suggests cutting to speed the pace, and that's what most of us end up having to do (kill your darlings, kill your darlings, even when it breaks your egocentric little scribbler's heart, kill your darlings).

As a teenager, sending out stories to magazines like *Fantasy and Science Fiction* and *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, I got used to the sort of rejection note that starts *Dear Contributor* (might as well start off *Dear Chump*), and so came to relish any little personal dash on these printed pink-slips. They were few and far between, but when they came they never failed to lighten my day and put a smile on my face.

In the spring of my senior year at Lisbon High—1966, this would've been—I got a scribbled comment that changed the way I rewrote my fiction once and forever. Jotted below the machine-generated signature of the editor was this *mot*: “Not bad, but PUFFY. You need to revise for length. Formula: 2nd Draft = 1st Draft - 10%. Good luck.”

I wish I could remember who wrote that note—Algis Budrys, perhaps. Whoever it was did me a hell of a favor. I copied the formula out on a piece of shirt-cardboard and taped it to the wall beside my typewriter. Good things started to happen for me shortly after. There was no sudden golden flood of magazine sales, but the number of personal notes on the rejection slips went up fast. I even got one from Durant Imboden, the fiction editor at *Playboy*. That communiqué almost stopped my heart. *Playboy* paid two thousand dollars and up for short stories, and two grand was a quarter of what my mother made each year in her housekeeping job at Pineland Training Center.

The Rewrite Formula probably wasn't the only reason I started to get some results; I suspect another was that it was just my time, coming around at last (sort of like Yeats's rough beast). Still, the Formula was surely part of it. Before the Formula, if I produced a story that was four thousand words or so in first draft, it was apt to be five thousand in second (some writers are taker-outers; I'm afraid I've always been a natural putter-inner). After the Formula, that changed. Even today I will aim for a second-draft length of thirty-six hundred words if the first draft of a story ran four thousand ... and if the first draft of a novel runs three hundred and fifty thousand words, I'll try my damndest to produce a second draft of no more than three hundred and fifteen thousand ... three hundred, if possible. Usually it is possible. What the Formula taught me is that every story and novel is collapsible to some degree. If you can't get out ten per cent of it while retaining the basic story and flavor, you're not trying very hard. The effect of judicious cutting is immediate and often amazing—literary Viagra. You'll feel it and your I.R. will, too.

Back story is all the stuff that happened before your tale began but which has an impact on the front story. Back story helps define character and establish motivation. I think it's important to get the back story in as quickly as possible, but it's also important to do it with some grace. As an example of what's not graceful, consider this line of dialogue:

“Hello, ex-wife,” Tom said to Doris as she entered the room.

Now, it may be important to the story that Tom and Doris are divorced, but there *has* to be a better way to do it than the above, which is about as graceful as an axe-murder. Here is one suggestion:

“Hi, Doris,” Tom said. His voice sounded natural enough—to his own ears, at least—but the fingers of his right hand crept to the place where his wedding ring had been until six months ago.

Still no Pulitzer winner, and quite a bit longer than *Hello, ex-wife*, but it's not all about speed, as I've already tried to point out. And if you think it's all about information, you ought to give up fiction and get a job writing instruction manuals—Dilbert's cubicle awaits.

You've probably heard the phrase *in medias res*, which means “into the midst of things.” This technique is an ancient and honorable one, but I don't like it. In *medias res* necessitates flashbacks, which strike me as boring and sort of corny. They always make me think of those

movies from the forties and fifties where the picture gets all swimmy, the voices get all echoey, and suddenly it's sixteen months ago and the mud-splashed convict we just saw trying to outrun the bloodhounds is an up-and-coming young lawyer who hasn't yet been framed for the murder of the crooked police chief.

As a reader, I'm a lot more interested in what's going to happen than what already *did*. Yes, there are brilliant novels that run counter to this preference (or maybe it's a prejudice)—*Rebecca*, by Daphne du Maurier, for one; *A Dark-Adapted Eye*, by Barbara Vine, for another—but I like to start at square one, dead even with the writer. I'm an A-to-Z man; serve me the appetizer first and give me dessert if I eat my veggies.

Even when you tell your story in this straightforward manner, you'll discover you can't escape at least *some* back story. In a very real sense, every life is *in medias res*. If you introduce a forty-year-old man as your main character on page one of your novel, and if the action begins as the result of some brand-new person or situation's exploding onto the stage of this fellow's life—a road accident, let's say, or doing a favor for a beautiful woman who keeps looking sexily back over her shoulder (did you note the awful adverb in this sentence which I could not bring myself to kill?)—you'll *still* have to deal with the first forty years of the guy's life at some point. How much and how well you deal with those years will have a lot to do with the level of success your story achieves, with whether readers think of it as “a good read” or “a big fat bore.” Probably J. K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter stories, is the current champ when it comes to back story. You could do worse than read these, noting how effortlessly each new book recaps what has gone before. (Also, the Harry Potter novels are just *fun*, pure story from beginning to end.)

Your Ideal Reader can be of tremendous help when it comes to figuring out how well you did with the back story and how much you should add or subtract on your next draft. You need to listen very carefully to the things I.R. didn't understand, and then ask yourself if *you* understand them. If you do and just didn't put those parts across, your job on the second draft is to clarify. If you don't—if the parts of the back story your Ideal Reader queried are hazy to you, as well—then you need to think a lot more carefully about the past events that cast a light on your characters' present behavior.

You also need to pay close attention to those things in the back story that bored your Ideal Reader. In *Bag of Bones*, for instance, main character Mike Noonan is a fortyish writer who, as the book opens, has just lost his wife to a brain aneurysm. We start on the day of her death, but there's still a hell of a lot of back story here, much more than I usually have in my fiction. This includes Mike's first job (as a newspaper reporter), the sale of his first novel, his relations with his late wife's sprawling family, his publishing history, and especially the matter of their summer home in western Maine—how they came to buy it and some of its pre-Mike-and-Johanna history. Tabitha, my I.R., read all this with apparent enjoyment, but there was also a two- or three-page section about Mike's community-service work in the year after his wife dies, a year in which his grief is magnified by a severe case of writer's block. Tabby didn't like the community-service stuff.

“Who cares?” she asked me. “I want to know more about his bad dreams, not how he ran for city council in order to help get the homeless alcoholics off the street.”

“Yeah, but he's got *writer's block*,” I said. (When a novelist is challenged on something he likes—one of his darlings—the first two words out of his mouth are almost always *Yeah but*.) “This

block goes on for a year, maybe more. He has to do *something* in all that time, doesn't he?"

"I guess so," Tabby said, "but you don't have to bore me with it, do you?"

Ouch. Game, set, and match. Like most good I.R.s, Tabby can be ruthless when she's right.

I cut down Mike's charitable contributions and community functions from two pages to two paragraphs. It turned out that Tabby was right—as soon as I saw it in print, I knew. Three million people or so have read *Bag of Bones*, I've gotten at least four thousand letters concerning it, and so far not a single one has said, "Hey, turkey! What was Mike doing for community-service work during the year he couldn't write?"

The most important things to remember about back story are that (a) everyone has a history and (b) most of it isn't very interesting. Stick to the parts that are, and don't get carried away with the rest. Long life stories are best received in bars, and only then an hour or so before closing time, and if you are buying.

– 13 –

We need to talk a bit about research, which is a specialized kind of back story. And please, if you *do* need to do research because parts of your story deal with things about which you know little or nothing, remember that word *back*. That's where research belongs: as far in the background and the back story as you can get it. *You* may be entranced with what you're learning about flesh-eating bacteria, the sewer system of New York, or the I.Q. potential of collie pups, but your readers are probably going to care a lot more about your characters and your story.

Exceptions to the rule? Sure, aren't there always? There have been very successful writers—Arthur Hailey and James Michener are the first ones that come to my mind—whose novels rely heavily on fact and research. Hailey's are barely disguised manuals about how things work (banks, airports, hotels), and Michener's are combination travelogues, geography lessons, and history texts. Other popular writers, like Tom Clancy and Patricia Cornwell, are more story-oriented but still deliver large (and sometimes hard to digest) dollops of factual information along with the melodrama. I sometimes think that these writers appeal to a large segment of the reading population who feel that fiction is somehow immoral, a low taste which can only be justified by saying, "Well, ahem, yes, I *do* read [Fill in author's name here], but only on airplanes and in hotel rooms that don't have CNN; also, I learned a great deal about [Fill in appropriate subject here]."

For every successful writer of the factoid type, however, there are a hundred (perhaps even a thousand) wannabes, some published, most not. On the whole, I think story belongs in front, but some research is inevitable; you shirk it at your peril.

In the spring of 1999 I drove from Florida, where my wife and I had wintered, back to Maine. My second day on the road, I stopped for gas at a little station just off the Pennsylvania Turnpike, one of those amusingly antique places where a fellow still comes out, pumps your gas, and asks how you're doing and who you like in the NCAA tournament.

I told this one I was doing fine and liked Duke in the tournament. Then I went around back to use the men's room. There was a brawling stream full of snowmelt beyond the station, and when I came out of the men's, I walked a little way down the slope, which was littered with cast-off tire-rims and engine parts, for a closer look at the water. There were still patches of snow on the

ANCHOR BOOKS¹⁷⁷



eBooks

Bird by Bird

Anne Lamott

Bird *by* Bird

*Some Instructions
on Writing and Life*

A n n e L a m o t t



ANCHOR BOOKS
A DIVISION OF RANDOM HOUSE, INC.
NEW YORK

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Part One - Writing](#)

[Getting Started](#)

[Short Assignments](#)

[Shitty First Drafts](#)

[Perfectionism](#)

[School Lunches](#)

[Polaroids](#)

[Character](#)

[Plot](#)

[Dialogue](#)

[Set Design](#)

[False Starts](#)

[Plot Treatment](#)

[How Do You Know When You're Done?](#)

[Part Two - The Writing Frame of Mind](#)

[Looking Around](#)

[The Moral Point of View](#)

[Broccoli](#)

[Radio Station KFKD](#)

[Jealousy](#)

[Part Three - Help Along the Way](#)

[Index Cards](#)

[Calling Around](#)

[Writing Groups](#)

[Someone to Read Your Drafts](#)

[Letters](#)

[Writer's Block](#)

[Part Four - Publication — and Other Reasons to Write](#)

[Writing a Present](#)
[Finding Your Voice](#)
[Giving](#)
[Publication](#)

[Part Five - The Last Class](#)

[About the Author](#)
[ALSO BY ANNE LAMOTT](#)
[ALSO BY ANNE LAMOTT](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

ALSO BY ANNE LAMOTT

Hard Laughter

Rosie

Joe Jones

All New People

Operating Instructions

Crooked Little Heart

Traveling Mercies

Blue Shoe

Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith

This book is dedicated
to Don Carpenter

& Neshama Franklin

& John Kaye

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the extraordinary debt I owe to the writers who have told me such wise things about writing over the years: Martin Cruz Smith, Jane Vandenburg, Ethan Canin, Alice Adams, Dennis McFarland, Orville Schell, and Tom Weston.

I would not be able to get my work done without the continual support and vision of my editor, Jack Shoemaker. My agent, Chuck Verrill, is just wonderful as is Nancy Palmer Jones, who copy-edited this book (and the last) with enormous skill and warmth and precision.

I want to mention once again that I do not think I'd even be alive today if not for the people of St. Andrew Presbyterian Church, Marin City, California.

Sam said to me the other day, "I love you like 20 tyrannosauruses on 20 mountaintops," and this is the exact same way in which (love him.

Introduction

I grew up around a father and a mother who read every chance they got, who took us to the library every Thursday night to load up on books for the coming week. Most nights after dinner my father stretched out on the couch to read, while my mother sat with her book in the easy chair and the three of us kids each retired to our own private reading stations. Our house was very quiet after dinner—unless, that is, some of my father's writer friends were over. My father was a writer, as were most of the men with whom he hung out. They were not the quietest people on earth, but they were mostly very masculine and kind. Usually in the afternoons, when that day's work was done, they hung out at the no name bar in Sausalito, but sometimes they came to our house for drinks and ended up staying for supper. I loved them, but every so often one of them would pass out at the dinner table. I was an anxious child to begin with, and I found this unnerving.

Every morning, no matter how late he had been up, my father rose at 5:30, went to his study, wrote for a couple of hours, made us all breakfast, read the paper with my mother, and then went back to work for the rest of the morning. Many years passed before I realized that he did this by choice, for a living, and that he was not unemployed or mentally ill. I wanted him to have a regular job where he put on a necktie and went off somewhere with the other fathers and sat in a little office and smoked. But the idea of spending entire days in someone else's office doing someone else's work did not suit my father's soul. I think it would have killed him. He did end up dying rather early, in his mid-fifties, but at least he had lived on his own terms.

So I grew up around this man who sat at his desk in the study all day and wrote books and articles about the places and people he had seen and known. He read a lot of poetry. Sometimes he traveled. He could go anywhere he wanted with a sense of purpose. One of the gifts of being a writer is that it gives you an excuse to do things, to go places and explore. Another is that writing motivates you to look closely at life, at life as it lurches by and tramps around.

Writing taught my father to pay attention; my father in turn taught other people to pay attention and then to write down their thoughts and observations. His students were the prisoners at San Quentin who took part in the creative-writing program. But he taught me, too, mostly by example. He taught the prisoners and me to put a little bit down on paper every day, and to read all the great books and plays we could get our hands on. He taught us to read poetry. He taught us to be bold and original and to let ourselves make mistakes, and that Thurber was right when he said, "You might as well fall flat on your face as lean over too far backwards." But while he helped the prisoners and me to discover that we had a lot of feelings and observations and memories and dreams and (God knows) opinions we wanted to share, we all ended up just the tiniest bit resentful when we found the one fly in the ointment: that at some point we had to actually sit down and write.

I believe writing was easier for me than for the prisoners because I was still a child. But I always found it hard. I started writing when I was seven or eight. I was very shy and strange-looking, loved reading above everything else, weighed about forty pounds at the time, and was so tense that I walked around with my shoulders up to my ears, like Richard Nixon. I saw a home movie once of a birthday party I went to in the first grade, with all these cute little boys and girls playing together like puppies, and all of a sudden I scuttled across the screen like Prufrock's crab. I was very clearly the one who was going to grow up to be a serial killer, or keep dozens and dozens of cats. Instead, I got funny. I got funny because boys, older boys I didn't even know,

would ride by on their bicycles and taunt me about my weird looks. Each time felt like a drive-by shooting. I think this is why I walked like Nixon: I think (was trying to plug my ears with my shoulders, but they wouldn't quite reach. So first I got funny and then I started to write, although I did not always write funny things.

The first poem I wrote that got any attention was about John Glenn. The first stanza went, "Colonel John Glenn went up to heaven / in his spaceship, Friendship Seven." There were many, many verses. It was like one of the old English ballads my mother taught us to sing while she played the piano. Each song had thirty or forty verses, which would leave my male relatives flattened to our couches and armchairs as if by centrifugal force, staring unblinkingly up at the ceiling.

The teacher read the John Glenn poem to my second-grade class. It was a great moment; the other children looked at me as though I had learned to drive. It turned out that the teacher had submitted the poem to a California state schools competition, and it had won some sort of award. It appeared in a mimeographed collection. I understood immediately the thrill of seeing oneself in print. It provides some sort of primal verification: you are in print; therefore you exist. Who knows what this urge is all about, to appear somewhere outside yourself, instead of feeling stuck inside your muddled but stroboscopic mind, peering out like a little undersea animal—a spiny blenny, for instance—from inside your tiny cave? Seeing yourself in print is such an amazing concept: you can get so much attention without having to actually show up somewhere. While others who have something to say or who want to be effectual, like musicians or baseball players or politicians, have to get out there in front of people, writers, who tend to be shy, get to stay home and still be public. There are many obvious advantages to this. You don't have to dress up, for instance, and you can't hear them boo you right away.

Sometimes I got to sit on the floor of my father's study and write my poems while he sat at his desk writing his books. Every couple of years, another book of his was published. Books were revered in our house, and great writers admired above everyone else. Special books got displayed prominently: on the coffee table, on the radio, on the back of the john. I grew up reading the blurbs on dust jackets and the reviews of my father's books in the papers. All of this made me start wanting to be a writer when I grew up—to be artistic, a free spirit, and yet also to be the rare working-class person in charge of her own life.

Still, I worried that there was never quite enough money at our house. I worried that my father was going to turn into a bum like some of his writer friends. I remember when I was ten years old, my father published a piece in a magazine that mentioned his having spent an afternoon on a porch at Stinson Beach with a bunch of other writers and that they had all been drinking lots of red wine and smoking marijuana. No one smoked marijuana in those days except jazz musicians, and they were all also heroin addicts. Nice white middle-class fathers were not supposed to be smoking marijuana; they were supposed to be sailing or playing tennis. My friends' fathers, who were teachers and doctors and fire fighters and lawyers, did not smoke marijuana. Most of them didn't even drink, and they certainly did not have colleagues who came over and passed out at the table over the tuna casserole. Reading my father's article, I could only imagine that the world was breaking down, that the next time I burst into my dad's study to show him my report card he'd be crouched under the desk, with one of my mother's nylon stockings knotted around his upper arm, looking up at me like a cornered wolf. I felt that this was going to be a problem; I was sure that we would be ostracized in our community.

All I ever wanted was to belong, to wear that hat of belonging.

In seventh and eighth grades I still weighed about forty pounds. I was twelve years old and had been getting teased about my strange looks for most of my life. This is a difficult country to look too different in—the United States of Advertising, as Paul Krassner puts it—and if you are too skinny or too tall or dark or weird or short or frizzy or homely or poor or nearsighted, you get crucified. I did.

But I was funny. So the popular kids let me hang out with them, go to their parties, and watch them neck with each other. This, as you might imagine, did not help my self-esteem a great deal. I thought I was a total loser. But one day I took a notebook and a pen when I went to Bolinas Beach with my father (who was not, as far as I could tell, shooting drugs yet). With the writer's equivalent of canvas and brush, I wrote a description of what I saw: "I walked to the lip of the water and let the foamy tongue of the rushing liquid lick my toes. A sand crab burrowed a hole a few inches from my foot and then disappeared into the damp sand...." I will spare you the rest. It goes on for quite a while. My father convinced me to show it to a teacher, and it ended up being included in a real textbook. This deeply impressed my teachers and parents and a few kids, even some of the popular kids, who invited me to more parties so I could watch them all make out even more frequently.

One of the popular girls came home with me after school one day, to spend the night. We found my parents rejoicing over the arrival of my dad's new novel, the first copy off the press. We were all so thrilled and proud, and this girl seemed to think I had the coolest possible father: a writer. (Her father sold cars.) We went out to dinner, where we all toasted one another. Things in the family just couldn't have been better, and here was a friend to witness it.

Then that night, before we went to sleep, I picked up the new novel and began to read the first page to my friend. We were lying side by side in sleeping bags on my floor. The first page turned out to be about a man and a woman in bed together, having sex. The man was playing with the woman's nipple. I began to giggle with mounting hysteria. Oh, this is great, I thought, beaming jocularly at my friend. I covered my mouth with one hand, like a blushing Charlie Chaplin, and pantomimed that I was about to toss that silly book over my shoulder. This is wonderful, I thought, throwing back my head to laugh jovially; my father writes pornography.

In the dark, I glowed like a light bulb with shame. You could have read by me. I never mentioned the book to my father, although over the next couple of years, I went through it late at night, looking for more sexy parts, of which there were a number. It was very confusing. It made me feel very scared and sad.

Then a strange thing happened. My father wrote an article for a magazine, called "A Lousy Place to Raise Kids," and it was about Marin County and specifically the community where we lived, which is as beautiful a place as one can imagine. Yet the people on our peninsula were second only to the Native Americans in the slums of Oakland in the rate of alcoholism, and the drug abuse among teenagers was, as my father wrote, soul chilling, and there was rampant divorce and mental breakdown and wayward sexual behavior. My father wrote disparagingly about the men in the community, their values and materialistic frenzy, and about their wives, "these estimable women, the wives of doctors, architects, and lawyers, in tennis dresses and cotton frocks, tanned and well preserved, wandering the aisles of our supermarkets with glints of madness in their eyes." No one in our town came off looking great. "This is the great tragedy of California," he wrote in the last paragraph, "for a life oriented to leisure is in the end a life oriented to death—the greatest leisure of all."

There was just one problem: I was an avid tennis player. The tennis ladies were my friends. I

practiced every afternoon at the same tennis club as they; I sat with them on the weekends and waited for the men (who had priority) to be done so we could get on the courts. And now my father had made them look like decadent zombies.

I thought we were ruined. But my older brother came home from school that week with a photocopy of my father's article that his teachers in both social studies and English had passed out to their classes; John was a hero to his classmates. There was an enormous response in the community: in the next few months I was snubbed by a number of men and women at the tennis club, but at the same time, people stopped my father on the street when we were walking together, and took his hand in both of theirs, as if he had done them some personal favor. Later that summer I came to know how they felt, when I read *Catcher in the Rye* for the first time and knew what it was like to have someone speak for me, to close a book with a sense of both triumph and relief, one lonely isolated social animal finally making contact.

I started writing a lot in high school: journals, impassioned antiwar pieces, parodies of the writers I loved. And I began to notice something important. The other kids always wanted me to tell them stories of what had happened, even—or especiaHy—when they had been there. Parties that got away from us, blowups in the classroom or on the school yard, scenes involving their parents that we had witnessed—I could make the story happen. I could make it vivid and funny, and even exaggerate some of it so that the event became almost mythical, and the people involved seemed larger, and there was a sense of larger significance, of meaning.

I'm sure my father was the person on whom his friends relied to tell their stories, in school and college. I know for sure that he was later, in the town where he was raising his children. He could take major events or small episodes from daily life and shade or exaggerate things in such a way as to capture their shape and substance, capture what life felt like in the society in which he and his friends lived and worked and bred. People looked to him to put into words what was going on.

I suspect that he was a child who thought differently than his peers, who may have had serious conversations with grown-ups, who as a young person, like me, accepted being alone quite a lot. I think that this sort of person often becomes either a writer or a career criminal. Throughout my childhood I believed that what I thought about was different from what other kids thought about. It was not necessarily more profound, but there was a struggle going on inside me to find some sort of creative or spiritual or aesthetic way of seeing the world and organizing it in my head. I read more than other kids; I luxuriated in books. Books were my refuge. I sat in corners with my little finger hooked over my bottom lip, reading, in a trance, lost in the places and times to which books took me. And there was a moment during my junior year in high school when I began to believe that I could do what other writers were doing. I came to believe that I might be able to put a pencil in my hand and make something magical happen.

Then I wrote some terrible, terrible stories.

In college the whole world opened up, and the books and poets being taught in my English and philosophy classes gave me the feeling for the first time in my life that there was hope, hope that I might find my place in a community. I felt that in my strange new friends and in certain new books, I was meeting my other half. Some people wanted to get rich or famous, but my friends and I wanted to get real. We wanted to get deep. (Also, I suppose, we wanted to get laid.) I devoured books like a person taking vitamins, afraid that otherwise I would remain this gelatinous narcissist, with no possibility of ever becoming thoughtful, of ever being taken seriously. I became a socialist, for five weeks. Then the bus ride to my socialist meetings wore

me out. I was drawn to oddballs, ethnic people, theater people, poets, radicals, gays and lesbians—and somehow they all helped me become some of those things I wanted so desperately to become: political, intellectual, artistic.

My friends turned me on to Kierkegaard, Beckett, Doris Lessing. I swooned with the excitement and nourishment of it all. I remember reading C. S. Lewis for the first time, *Surprised by Joy*, and how, looking inside himself, he found "a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, a harem of fondled hatreds." I felt elated and absolved. I had thought that the people one admired, the kind, smart people of the world, were not like that on the inside, were different from me and, say, Toulouse-Lautrec.

I started writing sophomoric articles for the college paper. Luckily, I was a sophomore. I was incompetent in all college ways except one—I got the best grades in English. I wrote the best papers. But I was ambitious; I wanted to be recognized on a larger scale. So I dropped out at nineteen to become a famous writer.

I moved back to San Francisco and became a famous Kelly Girl instead. I was famous for my incompetence and weepiness. I wept with boredom and disbelief. Then I landed a job as a clerk-typist at a huge engineering and construction firm in the city, in the nuclear quality-assurance department, where I labored under a tsunami wave of triplicate forms and memos. It was very upsetting. It was also so boring that it made my eyes feel ringed with dark circles, like Lurch. I finally figured out that most of this paperwork could be tossed without there being any real ... well ... fallout, and this freed me up to write short stories instead.

"Do it every day for a while," my father kept saying. "Do it as you would do scales on the piano. Do it by prearrangement with yourself. Do it as a debt of honor. And make a commitment to finishing things."

So in addition to writing furtively at the office, I wrote every night for an hour or more, often in coffeehouses with a notepad and my pen, drinking great quantities of wine because this is what writers do; this was what my father and all his friends did. It worked for them, although there was now a new and disturbing trend—they had started committing suicide. This was very painful for my father, of course. But we both kept writing.

I eventually moved out to Bolinas, where my father and younger brother had moved the year before when my parents split up. I began to teach tennis and clean houses for a living. Every day for a couple of years I wrote little snippets and vignettes, but mainly I concentrated on my magnum opus, a short story called "Arnold." A bald, bearded psychiatrist named Arnold is hanging out one day with a slightly depressed young female writer and her slightly depressed younger brother. Arnold gives them all sorts of helpful psychological advice but then, at the end, gives up, gets down on his haunches, and waddles around quacking like a duck to amuse them. This is a theme I have always loved, where a couple of totally hopeless cases run into someone, like a clown or a foreigner, who gives them a little spin for a while and who says in effect, "I'm lost, too! But look—I know how to catch rabbits!"

It was a terrible story.

I wrote a lot of other things, too. I took notes on the people around me, in my town, in my family, in my memory. I took notes on my own state of mind, my grandiosity, the low self-esteem. I wrote down the funny stuff I overheard. I learned to be like a ship's rat, veined ears trembling, and I learned to scribble it all down.

But mostly I worked on my short story "Arnold." Every few months I would send it to my father's agent in New York, Elizabeth McKee.

"Well," she'd write back, "it's really coming along now."

I did this for several years. I wanted to be published so badly. I heard a preacher say recently that hope is a revolutionary patience; let me add that so is being a writer. Hope begins in the dark, the stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come. You wait and watch and work: you don't give up.

I didn't give up, largely because of my father's faith in me. And then, unfortunately, when I was twenty-three, I suddenly had a story to tell. My father was diagnosed with brain cancer. He and my brothers and I were devastated, but somehow we managed, just barely, to keep our heads above water. My father told me to pay attention and to take notes. "You tell your version," he said, "and I am going to tell mine."

I began to write about what my father was going through, and then began to shape these writings into connected short stories. I wove in all the vignettes and snippets I'd been working on in the year before Dad's diagnosis, and came up with five chapters that sort of hung together. My father, who was too sick to write his own rendition, loved them, and had me ship them off to Elizabeth, our agent. And then I waited and waited and waited, growing old and withered in the course of a month. But I think she must have read them in a state of near euphoria, thrilled to find herself not reading "Arnold." She is not a religious woman by any stretch, but I always picture her clutching those stories to her chest, eyes closed, swaying slightly, moaning, "Thank ya, Lord."

So she sent them around New York, and Viking made us an offer. And thus the process began. The book came out when I was twenty-six, when my father had been dead for a year. God! I had a book published! It was everything I had ever dreamed of. And I had reached nirvana, right? Well.

I believed, before I sold my first book, that publication would be instantly and automatically gratifying, an affirming and romantic experience, a Hallmark commercial where one runs and leaps in slow motion across a meadow filled with wildflowers into the arms of acclaim and self-esteem.

This did not happen for me.

The months before a book comes out of the chute are, for most writers, right up there with the worst life has to offer, pretty much like the first twenty minutes of *Apocalypse Now*, with Martin Sheen in the motel room in Saigon, totally decompensating. The waiting and the fantasies, both happy and grim, wear you down. Plus there is the matter of the early reviews that come out about two months before publication. The first two notices I got on this tender book I'd written about my dying, now dead father said that my book was a total waste of time, a boring, sentimental, self-indulgent sack of spider puke.

This is not verbatim.

I was a little edgy for the next six weeks, as you can imagine. I had lots and lots of drinks every night, and told lots of strangers at the bar about how my dad had died and I'd written this book about it, and how the early reviewers had criticized it, and then I'd start to cry and need a few more drinks, and then I'd end up telling them about this great dog we'd had named Llewelyn who had to be put to sleep when I was twelve, which still made me so sad even to think about, I'd tell my audience, that it was all I could do not to go into the rest room and blow my brains out.

Then the book came out. I got some terrific reviews in important places, and a few bad ones. There were a few book-signing parties, a few interviews, and a number of important people

claimed to love it. But overall it seemed that I was not in fact going to be taking early retirement. I had secretly believed that trumpets would blare, major reviewers would proclaim that not since Moby Dick had an American novel so captured life in all of its dizzying complexity. And this is what I thought when my second book came out, and my third, and my fourth, and my fifth. And each time I was wrong.

But I still encourage anyone who feels at all compelled to write to do so. I just try to warn people who hope to get published that publication is not all that it is cracked up to be. But writing is. Writing has so much to give, so much to teach, so many surprises. That thing you had to force yourself to do—the actual act of writing—turns out to be the best part. It's like discovering that while you thought you needed the tea ceremony for the caffeine, what you really needed was the tea ceremony. The act of writing turns out to be its own reward.

I've managed to get some work done nearly every day of my adult life, without impressive financial success. Yet I would do it all over again in a hot second, mistakes and doldrums and breakdowns and all. Sometimes I could not tell you exactly why, especially when it feels pointless and pitiful, like Sisyphus with cash-flow problems. Other days, though, my writing is like a person to me—the person who, after all these years, still makes sense to me. It reminds me of "The Wild Rose," a poem Wendell Berry wrote for his wife:

Sometimes hidden from me in daily custom and in trust, so that I live by you unaware as by the beating of my heart,
Suddenly you flare in my sight, a wild rose blooming at the edge of thicket, grace and light where yesterday was only shade,
and once again I am blessed, choosing again what I chose before.

Ever since I was a little kid, I've thought that there was something noble and mysterious about writing, about the people who could do it well, who could create a world as if they were little gods or sorcerers. All my life I've felt that there was something magical about people who could get into other people's minds and skin, who could take people like me out of ourselves and then take us back to ourselves. And you know what? I still do.

So now I teach. This just sort of happened. Someone offered me a gig teaching a writing workshop about ten years ago, and I've been teaching writing classes ever since. But you can't teach writing, people tell me. And say, 'Who the hell are you, God's dean of admissions?'

If people show up in one of my classes and want to learn to write, or to write better, I can tell them everything that has helped me along the way and what it is like for me on a daily basis. I can teach them little things that may not be in any of the great books on writing. For instance, I'm not sure if anyone else has mentioned that December is traditionally a bad month for writing. It is a month of Mondays. Mondays are not good writing days. One has had all that freedom over the weekend, all that authenticity, all those dreamy dreams, and then your angry mute Slavic Uncle Monday arrives, and it is time to sit down at your desk. So I would simply recommend to the people in my workshops that they never start a large writing project on any Monday in December. Why set yourself up for failure?

Interviewers ask famous writers why they write, and it was (if I remember correctly) the poet John Ashbery who answered, "Because I want to." Flannery O'Connor answered, "Because I'm good at it," and when the occasional interviewer asks me, I quote them both. Then I add that other than writing, I am completely unemployable. But really, secretly, when I'm not being smart-alecky, it's because I want to and I'm good at it. I always mention a scene from the movie Chariots of Fire in which, as I remember it, the Scottish runner, Eric Liddell, who is the hero, is walking along with his missionary sister on a gorgeous heathery hillside in Scotland. She is nagging him to give up training for the Olympics and to get back to doing his missionary work at

their church's mission in China. And he replies that he wants to go to China because he feels it is God's will for him, but that first he is going to train with all of his heart, because God also made him very, very fast.

So God made some of us fast in this area of working with words, and he gave us the gift of loving to read with the same kind of passion with which we love nature. My students at the writing workshops have this gift of loving to read, and some of them are really fast, really good with words, and some of them aren't really fast and don't write all that well, but they still love good writing, and they just want to write. And I say, "Hey! That is good enough for me. Come on down."

So I tell them what it will be like for me at the desk the next morning when I sit down to work, with a few ideas and a lot of blank paper, with hideous conceit and low self-esteem in equal measure, fingers poised on the keyboard. I tell them they'll want to be really good right off, and they may not be, but they might be good someday if they just keep the faith and keep practicing. And they may even go from wanting to have written something to just wanting to be writing, wanting to be working on something, like they'd want to be playing the piano or tennis, because writing brings with it so much joy, so much challenge. It is work and play together. When they are working on their books or stories, their heads will spin with ideas and invention. They'll see the world through new eyes. Everything they see and hear and learn will become grist for the mill. At cocktail parties or in line at the post office, they will be gleaning small moments and overheard expressions: they'll sneak away to scribble these things down. They will have days at the desk of frantic boredom, of angry hopelessness, of wanting to quit forever, and there will be days when it feels like they have caught and are riding a wave.

And then tell my students that the odds of their getting published and of it bringing them financial security, peace of mind, and even joy are probably not that great. Ruin, hysteria, bad skin, unsightly tics, ugly financial problems, maybe; but probably not peace of mind. I tell them that I think they ought to write anyway. But I try to make sure they understand that writing, and even getting good at it, and having books and stories and articles published, will not open the doors that most of them hope for. It will not make them well. It will not give them the feeling that the world has finally validated their parking tickets, that they have in fact finally arrived. My writer friends, and they are legion, do not go around beaming with quiet feelings of contentment. Most of them go around with haunted, abused, surprised looks on their faces, like lab dogs on whom very personal deodorant sprays have been tested.

My students do not want to hear this. Nor do they want to hear that it wasn't until my fourth book came out that I stopped being a starving artist. They do not want to hear that most of them probably won't get published and that even fewer will make enough to live on. But their fantasy of what it means to be published has very little to do with reality. So I tell them about my four-year-old son Sam, who goes to a little Christian preschool where he recently learned the story of Thanksgiving. A friend of his, who is also named Sam but who is twelve years old and very political, asked my Sam to tell him everything he knew about the holiday. So my Sam told him this lovely Christian-preschool version of Thanksgiving, with the pilgrims and the Native Americans and lots of lovely food and feelings. At which point Big Sam turned to me and said, somewhat bitterly, "I guess he hasn't heard about the small-pox-infected blankets yet."

Now, maybe we weren't handing out those blankets yet; maybe we were still on our good behavior. But the point is that my students, who so want to be published, have not yet heard about the small-pox-infected blankets of getting published. So that's one of the things I tell them.

But I also tell them that sometimes when my writer friends are working, they feel better and more alive than they do at any other time. And sometimes when they are writing well, they feel that they are living up to something. It is as if the right words, the true words, are already inside them, and they just want to help them get out. Writing this way is a little like milking a cow: the milk is so rich and delicious, and the cow is so glad you did it. I want the people who come to my classes to have this feeling, too.

So I tell them everything I've been thinking or talking about lately that has helped me get my work done. There are some quotes and examples from other writers that have inspired me and that I hand out every session. There are some things my friends remind me of when I call them, worried, bored, discouraged, and trying to scrounge together cab fare to the bridge. What follows in this book is what I've learned along the way, what I pass along to each new batch of students. This is not like other writing books, some of which are terrific. It's more personal, more like my classes. As of today, here is almost every single thing I know about writing.

Part One

Writing

Getting Started

The very first thing I tell my new students on the first day of a workshop is that good writing is about telling the truth. We are a species that needs and wants to understand who we are. Sheep like do not seem to share this longing, which is one reason they write so very little. But we do. We have so much we want to say and figure out. Year after year my students are bursting with stories to tell, and they start writing projects with excitement and maybe even joy—finally their voices will be heard, and they are going to get to devote themselves to this one thing they've longed to do since childhood. But after a few days at the desk, telling the truth in an interesting way turns out to be about as easy and pleasurable as bathing a cat. Some lose faith. Their sense of self and story shatters and crumbles to the ground. Historically they show up for the first day of the workshop looking like bright goofy ducklings who will follow me anywhere, but by the time the second class rolls around, they look at me as if the engagement is definitely off.

"I don't even know where to start," one will wail.

Start with your childhood, I tell them. Plug your nose and jump in, and write down all your memories as truthfully as you can. Flannery O'Connor said that anyone who survived childhood has enough material to write for the rest of his or her life. Maybe your childhood was grim and horrible, but grim and horrible is Okay if it is well done. Don't worry about doing it well yet, though. Just start getting it down.

Now, the amount of material may be so overwhelming that it can make your brain freeze. When I had been writing food reviews for a number of years, there were so many restaurants and individual dishes in my brainpan that when people asked for a recommendation, I couldn't think of a single restaurant where I'd ever actually eaten. But if the person could narrow it down to, say, Indian, I might remember one lavish Indian palace, where my date had asked the waiter for the Rudyard Kipling sampler and later for the holy-cow tartare. Then a number of memories would come to mind, of other dates and other Indian restaurants.

So you might start by writing down every single thing you can remember from your first few years in school. Start with kindergarten. Try to get the words and memories down as they occur to you. Don't worry if what you write is no good, because no one is going to see it. Move on to first grade, to second, to third. Who were your teachers, your classmates? What did you wear? Who and what were you jealous of? Now branch out a little. Did your family take vacations during those years? Get these down on paper. Do you remember how much more presentable everybody else's family looked? Do you remember how when you'd be floating around in an inner tube on a river, your own family would have lost the little cap that screws over the airflow valve, so every time you got in and out of the inner tube, you'd scratch new welts in your thighs? And how other families never lost the caps?

If this doesn't pan out, or if it does but you finish mining this particular vein, see if focusing on holidays and big events helps you recollect your life as it was. Write down everything you can remember about every birthday or Christmas or Seder or Easter or whatever, every relative who was there. Write down all the stuff you swore you'd never tell another soul. What can you recall about your birthday parties—the disasters, the days of grace, your relatives' faces lit up by birthday candles? Scratch around for details: what people ate, listened to, wore—those terrible petaled swim caps, the men's awful trunks, the cocktail dress your voluptuous aunt wore that was so slinky she practically needed the Jaws of Life to get out of it. Write about the women's curlers with the bristles inside, the garters your father and uncles used to hold up their dress

socks, your grandfathers' hats, your cousins' perfect Brownie uniforms, and how your own looked like it had just been hatched. Describe the trench coats and stoles and car coats, what they revealed and what they covered up. See if you can remember what you were given that Christmas when you were ten, and how it made you feel inside. Write down what the grown-ups said and did after they'd had a couple of dozen drinks, especially that one Fourth of July when your father made Fish House punch and the adults practically had to crawl from room to room.

Remember that you own what happened to you. If your childhood was less than ideal, you may have been raised thinking that if you told the truth about what really went on in your family, a long bony white finger would emerge from a cloud and point at you, while a chilling voice thundered, "We told you not to tell." But that was then. Just put down on paper everything you can remember now about your parents and siblings and relatives and neighbors, and we will deal with libel later on.

"But how?" my students ask. "How do you actually do it?"

You sit down, I say. You try to sit down at approximately the same time every day. This is how you train your unconscious to kick in for you creatively. So you sit down at, say, nine every morning, or ten every night. You put a piece of paper in the typewriter, or you turn on your computer and bring up the right file, and then you stare at it for an hour or so. You begin rocking, just a little at first, and then like a huge autistic child. You look at the ceiling, and over at the clock, yawn, and stare at the paper again. Then, with your fingers poised on the keyboard, you squint at an image that is forming in your mind—a scene, a locale, a character, whatever—and you try to quiet your mind so you can hear what that landscape or character has to say above the other voices in your mind. The other voices are banshees and drunken monkeys. They are the voices of anxiety, judgment, doom, guilt. Also, severe hypochondria. There may be a Nurse Ratchedlike listing of things that must be done right this moment: foods that must come out of the freezer, appointments that must be canceled or made, hairs that must be tweezed. But you hold an imaginary gun to your head and make yourself stay at the desk. There is a vague pain at the base of your neck. It crosses your mind that you have meningitis. Then the phone rings and you look up at the ceiling with fury, summon every ounce of noblesse oblige, and answer the call politely, with maybe just the merest hint of irritation. The caller asks if you're working, and you say yeah, because you are.

Yet somehow in the face of all this, you clear a space for the writing voice, hacking away at the others with machetes, and you begin to compose sentences. You begin to string words together like beads to tell a story. You are desperate to communicate, to edify or entertain, to preserve moments of grace or joy or transcendence, to make real or imagined events come alive. But you cannot will this to happen. It is a matter of persistence and faith and hard work. So you might as well just go ahead and get started.

I wish I had a secret I could let you in on, some formula my father passed on to me in a whisper just before he died, some code word that has enabled me to sit at my desk and land flights of creative inspiration like an air-traffic controller. But I don't. All I know is that the process is pretty much the same for almost everyone I know. The good news is that some days it feels like you just have to keep getting out of your own way so that whatever it is that wants to be written can use you to write it. It is a little like when you have something difficult to discuss with someone, and as you go to do it, you hope and pray that the right words will come if only you show up and make a stab at it. And often the right words do come, and you—well—"write" for a while; you put a lot of thoughts down on paper. But the bad news is that if you're at all like

me, you'll probably read over what you've written and spend the rest of the day obsessing, and praying that you do not die before you can completely rewrite or destroy what you have written, lest the eagerly waiting world learn how bad your first drafts are.

The obsessing may keep you awake, or the self-loathing may cause you to fall into a narcoleptic coma before dinner. But let's just say that you do fall asleep at a normal hour. Then the odds are that you will wake up at four in the morning, having dreamed that you have died. Death turns out to feel much more frantic than you had imagined. Typically you'll try to comfort yourself by thinking about the day's work—the day's excrementitious work. You may experience a jittery form of existential dread, considering the absolute meaninglessness of life and the fact that no one has ever really loved you; you may find yourself consumed with a free-floating shame, and a hopelessness about your work, and the realization that you will have to throw out everything you've done so far and start from scratch. But you will not be able to do so. Because you suddenly understand that you are completely riddled with cancer.

And then the miracle happens. The sun comes up again. So you get up and do your morning things, and one thing leads to another, and eventually, at nine, you find yourself back at the desk, staring blankly at the pages you filled yesterday. And there on page four is a paragraph with all sorts of life in it, smells and sounds and voices and colors and even a moment of dialogue that makes you say to yourself, very, very softly, "Hmmm." You look up and stare out the window again, but this time you are drumming your fingers on the desk, and you don't care about those first three pages; those you will throw out, those you needed to write to get to that fourth page, to get to that one long paragraph that was what you had in mind when you started, only you didn't know that, couldn't know that, until you got to it. And the story begins to materialize, and another thing is happening, which is that you are learning what you aren't writing, and this is helping you to find out what you are writing. Think of a fine painter attempting to capture an inner vision, beginning with one corner of the canvas, painting what he thinks should be there, not quite pulling it off, covering it over with white paint, and trying again, each time finding out what his painting isn't, until finally he finds out what it is.

And when you do find out what one corner of your vision is, you're off and running. And it really is like running. It always reminds me of the last lines of *Rabbit, Run*: "his heels hitting heavily on the pavement at first but with an effortless gathering out of a kind of sweet panic growing lighter and quicker and quieter, he runs. Ah: runs. Runs."

I wish I felt that kind of inspiration more often. I almost never do. All I know is that if I sit there long enough, something will happen.

My students stare at me for a moment. "How do we find an agent?" they ask.

I sigh. When you are ready, there are books that list agents. You can select a few names and write to them and ask if they would like to take a look at your work. Mostly they will not want to. But if you are really good, and very persistent, someone eventually will read your material and take you on. I can almost promise you this. However, in the meantime, we are going to concentrate on writing itself, on how to become a better writer, because, for one thing, becoming a better writer is going to help you become a better reader, and that is the real payoff.

But my students don't believe me. They want agents, and to be published. And they also want refunds.

Almost all of them have been writing at least for a little while, some of them all of their lives. Many of them have been told over the years that they are quite good, and they want to know why they feel so crazy when they sit down to work, why they have these wonderful ideas and then

they sit down and write one sentence and see with horror that it is a bad one, and then every major form of mental illness from which they suffer surfaces, leaping out of the water like trout—the delusions, hypochondria, the grandiosity, the self-loathing, the inability to track one thought to completion, even the hand-washing fixation, the Howard Hughes germ phobias. And especially, the paranoia.

You can be defeated and disoriented by all these feelings, I tell them, or you can see the paranoia, for instance, as wonderful material. You can use it as the raw clay that you pull out of the river: surely one of your characters is riddled with it, and so in giving that person this particular quality, you get to use it, shape it into something true and funny or frightening. I read them a poem by Phillip Lopate that someone once sent me, that goes:

*We who are
your closest friends
feel the time
has come to tell you
that every Thursday
we have been meeting,
as a group,
to devise ways
to keep you
in perpetual uncertainty
frustration
discontent and
torture
by neither loving you
as much as you want
nor cutting you adrift.
Your analyst is
in on it,
plus your boyfriend
and your ex-husband;
and we have pledged
to disappoint you
as long as you need us.
In announcing our
association
we realize we have
placed in your hands
a possible antidote
against uncertainty
indeed against ourselves.
But since our Thursday nights
have brought us
to a community
of purpose
rare in itself*

*with you as
the natural center,
we feel hopeful you
will continue to make unreasonable
demands for affection
if not as a consequence
if your disastrous personality
then for the good of the collective.*

They stare at me like the cast of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Only about three of them think this poem is funny, or even a good example of someone taking his own paranoia and shaping it into something artistic and true. A few people look haunted. The ones who most want to be published just think I'm an extremely angry person. Some of them look emotionally broken, some look at me with actual disgust, as if I am standing there naked under fluorescent lights.

Finally someone will raise his or her hand. "Can you send your manuscript directly to a publisher, or do you really need an agent?"

After a moment or so, say, You really need an agent.

The problem that comes up over and over again is that these people want to be published. They kind of want to write, but they really want to be published. You'll never get to where you want to be that way, I tell them. There is a door we all want to walk through, and writing can help you find it and open it. Writing can give you what having a baby can give you: it can get you to start paying attention, can help you soften, can wake you up. But publishing won't do any of those things; you'll never get in that way.

My son, Sam, at three and a half, had these keys to a set of plastic handcuffs, and one morning he intentionally locked himself out of the house. I was sitting on the couch reading the newspaper when I heard him stick his plastic keys into the doorknob and try to open the door. Then I heard him say, "Oh, shit." My whole face widened, like the guy in Edvard Munch's *Scream*. After a moment I got up and opened the front door.

"Honey," I said, "what'd you just say?"

"I said, 'Oh, shit,' " he said.

"But, honey, that's a naughty word. Both of us have absolutely got to stop using it. Okay?"

He hung his head for a moment, nodded, and said, "Okay, Mom." Then he leaned forward and said confidentially, "But I'll tell you why I said 'shit.' " I said Okay, and he said, "Because of the fucking keys!"

Fantasy keys won't get you in. Almost every single thing you hope publication will do for you is a fantasy, a hologram— it's the eagle on your credit card that only seems to soar. What's real is that if you do your scales every day, if you slowly try harder and harder pieces, if you listen to great musicians play music you love, you'll get better. At times when you're working, you'll sit there feeling hung over and bored, and you may or may not be able to pull yourself up out of it that day. But it is fantasy to think that successful writers do not have these bored, defeated hours, these hours of deep insecurity when one feels as small and jumpy as a water bug. They do. But they also often feel a great sense of amazement that they get to write, and they know that this is what they want to do for the rest of their lives. And so if one of your heart's deepest longings is to write, there are ways to get your work done, and a number of reasons why it is important to do so.

And what are those reasons again? my students ask.

Because for some of us, books are as important as almost anything else on earth. What a miracle it is that out of these small, flat, rigid squares of paper unfolds world after world after world, worlds that sing to you, comfort and quiet or excite you. Books help us understand who we are and how we are to behave. They show us what community and friendship mean; they show us how to live and die. They are full of all the things that you don't get in real life—wonderful, lyrical language, for instance, right off the bat. And quality of attention: we may notice amazing details during the course of a day but we rarely let ourselves stop and really pay attention. An author makes you notice, makes you pay attention, and this is a great gift. My gratitude for good writing is unbounded; I'm grateful for it the way I'm grateful for the ocean. Aren't you? I ask.

Most of them nod. This is why they are here: they love to read, they love good writing, they want to do it, too. But a few of the students are still looking at me with a sense of betrayal or hopelessness, as if they are thinking of hanging themselves. Too late for a refund, I tell them cheerfully, but I have something even better. Next are the two single most helpful things I can tell you about writing.

Short Assignments

The first useful concept is the idea of short assignments. Often when you sit down to write, what you have in mind is an autobiographical novel about your childhood, or a play about the immigrant experience, or a history of—oh, say—say women. But this is like trying to scale a glacier. It's hard to get your footing, and your fingertips get all red and frozen and torn up. Then your mental illnesses arrive at the desk like your sickest, most secretive relatives. And they pull up chairs in a semicircle around the computer, and they try to be quiet but you know they are there with their weird coppery breath, leering at you behind your back.

What I do at this point, as the panic mounts and the jungle drums begin beating and I realize that the well has run dry and that my future is behind me and I'm going to have to get a job only I'm completely unemployable, is to stop. First I try to breathe, because I'm either sitting there panting like a lapdog or I'm unintentionally making slow asthmatic death rattles. So I just sit there for a minute, breathing slowly, quietly. I let my mind wander. After a moment I may notice that I'm trying to decide whether or not I am too old for orthodontia and whether right now would be a good time to make a few calls, and then I start to think about learning to use makeup and how maybe I could find some boyfriend who is not a total and complete fixer-upper and then my life would be totally great and I'd be happy all the time, and then I think about all the people I should have called back before I sat down to work, and how I should probably at least check in with my agent and tell him this great idea I have and see if he thinks it's a good idea, and see if he thinks I need orthodontia—if that is what he is actually thinking whenever we have lunch together. Then I think about someone I'm really annoyed with, or some financial problem that is driving me crazy, and decide that I must resolve this before I get down to today's work. So I become a dog with a chew toy, worrying it for a while, wrestling it to the ground, flinging it over my shoulder, chasing it, licking it, chewing it, flinging it back over my shoulder. I stop just short of actually barking. But all of this only takes somewhere between one and two minutes, so I haven't actually wasted that much time. Still, it leaves me winded. I go back to trying to breathe, slowly and calmly, and I finally notice the one-inch picture frame that I put on my desk to remind me of short assignments.

It reminds me that all I have to do is to write down as much as I can see through a one-inch picture frame. This is all I have to bite off for the time being. All I am going to do right now, for example, is write that one paragraph that sets the story in my hometown, in the late fifties, when the trains were still running. I am going to paint a picture of it, in words, on my word processor. Or all I am going to do is to describe the main character the very first time we meet her, when she first walks out the front door and onto the porch. I am not even going to describe the expression on her face when she first notices the blind dog sitting behind the wheel of her car—just what can see through the one-inch picture frame, just one paragraph describing this woman, in the town where I grew up, the first time we encounter her.

E. L. Doctorow once said that "writing a novel is like driving a car at night. You can see only as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way." You don't have to see where you're going, you don't have to see your destination or everything you will pass along the way. You just have to see two or three feet ahead of you. This is right up there with the best advice about writing, or life, I have ever heard.

So after I've completely exhausted myself thinking about the people I most resent in the world, and my more arresting financial problems, and, of course, the orthodontia, I remember to

pick up the one-inch picture frame and to figure out a one-inch piece of my story to tell, one small scene, one memory, one exchange. I also remember a story that I know I've told elsewhere but that over and over helps me to get a grip: thirty years ago my older brother, who was ten years old at the time, was trying to get a report on birds written that he'd had three months to write, which was due the next day. We were out at our family cabin in Bolinas, and he was at the kitchen table close to tears, surrounded by binder paper and pencils and unopened books on birds, immobilized by the hugeness of the task ahead. Then my father sat down beside him, put his arm around my brother's shoulder, and said, "Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird."

I tell this story again because it usually makes a dent in the tremendous sense of being overwhelmed that my students experience. Sometimes it actually gives them hope, and hope, as Chesterton said, is the power of being cheerful in circumstances that we know to be desperate. Writing can be a pretty desperate endeavor, because it is about some of our deepest needs: our need to be visible, to be heard, our need to make sense of our lives, to wake up and grow and belong. It is no wonder if we sometimes tend to take ourselves perhaps a bit too seriously. So here is another story I tell often.

In the Bill Murray movie *Stripes*, in which he joins the army, there is a scene that takes place the first night of boot camp, where Murray's platoon is assembled in the barracks. They are supposed to be getting to know their sergeant, played by Warren Oates, and one another. So each man takes a few moments to say a few things about who he is and where he is from. Finally it is the turn of this incredibly intense, angry guy named Francis. "My name is Francis," he says. "No one calls me Francis—anyone here calls me Francis and I'll kill them. And another thing. I don't like to be touched. Anyone here ever tries to touch me, I'll kill them," at which point Warren Oates jumps in and says, "Hey—tighten up, Francis."

This is not a bad line to have taped to the wall of your office.

Say to yourself in the kindest possible way, Look, honey, all we're going to do for now is to write a description of the river at sunrise, or the young child swimming in the pool at the club, or the first time the man sees the woman he will marry. That is all we are going to do for now. We are just going to take this bird by bird. But we are going to finish this one short assignment.

Shitty First Drafts

Now, practically even better news than that of short assignments is the idea of shitty first drafts. All good writers write them. This is how they end up with good second drafts and terrific third drafts. People tend to look at successful writers, writers who are getting their books published and maybe even doing well financially, and think that they sit down at their desks every morning feeling like a million dollars, feeling great about who they are and how much talent they have and what a great story they have to tell; that they take in a few deep breaths, push back their sleeves, roll their necks a few times to get all the cricks out, and dive in, typing fully formed passages as fast as a court reporter. But this is just the fantasy of the uninitiated. I know some very great writers, writers you love who write beautifully and have made a great deal of money, and not one of them sits down routinely feeling wildly enthusiastic and confident. Not one of them writes elegant first drafts. All right, one of them does, but we do not like her very much. We do not think that she has a rich inner life or that God likes her or can even stand her. (Although when I mentioned this to my priest friend Tom, he said you can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.)

Very few writers really know what they are doing until they've done it. Nor do they go about their business feeling dewy and thrilled. They do not type a few stiff warm-up sentences and then find themselves bounding along like huskies across the snow. One writer I know tells me that he sits down every morning and says to himself nicely, "It's not like you don't have a choice, because you do—you can either type or kill yourself." We all often feel like we are pulling teeth, even those writers whose prose ends up being the most natural and fluid. The right words and sentences just do not come pouring out like ticker tape most of the time. Now, Muriel Spark is said to have felt that she was taking dictation from God every morning—sitting there, one supposes, plugged into a Dictaphone, typing away, humming. But this is a very hostile and aggressive position. One might hope for bad things to rain down on a person like this.

For me and most of the other writers I know, writing is not rapturous. In fact, the only way I can get anything written at all is to write really, really shitty first drafts.

The first draft is the child's draft, where you let it all pour out and then let it romp all over the place, knowing that no one is going to see it and that you can shape it later. You just let this childlike part of you channel whatever voices and visions come through and onto the page. If one of the characters wants to say, "Well, so what, Mr. Poopy Pants?," you let her. No one is going to see it. If the kid wants to get into really sentimental, weepy, emotional territory, you let him. Just get it all down on paper, because there may be something great in those six crazy pages that you would never have gotten to by more rational, grown-up means. There may be something in the very last line of the very last paragraph on page six that you just love, that is so beautiful or wild that you now know what you're supposed to be writing about, more or less, or in what direction you might go—but there was no way to get to this without first getting through the first five and a half pages.

I used to write food reviews for California magazine before it folded. (My writing food reviews had nothing to do with the magazine folding, although every single review did cause a couple of canceled subscriptions. Some readers took umbrage at my comparing mounds of vegetable puree with various ex-presidents' brains.) These reviews always took two days to write. First I'd go to a restaurant several times with a few opinionated, articulate friends in tow. I'd sit there writing down everything anyone said that was at all interesting or funny. Then on the

following Monday I'd sit down at my desk with my notes, and try to write the review. Even after I'd been doing this for years, panic would set in. I'd try to write a lead, but instead I'd write a couple of dreadful sentences, xx them out, try again, xx everything out, and then feel despair and worry settle on my chest like an x-ray apron. It's over, I'd think, calmly. I'm not going to be able to get the magic to work this time. I'm ruined. I'm through. I'm toast. Maybe, I'd think, I can get my old job back as a clerk-typist. But probably not. I'd get up and study my teeth in the mirror for a while. Then I'd stop, remember to breathe, make a few phone calls, hit the kitchen and chow down. Eventually I'd go back and sit down at my desk, and sigh for the next ten minutes. Finally I would pick up my one-inch picture frame, stare into it as if for the answer, and every time the answer would come: all I had to do was to write a really shitty first draft of, say, the opening paragraph. And no one was going to see it.

So I'd start writing without reining myself in. It was almost just typing, just making my fingers move. And the writing would be terrible. I'd write a lead paragraph that was a whole page, even though the entire review could only be three pages long, and then I'd start writing up descriptions of the food, one dish at a time, bird by bird, and the critics would be sitting on my shoulders, commenting like cartoon characters. They'd be pretending to snore, or rolling their eyes at my overwrought descriptions, no matter how hard I tried to tone those descriptions down, no matter how conscious I was of what a friend said to me gently in my early days of restaurant reviewing. "Annie," she said, "it is just a piece of chicken. It is just a bit of cake."

But because by then I had been writing for so long, I would eventually let myself trust the process—sort of, more or less. I'd write a first draft that was maybe twice as long as it should be, with a self-indulgent and boring beginning, stupefying descriptions of the meal, lots of quotes from my black-humored friends that made them sound more like the Manson girls than food lovers, and no ending to speak of. The whole thing would be so long and incoherent and hideous that for the rest of the day I'd obsess about getting creamed by a car before I could write a decent second draft. I'd worry that people would read what I'd written and believe that the accident had really been a suicide, that I had panicked because my talent was waning and my mind was shot.

The next day, though, I'd sit down, go through it all with a colored pen, take out everything I possibly could, find a new lead somewhere on the second page, figure out a kicky place to end it, and then write a second draft. It always turned out fine, sometimes even funny and weird and helpful. I'd go over it one more time and mail it in.

Then, a month later, when it was time for another review, the whole process would start again, complete with the fears that people would find my first draft before I could rewrite it.

Almost all good writing begins with terrible first efforts. You need to start somewhere. Start by getting something—anything—down on paper. A friend of mine says that the first draft is the down draft—you just get it down. The second draft is the up draft—you fix it up. You try to say what you have to say more accurately. And the third draft is the dental draft, where you check every tooth, to see if it's loose or cramped or decayed, or even, God help us, healthy.

What I've learned to do when I sit down to work on a shitty first draft is to quiet the voices in my head. First there's the vinegar-lipped Reader Lady, who says primly, "Well, that's not very interesting, is it?" And there's the emaciated German male who writes these Orwellian memos detailing your thought crimes. And there are your parents, agonizing over your lack of loyalty and discretion; and there's William Bur-roughs, dozing off or shooting up because he finds you as bold and articulate as a houseplant; and so on. And there are also the dogs: let's not forget the dogs, the dogs in their pen who will surely hurtle and snarl their way out if you ever stop writing,

because writing is, for some of us, the latch that keeps the door of the pen closed, keeps those crazy ravenous dogs contained.

Quieting these voices is at least half the battle I fight daily. But this is better than it used to be. It used to be 87 percent. Left to its own devices, my mind spends much of its time having conversations with people who aren't there. I walk along defending myself to people, or exchanging repartee with them, or rationalizing my behavior, or seducing them with gossip, or pretending I'm on their TV talk show or whatever. I speed or run an aging yellow light or don't come to a full stop, and one nanosecond later am explaining to imaginary cops exactly why I had to do what I did, or insisting that I did not in fact do it.

I happened to mention this to a hypnotist I saw many years ago, and he looked at me very nicely. At first I thought he was feeling around on the floor for the silent alarm button, but then he gave me the following exercise, which I still use to this day.

Close your eyes and get quiet for a minute, until the chatter starts up. Then isolate one of the voices and imagine the person speaking as a mouse. Pick it up by the tail and drop it into a mason jar. Then isolate another voice, pick it up by the tail, drop it in the jar. And so on. Drop in any high-maintenance parental units, drop in any contractors, lawyers, colleagues, children, anyone who is whining in your head. Then put the lid on, and watch all these mouse people clawing at the glass, jabbering away, trying to make you feel like shit because you won't do what they want—won't give them more money, won't be more successful, won't see them more often. Then imagine that there is a volume-control button on the bottle. Turn it all the way up for a minute, and listen to the stream of angry, neglected, guilt-mongering voices. Then turn it all the way down and watch the frantic mice lunge at the glass, trying to get to you. Leave it down, and get back to your shitty first draft.

A writer friend of mine suggests opening the jar and shooting them all in the head. But I think he's a little angry, and I'm sure nothing like this would ever occur to you.

Perfectionism

Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people. It will keep you cramped and insane your whole life, and it is the main obstacle between you and a shitty first draft. I think perfectionism is based on the obsessive belief that if you run carefully enough, hitting each stepping-stone just right, you won't have to die. The truth is that you will die anyway and that a lot of people who aren't even looking at their feet are going to do a whole lot better than you, and have a lot more fun while they're doing it.

Besides, perfectionism will ruin your writing, blocking inventiveness and playfulness and life force (these are words we are allowed to use in California). Perfectionism means that you try desperately not to leave so much mess to clean up. But clutter and mess show us that life is being lived. Clutter is wonderfully fertile ground—you can still discover new treasures under all those piles, clean things up, edit things out, fix things, get a grip. Tidiness suggests that something is as good as it's going to get. Tidiness makes me think of held breath, of suspended animation, while writing needs to breathe and move.

When I was twenty-one, I had my tonsils removed. I was one of those people who got strep throat every few minutes, and my doctor finally decided that I needed to have my tonsils taken out. For the entire week afterward, swallowing hurt so much that I could barely open my mouth for a straw. I had a prescription for painkillers, though, and when they ran out but the pain hadn't, I called the nurse and said that she would really need to send another prescription over, and maybe a little mixed grill of drugs because I was also feeling somewhat anxious. But she wouldn't. I asked to speak to her supervisor. She told me her supervisor was at lunch and that I needed to buy some gum, of all things, and to chew it vigorously—the thought of which made me clutch at my throat. She explained that when we have a wound in our body, the nearby muscles cramp around it to protect it from any more violation and from infection, and that I would need to use these muscles if I wanted them to relax again. So finally my best friend Pammy went out and bought me some gum, and I began to chew it, with great hostility and skepticism. The first bites caused a ripping sensation in the back of my throat, but within minutes all the pain was gone, permanently.

I think that something similar happens with our psychic muscles. They cramp around our wounds—the pain from our childhood, the losses and disappointments of adulthood, the humiliations suffered in both—to keep us from getting hurt in the same place again, to keep foreign substances out. So those wounds never have a chance to heal. Perfectionism is one way our muscles cramp. In some cases we don't even know that the wounds and the cramping, are there, but both limit us. They keep us moving and writing in tight, worried ways. They keep us standing back or backing away from life, keep us from experiencing life in a naked and immediate way. So how do we break through them and get on?

It's easier if you believe in God, but not impossible if you don't. If you believe, then this God of yours might be capable of relieving you of some of this perfectionism. Still, one of the most annoying things about God is that he never just touches you with his magic wand, like Glinda the Good, and gives you what you want. Like it would be so much skin off his nose. But he might give you the courage or the stamina to write lots and lots of terrible first drafts, and then you'd learn that good second drafts can spring from these, and you'd see that big sloppy imperfect messes have value.

Now, it might be that your God is an uptight, judgmental perfectionist, sort of like Bob Dole

or, for that matter, me. But a priest friend of mine has cautioned me away from the standard God of our childhoods, who loves and guides you and then, if you are bad, roasts you: God as high school principal in a gray suit who never remembered your name but is always leafing unhappily through your files. If this is your God, maybe you need to blend in the influence of someone who is ever so slightly more amused by you, someone less anal. David Byrne is good, for instance. Gracie Allen is good. Mr. Rogers will work.

If you don't believe in God, it may help to remember this great line of Geneen Roth's: that awareness is learning to keep yourself company. And then learn to be more compassionate company, as if you were somebody you are fond of and wish to encourage. I doubt that you would read a close friend's early efforts and, in his or her presence, roll your eyes and snicker. I doubt that you would pantomime sticking your finger down your throat. think you might say something along the lines of, "Good for you. We can work out some of the problems later, but for now, full steam ahead!"

In any case, the bottom line is that if you want to write, you get to, but you probably won't be able to get very far if you don't start trying to get over your perfectionism. You set out to tell a story of some sort, to tell the truth as you feel it, because something is calling you to do so. It calls you like the beckoning finger of smoke in cartoons that rises off the pie cooling on the windowsill, slides under doors and into mouse holes or into the nostrils of the sleeping man or woman in the easy chair. Then the aromatic smoke crooks its finger, and the mouse or the man or woman rises and follows, nose in the air. But some days the smoke is faint and you just have to follow it as best you can, sniffing away. Still, even on those days, you might notice how great perseverance feels. And the next day the scent may seem stronger—or it may just be that you are developing a quiet doggedness. This is priceless. Perfectionism, on the other hand, will only drive you mad.

Your day's work might turn out to have been a mess. So what? Vonnegut said, "When I write, I feel like an armless legless man with a crayon in his mouth." So go ahead and make big scrawls and mistakes. Use up lots of paper. Perfectionism is a mean, frozen form of idealism, while messes are the artist's true friend. What people somehow (inadvertently, I'm sure) forgot to mention when we were children was that we need to make messes in order to find out who we are and why we are here—and, by extension, what we're supposed to be writing.

School Lunches

I know I set out to tell you every single thing I know about writing, but I am also going to tell you every single thing I know about school lunches, partly because the longings and dynamics and anxieties are so similar. I think this will also show how taking short assignments and then producing really shitty first drafts of these assignments can yield a bounty of detailed memory, raw material, and strange characters lurking in the shadows. So: sometimes when a student calls and is mewling and puking about the hopelessness of trying to put words down on paper, I ask him or her to tell me about school lunches—at parochial schools, private schools, twenty years earlier than mine, or ten years later, in Southern California or New York. And they always turn out to be similar to my middle-class Northern California public school lunches. But in important ways they are different, too, and this is even more interesting, for the obvious reason that when we study the differences, we see in bolder relief what we have in common. And for some strange reason, when my students start to jam with me about school lunches, they get off the phone feeling more enthusiastic and in better shape.

One time, in one of my classes, I asked my students to write about lunches for half an hour, and I sat down with them and wrote:

Here is the main thing I know about public school lunches: it only looked like a bunch of kids eating lunch. It was really about opening our insides in front of everyone. Just like writing is. It was a precursor of the showers in seventh- and eighth-grade gym, where everyone could see your everything or your lack of everything, and smell the inside smells of your body, and the whole time you just knew you were going to catch something. The contents of your lunch said whether or not you and your family were Okay. Some bag lunches, like some people, were Okay, and some weren't. There was a code, a right and acceptable way. It was that simple.

But in half an hour there was already too much material for me and some of the people in class, and it threatened to immobilize us. So we decided not even to bother with our parents' handwriting on the outside of the brown paper lunch bag—how much it resembled a Turkish assassin's and what that said about us. We decided to set aside the bag itself for a moment. For the time being we'd stick with the contents, and, to begin with, the sandwich. That was the one-inch picture frame we were going to look through.

Your sandwich was the centerpiece, and there were strict guidelines. It almost goes without saying that store-bought white bread was the only acceptable bread. There were no exceptions. If your mother made the white bread for your sandwich, you could only hope that no one would notice. You certainly did not brag about it, any more than you would brag that she also made headcheese. And there were only a few things that your parents could put in between the two pieces of bread. Bologna was fine, salami and unaggressive cheese were fine, peanut butter and jelly were fine if your parents understood the jelly/jam issue.

Grape jelly was best, by far, a nice slippery comforting sugary petroleum-product grape. Strawberry jam was second; everything else was iffy. Take raspberry, for instance—

Now, see, I couldn't remember, as I wrote in class, just exactly what it was about raspberry jam that was so disconcerting. So when I got home that night, I called a friend who is also a writer, very successful and maybe the most neurotic person I know. I said, Remember how in elementary school, grape jelly was best in your lunch, strawberry jam was Okay, but raspberry was real borderline? Can you talk to me about your experiences with these things? And my friend went into an impassioned, disoriented riff about how there was too much happening in

raspberry jam, too many seeds per spoonful. It felt like there were all these tiny little pod people in it. It was Body-Snatcher jam.

My friend then mentioned apricot jam, which was even worse than raspberry. I had not thought about this in thirty years, but now it all came back with horrible clarity. Apricot jam looked too much like glue, or mucilage. But you could count on having apricot jam when your father made the lunch. Fathers loved apricot jam; I don't know why, but I'm sure Anna Freud could have a field day with it.

I sat down that night and kept writing:

In general, come to think of it, when fathers made lunches, things always turned out badly. Fathers were so oblivious back then. They were like foreigners. For instance, a code bologna sandwich meant white bread, one or two slices of bologna, mustard, one wilted piece of iceberg lettuce. (The Catholics were heavily into mayonnaise, which we might get into later.) Fathers, to begin with, always used nonregulation bread and then buttered it, which made the sandwich about as tradable as a plate of haggis. Also, everything was always falling out of the sandwiches fathers made. I'm not sure why. They'd use anything green and frilly for lettuce, when of course only the one piece of wilted iceberg was permissible. Your friends saw a big leaf of romaine falling out along with the slice of bologna, and you might soon find yourself alongside the kid against the fence.

There was always that one kid against the fence. How could the rest of us feel Okay if there wasn't? If it was a guy, there was probably a trumpet case at his feet and he wore strangely scuffed shoes, because he avoided the foot traffic on sidewalks and walked instead through weedy lots with dogs yipping at him. He didn't end up at that station only because his lunches were nightmarish in their eccentricity, but his lunches didn't help.

He almost certainly ended up being a writer.

Now, who knows if any of this is usable material? There's no way to tell until you've got it all down, and then there might just be one sentence or one character or one theme that you end up using. But you get it all down. You just write.

I heard Natalie Goldberg, the author of *Writing Down the Bones*, speak on writing once. Someone asked her for the best possible writing advice she had to offer, and she held up a yellow legal pad, pretended her fingers held a pen, and scribbled away. I think this was some sort of Zen reference — the Buddhist disciple remembering Buddha's flower sermon, in which all Buddha did was hold up a flower and twirl it, in silence, sitting on the mountain. Me, I'm a nice Christian girl, and while I wish I could quote something kicky and inspirational that Jesus had to say about writing, the truth is that when students ask me for the best practical advice I know, I always pick up a piece of paper and pantomime scribbling away. My students usually think this is a very wise and Zenlike thing for me to convey. Mostly, I forget to give Natalie Goldberg credit.

But write about what? they ask next.

Write about carrot sticks, I tell them:

Code carrots had to look machine extruded, absolutely uniform, none longer than the length of the sandwich. Your parents would sometimes send you to school with waxed-paper packets of uneven cuckoo-bunny carrots, and your carrot esteem would be so low you couldn't even risk looking at the guy against the fence. Bad juju. If you so much as glanced at him, a visible empathetic arc would stretch between you, almost like a rainbow, and link you two in the minds of your peers forever.

And then there was the matter of the wrapping paper; waxed paper and later Saran wrap. If

code lunches were about that intense desire for one thing in life to be Okay, or even just to appear to be Okay, when all around you and at home and inside you things were so chaotic and painful, then it mattered that it not look like Jughead had wrapped your sandwich. A code lunch suggested that someone in your family was paying attention, even if in your heart you knew that your parents were screwing up left and right. So it was a little like making your bed at lunch. Everything should be squared. Sandwiches should be wrapped with hospital corners. Right?

Okay. That's all. But now I have this material to choose from, to work with, to shape, edit, highlight, or toss. (And that's very nice of you to suggest the latter.) This is my version of school lunches. Yours might be different and I would be interested in hearing about it. (Now don't get me wrong. I am not suggesting you mail it to me. But I bet it reveals some interesting stuff about you and your family and the times in which you grew up.) And even though what I've quoted here is shitty-first-draft stuff, the boy against the fence appeared out of nowhere—I had no idea when started writing that he was in my memory. To me, he is the most important thing that came out of this exercise. Tomorrow when I sit down to work on my novel, he will be someone who matters to me, whom I want to work with, get to know, who has something important to say or somewhere only he can take me.

Polaroids

Writing a first draft is very much like watching a Polaroid develop. You can't—and, in fact, you're not supposed to—know exactly what the picture is going to look like until it has finished developing. First you just point at what has your attention and take the picture. In the last chapter, for instance, what had my attention were the contents of my lunch bag. But as the picture developed, I found I had a really clear image of the boy against the fence. Or maybe your Polaroid was supposed to be a picture of that boy against the fence, and you didn't notice until the last minute that a family was standing a few feet away from him. Now, maybe it's his, family, or the family of one of the kids in his class, but at any rate these people are going to be in the photograph, too. Then the film emerges from the camera with a grayish green murkiness that gradually becomes clearer and clearer, and finally you see the husband and wife holding their baby with two children standing beside them. And at first it all seems very sweet, but then the shadows begin to appear, and then you start to see the animal tragedy, the baboons baring their teeth. And then you see a flash of bright red flowers in the bottom left quadrant that you didn't even know were in the picture when you took it, and these flowers evoke a time or a memory that moves you mysteriously. And finally, as the portrait comes into focus, you begin to notice all the props surrounding these people, and you begin to understand how props define us and comfort us, and show us what we value and what we need, and who we think we are.

You couldn't have had any way of knowing what this piece of work would look like when you first started. You just knew that there was something about these people that compelled you, and you stayed with that something long enough for it to show you what it was about.

Watch this Polaroid develop:

Six or seven years ago I was asked to write an article on the Special Olympics. I had been going to the local event for years, partly because a couple of friends of mine compete. Also, I love sports, and I love to watch athletes, special or otherwise. So I showed up this time with a great deal of interest but no real sense of what the finished article might look like.

Things tend to go very, very slowly at the Special Olympics. It is not like trying to cover the Preakness. Still, it has its own exhilaration, and I cheered and took notes all morning.

The last track-and-field event before lunch was a twenty-five -yard race run by some unusually handicapped runners and walkers, many of whom seemed completely confused. They lumped and careened along, one man making a snail-slow break for the stands, one heading out toward the steps where the winners receive their medals; both of them were shepherded back. The race took just about forever. And here it was nearly noon and we were all so hungry. Finally, though, everyone crossed over the line, and those of us in the stands got up to go—when we noticed that way down the track, four or five yards from the starting line, was another runner.

She was a girl of about sixteen with a normal-looking face above a wracked and emaciated body. She was on metal crutches, and she was just plugging along, one tiny step after another, moving one crutch forward two or three inches, then moving a leg, then moving the other crutch two or three inches, then moving the other leg. It was just excruciating. Plus, I was starving to death. Inside I was going, Come on, come on, come on, swabbing at my forehead with anxiety, while she kept taking these two- or three-inch steps forward. What felt like four hours later, she crossed the finish line, and you could see that she was absolutely stoked, in a shy, girlish way.

A tall African American man with no front teeth fell into step with me as I left the bleachers to go look for some lunch. He tugged on the sleeve of my sweater, and I looked up at him, and he

handed me a Polaroid someone had taken of him and his friends that day. "Look at us," he said. His speech was difficult to understand, thick and slow as a warped record. His two friends in the picture had Down's syndrome. All three of them looked extremely pleased with themselves. I admired the picture and then handed it back to him. He stopped, so I stopped, too. He pointed to his own image. "That," he said, "is one cool man."

And this was the image from which an article began forming, although I could not have told you exactly what the piece would end up being about. I just knew that something had started to emerge.

After lunch I wandered over to the auditorium, where it turned out a men's basketball game was in progress. The African American man with no front teeth was the star of the game. You could tell that he was because even though no one had made a basket yet, his teammates almost always passed him the ball. Even the people on the other team passed him the ball a lot. In lieu of any scoring, the men stampeded in slow motion up and down the court, dribbling the ball thunderously. I had never heard such a loud game. It was all sort of crazily beautiful. I imagined describing the game for my article and then for my students: the loudness, the joy. I kept replaying the scene of the girl on crutches making her way up the track to the finish line—and all of a sudden my article began to appear out of the grayish green murk. And I could see that it was about tragedy transformed over the years into joy. It was about the beauty of sheer effort. I could see it almost as clearly as I could the photograph of that one cool man and his two friends.

The auditorium bleachers were packed. Then a few minutes later, still with no score on the board, the tall black man dribbled slowly from one end of the court to the other, and heaved the ball up into the air, and it dropped into the basket. The crowd roared, and all the men on both teams looked up wide-eyed at the hoop, as if it had just burst into flames.

You would have loved it, I tell my students. You would have felt like you could write all day.

Character

Knowledge of your characters also emerges the way a Polaroid develops: it takes time for you to know them. One image that helps me begin to know the people in my fiction is something a friend once told me. She said that every single one of us at birth is given an emotional acre all our own. You get one, your awful Uncle Phil gets one, I get one, Tricia Nixon gets one, everyone gets one. And as long as you don't hurt anyone, you really get to do with your acre as you please. You can plant fruit trees or flowers or alphabetized rows of vegetables, or nothing at all. If you want your acre to look like a giant garage sale, or an auto-wrecking yard, that's what you get to do with it. There's a fence around your acre, though, with a gate, and if people keep coming onto your land and sliming it or trying to get you to do what they think is right, you get to ask them to leave. And they have to go, because this is your acre.

By the same token, each of your characters has an emotional acre that they tend, or don't tend, in certain specific ways. One of the things you want to discover as you start out is what each person's acre looks like. What is the person growing, and what sort of shape is the land in? This knowledge may not show up per se in what you write, but the point is that you need to find out as much as possible about the interior life of the people you are working with.

Now, you also want to ask yourself how they stand, what they carry in their pockets or purses, what happens in their faces and to their posture when they are thinking, or bored, or afraid. Whom would they have voted for last time? Why should we care about them anyway? What would be the first thing they stopped doing if they found out they had six months to live? Would they start smoking again? Would they keep flossing?

You are going to love some of your characters, because they are you or some facet of you, and you are going to hate some of your characters for the same reason. But no matter what, you are probably going to have to let bad things happen to some of the characters you love or you won't have much of a story. Bad things happen to good characters, because our actions have consequences, and we do not all behave perfectly all the time. As soon as you start protecting your characters from the ramifications of their less-than-lofty behavior, your story will start to feel flat and pointless, just like in real life. Get to know your characters as well as you can, let there be something at stake, and then let the chips fall where they may. My Al-Anon friend told me about the frazzled, defeated wife of an alcoholic man who kept passing out on the front lawn in the middle of the night. The wife kept dragging him in before dawn so that the neighbors wouldn't see him, until finally an old black woman from the South came up to her one day after a meeting and said, "Honey? Leave him lay where Jesus flang him." And I am slowly, slowly in my work—and even more slowly in real life—learning to do this.

A man know once said to me, "The evidence is in, and you are the verdict." This will be true for each of your characters. The evidence will be in, and each of them will be his or her own verdict. But you may not know what this verdict is at first. You may only know your characters' externals instead of their essences. Don't worry about it. More will be revealed over time. In the meantime, can you see what your people look like? What sort of first impression do they make? What does each one care most about, want more than anything in the world? What are their secrets? How do they move, how do they smell? Everyone is walking around as an advertisement for who he or she is—so who is this person? Show us. Whatever your characters do or say will be born out of who they are, so you need to set out to get to know each one as well as possible. One way to do this is to look within your own heart, at the different facets of your personality.

You may find a con man, an orphan, a nurse, a king, a hooker, a preacher, a loser, a child, a crone. Go into each of these people and try to capture how each one feels, thinks, talks, survives.

Another way to familiarize yourself with your characters is to base them partly on someone you know, a model from real life or a composite—your Uncle Edgar, but with the nervous tics and the odd smell of this guy you observed for ten minutes in line at the post office. Squint at these characters in your mind, and then start to paint them for us. Pages and pages of straight description, though, will probably wear us out. See if you can hear what they would say and how they would say it. One line of dialogue that rings true reveals character in a way that pages of description can't.

How would your main characters describe their current circumstances to a close friend, before and then after a few drinks? See if you can take dictation from them as they tell you who they think they are and what life has been like lately. Here is a passage by Andre Dubus that I always pass out to my students when we first begin to talk about character:

I love short stories because I believe they are the way we live. They are what our friends tell us, in their pain and joy, their passion and rage, their yearning and their cry against injustice. We can sit all night with our friend while he talks about the end of his marriage, and what we finally get is a collection of stories about passion, tenderness, misunderstanding, sorrow, money; those hours and days and moments when he was absolutely married, whether he and his wife were screaming at each other, or sulking around the house, or making love. While his marriage was dying, he was also working; spending evenings with friends, rearing children; but those are other stories. Which is why, days after hearing a painful story by a friend, we see him and say: How are you? We know that by now he may have another story to tell, or he may be in the middle of one, and we hope it is joyful.

Think of the basket of each character's life: what holds the ectoplasm together—what are this person's routines, beliefs? What little things would your characters write in their journals: I ate this, I hate that, I did this, took the dog for a long walk, I chatted with my neighbor. This is all the stuff that tethers them to the earth and to other people, all the stuff that makes each character think that life sort of makes sense.

The basket is an apt image because of all the holes. How aware is each character of how flimsy the basket really is? How present are your people? Someone once said to me, "I am trying to learn to stay in the now—not the last now, not the next now; this now." Which "now" do your characters dwell in?

What are your characters teaching their children by example and by indoctrination? For instance, I was teaching Sam peace chants for a long time, when he was only two. It was during the war in the Persian Gulf; I was a little angry.

"What do we want?" I'd call to Sam.

"Peace," he'd shout dutifully.

"And when do we want it?" I'd ask.

"Now!" he'd say, and I'd smile and toss him a fish.

The words were utterly meaningless to him, of course. I might as well have taught him to reply "Spoos!" instead of "Peace" and "August!" instead of "Now." My friends loved it, though; all three of his grandparents loved it. Now, how much does this say about me and my longings? I think something like this would tell a reader more about a character than would three pages of description. It would tell us about her current politics and the political tradition from which she sprang, her people-pleasing, her longing for peace and her longing to belong, her way of diluting

rage and frustration with humor, while also using her child as a prop, a little live Charlie McCarthy. The latter is horrifying, but it's also sort of poignant. Maybe thirty-five years ago this woman had to perform for her parents' friends. Maybe she was their little Charlie McCarthy. Maybe she and her therapist can discuss it for the next few months. And did this woman stop using her kid, once she realized what she was doing? No, she didn't, and this tells us even more. She kept at it, long after the war was over, until one day she called to her three-and-a-half-year-old son, "Hey—what do we want?" And he said plaintively, "Lunch."

I once asked Ethan Canin to tell me the most valuable thing he knew about writing, and without hesitation he said, "Nothing is as important as a likable narrator. Nothing holds a story together better." I think he's right. If your narrator is someone whose take on things fascinates you, it isn't really going to matter if nothing much happens for a long time. I could watch John Cleese or Anthony Hopkins do dishes for about an hour without needing much else to happen. Having a likable narrator is like having a great friend whose company you love, whose mind you love to pick, whose running commentary totally holds your attention, who makes you laugh out loud, whose lines you always want to steal. When you have a friend like this, she can say, "Hey, I've got to drive up to the dump in Petaluma — wanna come along?" and you honestly can't think of anything in the world you'd rather do. By the same token, a boring or annoying person can offer to buy you an expensive dinner, followed by tickets to a great show, and in all honesty you'd rather stay home and watch the aspic set.

Now, a person's faults are largely what make him or her likable. I like for narrators to be like the people I choose for friends, which is to say that they have a lot of the same flaws as I. Preoccupation with self is good, as is a tendency toward procrastination, self-delusion, darkness, jealousy, groveling, greediness, addictiveness. They shouldn't be too perfect; perfect means shallow and unreal and fatally uninteresting. I like for them to have a nice sick sense of humor and to be concerned with important things, by which I mean that they are interested in political and psychological and spiritual matters. I want them to want to know who we are and what life is all about. I like them to be mentally ill in the same sorts of ways that I am; for instance, I have a friend who said one day, "I could resent the ocean if I tried," and realized that I love that in a guy. I like for them to have hope—if a friend or a narrator reveals himself or herself to be hopeless too early on, I lose interest. It depresses me. It makes me overeat. I don't mind if a person has no hope if he or she is sufficiently funny about the whole thing, but then, this being able to be funny definitely speaks of a kind of hope, of buoyancy. Novels ought to have hope; at least, American novels ought to have hope. French novels don't need to. We mostly win wars, they lose them. Of course, they did hide more Jews than many other countries, and this is a form of winning. Although as my friend Jane points out, if you or I had been there speaking really bad French, they would have turned us in in a hot second—bank on it. In general, though, there's no point in writing hopeless novels. We all know we're going to die; what's important is the kind of men and women we are in the face of this.

Sometimes people turn out to be not all that funny or articulate, but they can still be great friends or narrators if they possess a certain clarity of vision—especially if they have survived or are in the process of surviving a great deal. This is inherently interesting material, since this is the task before all of us: sometimes we have to have one hand on this rock here, one hand on that one, and each big toe seeking out firm if temporary footing, and while we're scaling that rock face, there's no time for bubbles, champagne, and a witty aside. You don't mind that people in this situation are not being charming. You are glad to see them doing something you will need to

do down the line, and with dignity. The challenge and the dignity make it interesting enough.

Besides, deciding what is interesting is about as subjective as things get. People hand me books and articles to read that they promise are fascinating, and I wake up holding the book, with a jerk—like when you wake up from a little nap at the movies, thinking that you are falling out of an airplane. Here, for me, is the last word on interesting, from a short story by Abigail Thomas:

My mother's first criterion for a man is that he be interesting. What this really means is that he be able to appreciate my mother, whose jokes hinge on some grammatical subtlety or a working knowledge of higher mathematics. You get the picture. Robbie is about as interesting as a pair of red high-top Converse sneakers. But Robbie points to the mattress on the floor. He grins, slowly unbuckling his belt, drops his jeans. "Lie down," says Robbie.

This is interesting enough for me.

Another thing: we want a sense that an important character, like a narrator, is reliable. We want to believe that a character is not playing games or being coy or manipulative, but is telling the truth to the best of his or her ability. (Unless a major characteristic of his or hers is coyness or manipulation or lying.) We do not wish to be crudely manipulated. Of course, we enter into a work of fiction to be manipulated, but in a pleasurable way. We want to be massaged by a masseur, not whapped by a carpet beater.

This brings us to the matter of how we, as writers, tell the truth. A writer paradoxically seeks the truth and tells lies every step of the way. It's a lie if you make something up. But you make it up in the name of the truth, and then you give your heart to expressing it clearly. You make up your characters, partly from experience, partly out of the thin air of the subconscious, and you need to feel committed to telling the exact truth about them, even though you are making them up. I suppose the basic moral reason for doing this is the Golden Rule. I don't want to be lied to; I want you to tell me the truth, and I will try to tell it to you.

One final reminder: you probably won't know your characters until weeks or months after you've started working with them. Frederick Buechner wrote:

You avoid forcing your characters to march too steadily to the drumbeat of your artistic purpose. You leave some measure of real freedom for your characters to be themselves. And if minor characters show an inclination to become major characters, as they're apt to do, you at least give them a shot at it, because in the world of fiction it may take many pages before you find out who the major characters really are, just as in the real world it may take you many years to find out that the stranger you talked to once for half an hour in the railroad station may have done more to point you to where your true homeland lies than your priest or your best friend or even your psychiatrist.

Just don't pretend you know more about your characters than they do, because you don't. Stay open to them. It's teatime and all the dolls are at the table. Listen. It's that simple.

Plot

Plot is the main story of your book or short story. If you are looking for long, brilliant discussions of plot, E. M. Forster and John Gardner have written books in which they discuss it so lucidly and wisely that they will leave you howling like a wolf. I just want to add a few thoughts here, things that I pass on to my students when they seem especially bitter and confused.

Plot grows out of character. If you focus on who the people in your story are, if you sit and write about two people you know and are getting to know better day by day, something is bound to happen.

Characters should not, conversely, serve as pawns for some plot you've dreamed up. Any plot you impose on your characters will be onomatopoeic: PLOT. I say don't worry about plot. Worry about the characters. Let what they say or do reveal who they are, and be involved in their lives, and keep asking yourself, Now what happens? The development of relationship creates plot. Flannery O'Connor, in *Mystery and Manners*, tells how she gave a bunch of her early stories to the old lady who lived down the street, and the woman returned them saying, "Them stories just gone and shown you how some folks would do."

That's what plot is: what people will up and do in spite of everything that tells them they shouldn't, everything that tells them that they should sit quietly on the couch and practice their Lamaze, or call their therapist, or eat until the urge to do that thing passes.

So focus on character. What happens in Faulkner's books, for instance, arises from the nature of his characters, and even though his characters are not necessarily people you want to date, they compel us because we believe that they exist and we believe that the things they do are true to who they are. We read Faulkner for the beauty of his horrible creations, the beauty of the writing, and we read him to find out what life is about from his point of view. He expresses this through his characters. All you can give us is what life is about from your point of view. You are not going to be able to give us the plans to the submarine. Life is not a submarine. There are no plans.

Find out what each character cares most about in the world because then you will have discovered what's at stake. Find a way to express this discovery in action, and then let your people set about finding or holding onto or defending whatever it is. Then you can take them from good to bad and back again, or from bad to good, or from lost to found. But something must be at stake or you will have no tension and your readers will not turn the pages. Think of a hockey player—there had better be a puck out there on the ice, or he is going to look pretty ridiculous.

This is how it works for me: I sit down in the morning and reread the work I did the day before. And then I wool-gather, staring at the blank page or off into space. I imagine my characters, and let myself daydream about them. A movie begins to play in my head, with emotion pulsing underneath it, and I stare at it in a trancelike state, until words bounce around together and form a sentence. Then I do the menial work of getting it down on paper, because I'm the designated typist, and I'm also the person whose job it is to hold the lantern while the kid does the digging. What is the kid digging for? The stuff. Details and clues and images, invention, fresh ideas, an intuitive understanding of people. I tell you, the holder of the lantern doesn't even know what the kid is digging for half the time—but she knows gold when she sees it.

Your plot will fall into place as, one day at a time, you listen to your characters carefully, and

watch them move around doing and saying things and bumping into each other. You'll see them influence each other's lives, you'll see what they are capable of up and doing, and you'll see them come to various ends. And this process of discovering the story will often take place in fits and starts. Don't worry about it. Keep trying to move the story forward. There will be time later to render it in a smooth and seamless way. John Gardner wrote that the writer is creating a dream into which he or she invites the reader, and that the dream must be vivid and continuous. I tell my students to write this down—that the dream must be vivid and continuous—because it is so crucial. Outside the classroom, you don't get to sit next to your readers and explain little things you left out, or fill in details that would have made the action more interesting or believable. The material has got to work on its own, and the dream must be vivid and continuous. Think of your nightly dreams, how smoothly one scene slides into another, how you don't roll your closed eyes and say, "Wait just a minute—I've never shot drugs with Rosalyn Carter, and I don't even own any horses, let alone little Arabians the size of cats." You mostly go along from scene to scene simply because it's all so immediate and compelling. You simply have to find out what happens next, and this is how you want your reader to feel.

You may need someone else to bounce your material off of, probably a friend or a mate, someone who can tell you if the seams show, or if you've lurched off track, or even that it is not as bad as you thought and that the first one hundred pages do in fact hold up. But by all means let someone else take a look at your work. It's too hard always to have to be the executioner. Also, you may not be able to see the problems, because in finding your characters and their story, you are trying to describe something by feel and not by sight. So find someone who can bring a colder eye and a certain detachment to the project. I had a friend named Al who every so often took other people's cats to the pound to be put down, because his friends couldn't bear to do it themselves. They were cats who were, for one reason or another, like sickness or incontinence, a blight on the landscape. He didn't care one way or the other about cats. He had an imaginary company, whose business was having cats put to sleep, whose slogan was "The pussy must pay." Let someone do this with your manuscripts, help you get rid of the twists in the plot that are never going to work no matter how hard you try or how many passes you make at it.

If I tell thirty students to write me a story about two married people who are considering divorce until something unforeseen happens, they'll give me thirty wildly different stories, because they will have thirty different personal histories and sensibilities. One person is going to write an epiphany story, where the wife sees some wild geese pass in the night, lit by the moon, and suddenly decides to give her husband another chance. Another person is going to write about the moment when the husband, on his morning run, first comes to believe his marriage is worth saving and then is jogging home to share the good news with his wife when he gets hit by a student driver. Another will set the story in Hollywood, because he's been reading Nathanael West recently, and it will be jewellike in its weirdness. Each writer will come up with his or her own description of what love and life are all about. Some of these descriptions will be cynical, some rueful, some full of hope. Some will be slow and interior, some will crackle with drama.

Drama is the way of holding the reader's attention. The basic formula for drama is setup, buildup, payoff—just like a joke. The setup tells us what the game is. The buildup is where you put in all the moves, the forward motion, where you get all the meat off the turkey. The payoff answers the question, Why are we here anyway? What is it that you've been trying to give? Drama must move forward and upward, or the seats on which the audience is sitting will become very hard and uncomfortable. So, in fact, will the audience. And eventually the audience will

become impatient, disappointed, and unhappy. There must be movement.

You need to be moving your characters forward, even if they only go slowly. Imagine moving them across a lily pond. If each lily pad is beautifully, carefully written, the reader will stay with you as you move toward the other side of the pond, needing only the barest of connections—such as rhythm, tone, or mood.

Now, you may have to use effects and tricks to move things along and to help us remember who each character is—give him a cigar, give her piggy little alcoholic eyes—but if you're faking it, it will show. If you knowingly fake something to get the plot to move forward—if, for instance, you have taken a character you don't understand and given her feelings you don't really feel because you want the plot to work—you probably won't get away with it. The reader will stop trusting you and will possibly even become bitter and resentful. These are the worst possible things for a reader to become. You must assume that we, your readers, are bright and attentive, even if we have lost the tiniest bit of ground in the last few years. So we are going to catch you if you try to fake it.

If you realize that you have done this, you need to stop and look at your characters again. You've got to go into these people, and since you don't know them, this means that you need to go into you, wonderful you, who has so many problems and idiosyncrasies—you, who will be able to figure out what is true for these people and hence, what they would or would not do in a given situation.

I read a wonderful passage in an interview with Carolyn Chute, the author of *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*, who was discussing rewriting: "I feel like a lot of time my writing is like having about twenty boxes of Christmas decorations. But no tree. You're going, Where do I put this? Then they go, Okay, you can have a tree, but we'll blindfold you and you gotta cut it down with a spoon." This is how I've arrived at my plots a number of times. I would have all these wonderful shiny bulbs, each self-contained with nothing to hang them on. But I would stay with the characters, caring for them, getting to know them better and better, suiting up each morning and working as hard as I could, and somehow, mysteriously, I would come to know what their story was. Over and over I feel as if my characters know who they are, and what happens to them, and where they have been and where they will go, and what they are capable of doing, but they need me to write it down for them because their handwriting is so bad.

Some writers claim to know what the climax is early on, well before they get anywhere near it. The climax is that major event, usually toward the end, that brings all the tunes you have been playing so far into one major chord, after which at least one of your people is profoundly changed. If someone isn't changed, then what is the point of your story? For the climax, there must be a killing or a healing or a domination. It can be a real killing, a murder, or it can be a killing of the spirit, or of something terrible inside one's soul, or it can be a killing of a deadness within, after which the person becomes alive again. The healing may be about union, reclamation, the rescue of a fragile prize. But whatever happens, we need to feel that it was inevitable, that even though we may be amazed, it feels absolutely right, that of course things would come to this, of course they would shake down in this way.

In order to have this sense of inevitability, the climax of your story will probably only reveal itself to you slowly and over time. You may think that you know what this moment contains—and it makes sense to aim for something—but I recommend that you not fix too hard on what it will be. Fix instead on who your people are and how they feel toward one another, what they say, how they smell, whom they fear. Let your human beings follow the music they hear, and let it

take them where it will. Then you may discover, when you get close enough to peer into the opening, as if into a scenic Easter egg, that your characters had something in mind all along that was brighter and much more meaningful than what you wanted to impose on them.

So aim but not too hard, and when you finally see the climax forming in front of you, then you can race toward it.

Lastly: I heard Alice Adams give a lecture on the short story once, one aspect of which made the writing students in her audience so excited that I have passed it along to my students ever since. (Most of the time I give her credit.) She said that sometimes she uses a formula when writing a short story, which goes ABDCE, for Action, Background, Development, Climax, and Ending. You begin with action that is compelling enough to draw us in, make us want to know more. Background is where you let us see and know who these people are, how they've come to be together, what was going on before the opening of the story. Then you develop these people, so that we learn what they care most about. The plot—the drama, the actions, the tension—will grow out of that. You move them along until everything comes together in the climax, after which things are different for the main characters, different in some real way. And then there is the ending: what is our sense of who these people are now, what are they left with, what happened, and what did it mean?

A formula can be a great way to get started. And it feels so great finally to dive into the water; maybe you splash around and flail for a while, but at least you're in. Then you start doing whatever stroke you can remember how to do, and you get this scared feeling inside you—of how hard it is and how far there is to go—but still you're in, and you're afloat, and you're moving.

Dialogue

Good dialogue is such a pleasure to come across while reading, a complete change of pace from description and exposition and all that writing. Suddenly people are talking, and we find ourselves clipping along. And we have all the pleasures of voyeurism because the characters don't know we are listening. We get to feel privy to their inner workings without having to spend too much time listening to them think. I don't want them to think all the time on paper. It's bad enough that I have to think all the time without having someone else dump his or her obsessive-compulsive, paranoid thinking on me, too.

On the other hand, nothing can break the mood of a piece of writing like bad dialogue. My students are miserable when they are reading an otherwise terrific story to the class and then hit a patch of dialogue that is so purple and expositional that it reads like something from a childhood play by the Gabor sisters. Suddenly the piece is emotionally tone-deaf and there's a total lack of resonance. I can see the surprise on my students' faces, because the dialogue looked Okay on paper, yet now it sounds as if it were poorly translated from their native Hindi. The problem is that the writer simply put it down word by word; read out loud, it has no flow, no sense of the character's rhythm that in real life would run through the words.

In nonfiction, the hope is that the person actually said the words that you have attributed to him or her. In fiction, though, anything goes. It is a matter of ear, just as finding the right physical detail is mostly a matter of eye. You're not reproducing actual speech—you're translating the sound and rhythm of what a character says into words. You're putting down on paper your sense of how the characters speak.

There is a real skill to hearing all those words that real people—and your characters—say and to recording what you have heard—and the latter is or should be more interesting and concise and even more true than what was actually said. Dialogue is more like a movie than it is like real life, since it should be more dramatic. There's a greater sense of action. In the old days, before movies, let's say before Hemingway, the dialogue in novels was much more studied, ornate. Characters talked in ways we can't really imagine people talking. With Hemingway, things began to terse up. Good dialogue became sharp and lean. Now, in the right hands, dialogue can move things along in a way that will leave you breathless.

There are a number of things that help when you sit down to write dialogue. First of all, sound your words—read them out loud. If you can't bring yourself to do this, mouth your dialogue. This is something you have to practice, doing it over and over and over. Then when you're out in the world—that is, not at your desk—and you hear people talking, you'll find yourself editing their dialogue, playing with it, seeing in your mind's eye what it would look like on the page. You listen to how people really talk, and then learn little by little to take someone's five-minute speech and make it one sentence, without losing anything. If you are a writer, or want to be a writer, this is how you spend your days—listening, observing, storing things away, making your isolation pay off. You take home all you've taken in, all that you've overheard, and you turn it into gold. (Or at least you try.)

Second, remember that you should be able to identify each character by what he or she says. Each one must sound different from the others. And they should not all sound like you; each one must have a self. If you can get their speech mannerisms right, you will know what they're wearing and driving and maybe thinking, and how they were raised, and what they feel. You need to trust yourself to hear what they are saying over what you are saying. At least give each of

them a shot at expression: sometimes what they are saying and how they are saying it will finally show you who they are and what is really happening. Whoa—they're not going to get married after all! She's gay! And you had no idea!

Third, you might want to try putting together two people who more than anything else in the world wish to avoid each other, people who would avoid whole cities just to make sure they won't bump into each other. But there are people out there in the world who almost inspire me to join the government witness protection program, just so I can be sure I will never have to talk to them again. Maybe there is someone like this in your life. Take a character whom one of your main characters feels this way about and put the two of them in the same elevator. Then let the elevator get stuck. Nothing like a supercharged atmosphere to get things going. Now, they both will have a lot to say, but they will also be afraid that they won't be able to control what they say. They will be afraid of an explosion. Maybe there will be one, maybe not. But there's one way to find out. In any case, good dialogue gives us the sense that we are eavesdropping, that the author is not getting in the way. Thus, good dialogue encompasses both what is said and what is not said. What is not said will sit patiently outside that stuck elevator door, or it will dart around the characters' feet inside the elevator, like rats. So let these characters hold back some thoughts, and at the same time, let them detonate little bombs.

If you are lucky, your characters may become impatient with your inability, while writing dialogue, to keep up with all they have to say. This is when you will know that you are on the right track.

Dialogue is the way to nail character, so you have to work on getting the voice right. You don't want to sit there, though, trying to put the right words in their mouths. I don't think the right words exist already in your head, any more than the characters do. They exist somewhere else. What we have in our heads are fragments and thoughts and things we've heard and memorized, and we take our little ragbag and reach into it and throw some stuff down and then our unconscious kicks in. For instance, say you have a guy walking down the street, and it's cold, and you've always wanted a leather topcoat, so you give him one. Then you follow him down the street. Describe what you see, and listen carefully.

Say this boy meets a girl. The boy in the leather overcoat meets the beautiful girl with the harelip and the Gucci bag, on the street, and he can't just say, Hey, let's get married! Things need to happen. They need to get to know each other, even if just a little. They will talk to each other, and they will talk about each other to friends. Get all this down. After you've spent a while with them, they will start to sound more like themselves—because you are getting to really know them—and you may see that you'd better get rid of that topcoat, it's pretty jive, and that you need to go back and redo the early dialogue. But don't stop and do it just now. Keep moving; let them spend some time together, let them jam for a while. Come back later for the rewrite.

The better you know the characters, the more you'll see things from their point of view. You need to trust that you've got it in you to listen to people, watch them, and notice what they wear and how they move, to capture a sense of how they speak. You want to avoid at all costs drawing your characters on those that already exist in other works of fiction. You must learn about people from people, not from what you read. Your reading should confirm what you've observed in the world.

As you learn who your characters are, compassion for them will grow. There shouldn't be just a single important character in your work for whom you have compassion. You need to feel it even for the villain—in fact, especially for the villain. Life is not like formula fiction. The villain

has a heart, and the hero has great flaws. You've got to pay attention to what each character says, so you can know each of their hearts.

Only in the comics and formula movies do we get any pleasure from destroying totally evil and sinister villains, because in those cases they've been systematically depersonalized. They commit only acts of atrocity and sociopathology, and they say terribly evil things, and then we get to ritually kill them. There can be, at the end of the book, the relief that comes with justice.

You can't write down your intellectual understanding of a hero or villain and expect us to be engaged. You probably have got to find these characters within the community of people who live in your heart. For instance, just to mix media for a moment, if Anthony Hopkins in *The Silence of the Lambs* hadn't had an emotional understanding of Hannibal Lector's heart, his mannerisms would not have rung so true or been so terrifying. The first time we see him, he's simply standing there, expressionless, with his arms by his side. It is just chilling. I felt like might break out in welts from sheer anxiety. I felt like my neck had developed a life of its own and was going to wait for me out in the lobby. To have this effect on us, Hopkins must have sympathized with something inside Lector, must have understood something about his heart.

The writer needs to try to understand each of his or her characters in this way. The only thing to do when the sense of dread and low self-esteem tells you that you are not up to this is to wear it down by getting a little work done every day. You really can do it, really can find these people inside you and learn to hear what they have to say.

For example, let's say you have a main character whose feelings can be hurt if he's spoken to sharply—unlike you, ha-ha-ha. Say he is also a little like you in the sense that when he gets a bit depressed or tense, he heads for a rib joint to eat a pound of burned, fatty meat. So he is perhaps also a little overweight—not that you are overweight. I'm sure your weight is just fine. Anyway, let's make him someone who works in an office, someone who's been pampered—what could he say that lets us see this? Let's dress him carefully because we may have to humiliate him in a minute. For instance, we can see by the precision of the knot in his tie that his wife tied it this morning. His clothes and ring and shoes are all going to talk, and they are going to help us find out who he is, but more importantly he is going to say things to his secretary and to his callers and to the people with whom he works, and these people are going to say things back to him, and we want to hear both sides of these conversations.

What if his boss says something to him that seems innocuous but that cuts him to the quick? And what if this time he responds in a completely different way than heading out for barbecue? What if he starts saying things that have nothing to do with what you had in mind, and it all mysteriously rings true? What if he says something so insulting to his boss that it puts his job in jeopardy, and then, instead of a little assault eating, he responds by spending his entire lunch hour at an adult bookstore? Well, maybe you had him wrong to begin with. Maybe he goes from being an Ivy League lawyer to a semisuccessful rug salesman in two lines of dialogue. This may not be convenient for you, but at least now you can see with whom you are really working.

Now I want to hear how he describes his day to his wife, what he leaves in and how he says it, and what he neglects to mention. So you make an attempt at capturing this by trying to find him in your psyche, this person who has been talked down to, whose skin is a little thin, whose feelings are easily hurt. You write a shitty first draft of it and you sound it out, and you leave in those lines that ring true and take out the rest. I wish there were an easier, softer way, a shortcut, but this is the nature of most good writing: that you find out things as you go along. Then you go back and rewrite. Remember: no one is reading your first drafts.

I need to digress again for a minute: you create these characters and figure out little by little what they say and do, but this all happens in a part of you to which you have no access—the unconscious. This is where the creating is done. We start out with stock characters, and our unconscious provides us with real, flesh-and-blood, believable people. My friend Carpenter talks about the unconscious as the cellar where the little boy sits who creates the characters, and he hands them up to you through the cellar door. He might as well be cutting out paper dolls. He's peaceful; he's just playing.

You can't will yourself into being receptive to what the little boy has to offer, and you can't buy a key that will let you into the cellar. You have to relax, and wool-gather, and get rid of the critics, and sit there in some sort of self-hypnosis, and then you have to practice. I mean, you can't just sit there at your desk drooling. You have to move your hand across the paper or the keyboard. You may do it badly for a while, but you keep on doing it. Try to remember that to some extent, you're just the typist. A good typist listens.

I sometimes imagine that instead of a little kid, there's a long-necked, good-natured Dr. Seuss character down there, grim with concentration and at the same time playing. He cranes his head toward the sound of the characters talking, but not like a court reporter, more like somebody sitting alone at an adjacent table, trying not to pry but wanting to take it all in. You may want to come up with an image or a metaphor for this other part of you that is separate from your rational, conscious mind, this other person with whom you can collaborate. This may help you feel less alone.

One last thing: dialogue that is written in dialect is very tiring to read. If you can do it brilliantly, fine. If other writers read your work and rave about your use of dialect, go for it. But be positive that you do it well, because otherwise it is a lot of work to read short stories or novels that are written in dialect. It makes our necks feel funny. We are, as you know, a tense people, and we have a lot of problems of our own without you adding to them. (However, someone behind me in line at the market last week, during a storm, said, after smiting her own forehead, "Oh, vat vader," and then pointed outside to the rain. I was tempted for the rest of the day to write an entire novel about her, in dialect.)

Set Design

Sometimes you may find it useful to let your characters huddle in the wings without you, preparing for their roles, improvising dialogue, while you set the stage for their appearance. Imagine yourself as the set designer for a play or for the movie version of the story you are working on. It may help you to know what the room (or the ship or the office or the meadow) looks like where the action will be taking place. You want to know its feel, its temperature, its colors. Just as everyone is a walking advertisement for who he or she is, so every room is a little showcase of its occupants' values and personalities. Every room is about memory. Every room gives us layers of information about our past and present and who we are, our shrines and quirks and hopes and sorrows, our attempts to prove that we exist and are more or less Okay. You can see, in our rooms, how much light we need—how many light bulbs, candles, skylights we have—and in how we keep things lit you can see how we try to comfort ourselves. The mix in our rooms is so touching: the clutter and the cracks in the wall belie a bleakness or brokenness in our lives, while photos and a few rare objects show our pride, our rare shining moments.

As the photographer Catherine Wagner has pointed out, these rooms are future ruins.

So you sit there at your desk trying to see what the set looks like that your characters will be entering in a moment. Perhaps they have money and you don't—not, of course, that you're bitter about this. You may need to call one of your friends or relatives who has or had a great deal of money, and ask them as tactfully as possible to help you design a house where some old gentry lived. By tactfully, I mean that you're going to get the best possible information if you do not mention life's unfairness and that your own house looks more like God's Little Acre with every passing day and that you may have to put the dog to sleep because you can't afford to feed her. You just say, "I'm working on a section of my book where we first meet a family of great wealth and breeding, and I was wondering if I could pick your brain about what sort of carpets and rugs and lighting and antiques they might have. For instance, let's start with the living room. Can you describe a really lovely living room in as much detail as possible?" And then you can ask what smells your friend remembers, in the living room and kitchen, and what the light was like, and what various rooms sounded like or what their silences felt like. Or by the same token, you can ask someone who grew up in poverty to give you an exact description of his or her house, the kitchen, the bedrooms, the couch in the backyard.

Years ago I was working on a novel that involved a woman who gardened, who in fact loved to garden. I do not love to garden. I love other people's gardens, and I like cut flowers. I have Astroturf and a whole lot of high-quality plastic flowers stuck in the dirt of our front yard. These are quite a lovely sight and bring to mind many e. e. cummings poems.

People used to give me potted plants and trees, and what happened to them is really too horrible to go into here. They'd end up looking like I watered them with Agent Orange. I'd tell people that I didn't do well with potted plants, and they'd decide that I'd just never met the right one and that they were going to be the person to free me and cause God to restore my glorious gift of sight and all that, and they'd bring me some little training plant, and I'd try really hard to water it and keep it in or out of sunlight, whatever its little card of introduction said it preferred, and to take it for little walks around the house, and within about a month you could almost hear chlorophyllous breakdown, a Panic in Needle Park sort of thing. Then you'd see it clutching its little throat, staring at you with its little Keane eyes, gasping and accusing—and I mean, who needs it? Believe me, I have enough problems as it is.

I actually kept this one horrible plant alive for months, this huge potted thing. I don't even know what it was, but it was about three feet tall, before its decline, and green in a sort of fake jolly way. I watered it, I cut off its dead leaves, and how did it repay me? By becoming Howard Hughes in his last days. It lost all this weight, it stopped going out. I came to believe that it would be requesting latex gloves soon, boxes of them, and boxes of Kleenex with which to cover its food between bites. I gave it water, sunlight, expensive plant food—what was I supposed to do, get it a psychiatrist? So I finally came to my senses, took it outside, and put it against the side of the house where I wouldn't have to look at it. You are probably thinking that it immediately began to flourish, but it didn't. It died.

So, needless to say, when it came time to design a garden for my main character, I wasn't going to be able to plumb the depths of my own gardening experience. But I just knew somehow, without being able to explain the process to you, that this main character gardened. I love to see people in gardens, I love the meditation of sitting alone in gardens, I love all the metaphors that gardens are.

The garden is one of the two great metaphors for humanity. The other, of course, is the river. Metaphors are a great language tool, because they explain the unknown in terms of the known. But they only work if they resonate in the heart of the writer. So I felt a little understaffed here, loving the metaphor when I came upon it, wanting to work with it, and yet not loving to garden.

I didn't know where to start, but I did know that the garden did not start out as metaphor. It started out as paradise. Then, as now, the garden is about life and beauty and the impermanence of all living things. The garden is about feeding your children, providing food for the tribe. It's part of an urgent territorial drive that we can probably trace back to animals storing food. It's a competitive display mechanism, like having a prize bull, this greed for the best tomatoes and English tea roses; it's about winning, about providing society with superior things, and about proving that you have taste and good values and you work hard. And what a wonderful relief every so often to know who the enemy is—because in the garden, the enemy is everything: the aphids, the weather, time. And so you pour yourself into it, care so much, and see up close so much birth and growth and beauty and danger and triumph—and then everything dies anyway, right? But you just keep doing it. What a great metaphor! I love this so much! I wanted a garden in my book so badly! Finally, finally, it occurred to me to call a nursery.

I reached a very nice man to whom I explained what I was doing, and I asked if he could help me design a fictional garden for someone living in the North Bay with a large backyard.

We decided to begin by showing the garden as it would look in the summer, and then he would help me through the months as the seasons changed.

"Do you want some fruit trees?" he asked.

And then for the next half hour, we designed a garden full of trees and flowers of every kind. I said I saw in my mind's eye a white latticework screen somewhere in the garden, and asked what kinds of vines might go well with that. He suggested snow peas. Then we added some vegetables, and a patch of wild strawberries, and I had my garden. I got into the habit of calling him every few months to check in. "What would the apple tree be doing?" I'd ask. "Would there be fruit, or even leaves? And what would I do to take care of the flower beds now?"

I also started going to people's gardens, asking them what this or that plant was and how they take care of it, and they'd say funny or brilliant things and I'd steal their lines. I picked up a book on gardens, so I could study flowers and trees and vines in that way, and honest to God, people who read my novel believed that I loved to garden. Sometimes in fact they would start talking

shop with me, thinking we could jam away, as gardeners are wont to do, until I'd let them know that I had only been winging it, with a lot of help from people around me, people who knew a lot more about gardens than I, friends who would cover for me, just like in real life.

"You don't love to garden?" they'd ask incredulously, and I'd shake my head and not mention that what I love are cut flowers, because this sounds so violent and decadent, like when Salvador Dalí said his favorite animal was fillet of sole.

And in the years since, I have asked all sorts of people to help me design sets. I've asked them to describe what the world looked like in certain American cities or African villages, inside a particular car in the rain, or down by the water when hoboes still came to town on the train. Then I try to imagine the movie set of this scene in as much detail as possible. Sometimes I can see it most clearly if I close my eyes. Other times I stare off into the middle distance, like a cat.

False Starts

I talked earlier about the artist who is trying to capture something in one corner of his canvas but keeps discovering that what he has painted is not what he had in mind. He keeps covering his work over with white paint each time that he discovers what it isn't, and each time this brings him closer to discovering what it is. This has happened again and again for me in writing. I may think I know who a certain character is or how an essay should proceed, so I make a stab at following this ghostly blueprint in my head. Then it turns out that I've been wrong, wrong about the character. I had the sandwich board she was wearing confused with who she really is. So I white it out and try again.

I found out something important about false starts when I began accompanying some members of my church to a convalescent home once a month, where we were conducting a worship service. After that first dismal visit, I thought I knew who the residents were and what they were capable of, what they were all about. If I had started to write, I would have written about them with confidence, and I would have been all wrong.

I have been going there for four years now. I don't ever really look forward to it, but I keep going back for reasons I do not quite understand. Perhaps I am subconsciously hoping it will help me get into the Junior League someday. Still, the moment I walk in and smell those old people again, and find them parked in the hallways like so many cars abandoned by the side of the road, I start begging God not to let me end up like this. But God is not a short-order cook, and these people were once my age. I bet they used to beg God not to let them end up as they have.

At first many of them look strangely alike, just as many people at the Special Olympics bear a familial resemblance to one another. Then you start to notice that some have lambskin chaps or blankets, some have manicures, some have the teeth they were born with, some have sores, some don't, some were clearly beautiful in earlier days, some weren't, some seem to know where they are, some remember lines from the Lord's Prayer, some sleep, some try to sing along on the simple hymns and clap in rhythm. But even the ones who clap all clap differently. Some clap along frailly, almost in silence. One woman claps with great gusto, as if she's at a polka. One old man claps once, as if to kill a fly. My favorite, a woman named Anne like me, is someone I'd first pegged as a muzzy, emaciated woman who smelled of urine and baby powder without a whole lot going on inside. She isn't what I thought, though. I still don't know who she is, but I do know now who she isn't.

She can never remember my name, and when I tell her every month, she pantomimes smiting her own forehead. Then we both smile. I suspect she is pulling my leg. When we sing "Amen," she always sits with her hands in her lap, palms cupped together as if there might be a tiny bird inside. With each clap, she moves her hands a tiny bit apart, as if she really does want to clap along, but at the same time she doesn't want to let the bird get out.

If I'd written about her and the other old people after the first few visits, the smells and confusion would have dominated my description. I would have recorded our odd conversations—one woman is convinced we went to school together; another once asked if Sam was a dog—and I would have tried to capture my sense of waste. Instead, I continued to go there, and I struggled to find meaning in their bleak existence. What finally helped was an image from a medieval monk, Brother Lawrence, who saw all of us as trees in winter, with little to give, stripped of leaves and color and growth, whom God loves unconditionally anyway. My priest

friend Margaret, who works with the aged and who shared this image with me, wanted me to see that even though these old people are no longer useful in any traditional meaning of the word, they are there to be loved unconditionally, like trees in the winter.

When you write about your characters, we want to know all about their leaves and colors and growth. But we also want to know who they are when stripped of the surface show. So if you want to get to know your characters, you have to hang out with them long enough to see beyond all the things they aren't. You may try to get them to do something because it would be convenient plotwise, or you might want to pigeonhole them so you can maintain the illusion of control. But with luck their tendrils will sneak out the sides of the box you've put them in, and you will finally have to admit that who they are isn't who you thought they were.

Dying people can teach us this most directly. Often the attributes that define them drop away—the hair, the shape, the skills, the cleverness. And then it turns out that the packaging is not who that person has really been all along. Without the package, another sort of beauty shines through. For instance, on a retail-therapy outing ten days before she died, my friend Pammy discovered that she could no longer write her name on checks, and she turned to me and said, "What is the point of being alive when you can't even sign checks?" I could only shrug and shake my head. But it turned out that the essence of Pammy wasn't about the things she could do with her hands. Who she was wasn't about doing at all.

On the first anniversary of her death, I visited a memorial garden at the radiation clinic where she had been treated, and discovered that someone had planted a yew tree there in her honor. The yew was bigger than me and fuzzy, like an Edward Koren character. It looked like it might suddenly come over and hug me. Near the yew were tall flowering bushes—some kind of poppy, perhaps. But almost all of the petals had fallen off, so mostly I just saw a thousand tangled stems growing skyward. Then I realized that the stems were actually connected, and that they bore seeds that would flower again in the spring.

That's how real life works, in our daily lives as well as in the convalescent home and even at the deathbed, and this is what good writing allows us to notice sometimes. You can see the underlying essence only when you strip away the busyness, and then some surprising connections appear.

Plot Treatment

My students assume that when well-respected writers sit down to write their books, they know pretty much what is going to happen because they've outlined most of the plot, and this is why their books turn out so beautifully and why their lives are so easy and joyful, their self-esteem so great, their childlike senses of trust and wonder so intact. Well. I do not know anyone fitting this description at all. Everyone I know flails around, kvetching and growing despondent, on the way to finding a plot and structure that work. You are welcome to join the club.

On the other hand, in lieu of a plot you may find that you have a sort of temporary destination, perhaps a scene that you envision as the climax. So you write toward this scene, but when you get there, or close, you see that because of all you've learned about your characters along the way, it no longer works. The scene may have triggered the confidence that got you to work on your piece, but now it doesn't ring true and so it does not make the final cut.

I went through this process with my second novel, where an image kept me going while I came to have a strong sense of the people I was writing about. Yet when it was that climactic image's turn on the dance floor, it was all wrong. So I got very quiet for a few days and waited for the characters to come to me with their lines and intentions. Gradually I came to feel that I knew how the book ended, how it all hung together. By then, I had spent two solid years on the book, sending it off chunk by chunk to my editor at Viking.

My editor had loved the characters all along, had loved the tone and the writing, but after reading my finished second draft straight through, he sent me back a letter that began, "This is perhaps the hardest letter I've ever had to write." I saw stars right there at the post office, as if someone had hit me on the head. The room spun. The editor went on to say that while he enjoyed the people and what they had to say, I had in effect created a beautiful banquet but never invited the reader to sit down and eat. So the reader went hungry. And that, to mix metaphors, the book felt like a house with no foundation, no support beams, which was collapsing in on itself, and there was no way to shore it up. I should put it away and get to work on another book from scratch.

The thing is, I had already spent most of the advance.

I went into a very deep state of grief and fear at the post office, and this stuck with me for the next week or so. I was wild with humiliation and deeply afraid for my future. But I called someone who loved my writing, who had encouraged me all along, and she told me to give the book a little space, a little sunshine and fresh air. She said not to pick it up again for a month. She said that everything was going to be Okay, although she did not know exactly what Okay might look like.

So I went off to the elephants' graveyard, renting a room in a huge old house on the Petaluma River. It was very quiet and pastoral. No one knew who I was. Hardly anyone knew where I was. The meadows outside my windows were filled with cows and grass and hay. I licked my wounds for a couple of weeks and waited for my confidence to return. I tried not to make any big decisions about how to salvage the book or my writing life, because the one thing I knew for sure was that if you want to make God laugh, tell her your plans.

Finally, I found myself ready to look at the book again. I read it through in one sitting and loved it. I thought it was wonderful. A huge mess, granted, but a wonderful mess.

I called my editor and told him I knew what I was doing now and that I would prove this to him. He was genuinely happy.

There was a huge dilapidated living room in the house where I lived, and one morning I took my three-hundred-page manuscript and began to lay it down on the floor, section by section. I put a two-page scene here, a ten-page passage there. I put these pages down in a path, from beginning to end, like a horizontal line of dominoes, or like a garden path made of tiles. There were sections up front that clearly belonged in the middle, there were scenes in the last fifty pages that would be wonderful near the beginning, there were scenes and moments scattered throughout that could be collected and rewritten to make a great introduction to the two main characters. I walked up and down the path, moving batches of paper around, paper-clipping self-contained sections and scribbling notes to myself on how to shape or tighten or expand each section in whatever necessary way. I noticed where things were missing—transitions, vital information we needed to know before what happened could make any sense—and then, on a blank piece of paper, I blocked in what I thought was needed and lay the page on the pile where it fit in. This page held some space, perhaps for whole scenes, in the way that—after a loss—a great friend holds some space for you in which to grieve or find your bearings. Scribbling notes on various sections to indicate that in fact something was at stake there, I went ahead and let bad things happen to these people whom I had been protecting. I found places where I could lean on them harder, push them, load them up in a way that would make their catastrophe inevitable, and I blocked the catastrophe in, too. Then, when I was sure, I stacked up all the pages in their new order and set about writing a third draft.

I wrote that draft short assignment by short assignment, making each section, no matter how small or seemingly casual, as good as I could. I took out whole paragraphs that I loved, paragraphs I'd shoehorned into the book because I liked the writing or the image or the humor. I worked on it for eight or nine months, sending off the first third, which my editor was amazed by, and then the second section, which he loved. I finished the third section around the time I broke up with a man with whom I'd been involved for some time. I had a brainstorm: I would mail the third section off, borrow the money to fly to New York, and spend a week there, doing the line editing of the book with my editor and, at the same time, getting away from this man I was breaking up with. Also, I could collect the last third of the advance that Viking owed me and do a little retail therapy in New York City.

I wrote to my editor to say I was coming. He did not say not to. I told the man I was involved with to move all of his stuff out of the house. I borrowed a thousand dollars from my aunt, promising her that I would pay it back by the end of the month. And then I flew to New York.

My first morning there, I put on my girl-writer dress and heels and went to meet my editor. I figured we would start editing together that very morning, and then he could give me the last of the advance. It would turn out that I had bounced back from this devastating setback and that truth and beauty had once again triumphed. Everyone would be so shocked to hear that this book had almost been thrown away. But my editor said, "I'm sorry." I looked at him quizzically. "I am so, so sorry," he said. "But it still doesn't work." He didn't understand why certain things happened the way they did, or why some things happened to begin with, and most importantly, why so little happened at all. I sat there staring at him as if his face were melting. "I am so sorry," he said, and for a while I was too stunned to cry. I kept touching my forehead, the way you pat your head to make sure your hair is Okay. I think I must have looked like Blanche DuBois on bad acid. Then I started to cry and told him I had to go right that very second. He said to phone him the next day. I said I would, although I did not actually expect to be alive then.

Luckily, I was still drinking at the time. I went to the house where I was staying with old

family friends, slammed down a dozen social drinks with them, and then took a cab to meet some other friends. I had a few hundred more drinks with them, and the merest bit of cocaine—actually, I began to resemble an anteater at one point. Then I went to a liquor store and got a half-pint of Irish whiskey and went back to the house where I was staying and had little social slugs of Bushmills straight from the bottle until I passed out.

I was a little depressed when I woke up. I looked at my manuscript in my suitcase, thought about all those beautiful, hilarious, poignant people I had been working with for almost three years, and all of a sudden I was in a rage. I called my editor at home. He was not planning on going to work that day. He was a little depressed, too. "I am coming over," I said, and there was a silence, and then he said, very tentatively, "Okay," like he wanted to ask, "And will you be bringing your knives?" Then I went downstairs and caught a cab to his apartment.

He let me in and tried to get me to sit down, but I was too crazy and disappointed and angry and crushed and humiliated and shocked. I held my manuscript to my chest like a baby. There were sections where friends who had read it had laughed out loud, or had called me, crying. There was some incredibly funny material in there, some important things no one else was writing about. I was sure of it. Sort of. I began to stalk around his living room, like a trial lawyer making her case to the jury, explaining various aspects of the book, some of which, in my desire not to appear too obvious, I had forgotten to put down at all. I filled in lots of spaces, describing things that existed between the characters that I had assumed were clear. I was ranting—twenty-eight years old, savagely hung over, feeling like I was about to die—but I told him who the people were and what the story was. I sketched in the underpinnings of their lives and thought out loud how I could solve the bigger problems of plot and theme, how I could simplify some things and deepen others. I was not thinking about what I was going to say. Words were just pouring out of me, and when I was done, he looked at me, and said, "Thank you."

We sat side by side on his couch for a while, in silence. Finally he said, "Listen. I want you to write that book you just described to me. You haven't done it here. Go off somewhere and write me a treatment, a plot treatment. Tell me chapter by chapter what you just told me in the last half hour, and I will get you the last of the advance."

And I did. I arranged to stay with some friends in Cambridge for a month, and there I sat down every day and wrote five hundred to a thousand words describing what was going on in each chapter. I discussed who the characters were turning out to be, where they'd been, what they were up to, and why. I quoted directly from the manuscript sometimes, using some of the best lines to instill confidence in both me and my editor, and I figured out, over and over, point A, where the chapter began, and point B, where it ended, and what needed to happen to get my people from A to B. And then how the B of the last chapter would lead organically into point A of the next chapter. The book moved along like the alphabet, like a vivid and continuous dream. The treatment was forty pages long. I mailed it from Cambridge, and flew home.

It worked. My editor gave me the last of the advance, which I used to pay back my aunt and to buy time so I could write a final draft. This time I knew exactly what I was doing. I had a recipe. The book came out the following autumn and has been the most successful of my novels.

Whenever I tell this story to my students, they want to see the actual manuscript of the plot treatment. When I bring it in, they pore over it like it is some kind of Rosetta stone. It is typed on paper that has become crisp with age. There are annotations, smudges, and rings left by coffee and by red wine. It strikes me as being a brave document, rather like the little engine who could on the morning after.

How Do You Know When You're Done?

This is a question my students always ask. I don't quite know how to answer it. You just do. I think my students believe that when a published writer finishes something, she crosses the last t, pushes back from the desk, yawns, stretches, and smiles. I do not know anyone who has ever done this, not even once. What happens instead is that you've gone over and over something so many times, and you've weeded and pruned and rewritten, and the person who reads your work for you has given you great suggestions that you have mostly taken— and then finally something inside you just says it's time to get on to the next thing. Of course, there will always be more you could do, but you have to remind yourself that perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor.

There's an image I've heard people in recovery use—that getting all of one's addictions under control is a little like putting an octopus to bed. I think this perfectly describes the process of solving various problems in your final draft. You get a bunch of the octopus's arms neatly tucked under the covers—that is, you've come up with a plot, resolved the conflict between the two main characters, gotten the tone down pat—but two arms are still flailing around. Maybe the dialogue in the first half and the second half don't match, or there is that one character who still seems one-dimensional. But you finally get those arms under the sheets, too, and are about to turn off the lights when another long sucking arm breaks free.

This will probably happen while you are sitting at your desk, kneading your face, feeling burned out and rubberized. Then, even though all the sucking disks on that one tentacle are puckering open and closed, and the slit-shaped pupils of the octopus are looking derisively at you, as if it might suck you to death just because it's bored, and even though you know that your manuscript is not perfect and you'd hoped for so much more, but if you also know that there is simply no more steam in the pressure cooker and that it's the very best you can do for now—well? I think this means that you are done.

Part Two

The Writing Frame of Mind

Looking Around

Writing is about learning to pay attention and to communicate what is going on. Now, if you ask me, what's going on is that we're all up to here in it, and probably the most important thing is that we not yell at one another. Otherwise we'd all just be barking away like Pekingese: "Ah! Stuck in the shit! And it's your fault, you did this..." Writing involves seeing people suffer and, as Robert Stone once put it, finding some meaning therein. But you can't do that if you're not respectful. If you look at people and just see sloppy clothes or rich clothes, you're going to get them wrong.

The writer is a person who is standing apart, like the cheese in "The Farmer in the Dell" standing there alone but deciding to take a few notes. You're outside, but you can see things up close through your binoculars. Your job is to present clearly your viewpoint, your line of vision. Your job is to see people as they really are, and to do this, you have to know who you are in the most compassionate possible sense. Then you can recognize others. It's simple in concept, but not that easy to do. My Uncle Ben wrote me a letter twenty years ago in which he said, "Sometimes you run into someone, regardless of age or sex, whom you know absolutely to be an independently operating part of the Whole that goes on all the time inside yourself, and the eye-motes go click and you hear the tribal tones of voice resonate, and there it is—you recognize them." That is what I'm talking about: you want your readers' eye-motes to go click! with recognition as they begin to understand one of your characters, but you probably won't be able to present a character that recognizable if you do not first have self-compassion.

It is relatively easy to look tenderly and with recognition at a child, especially your own child and especially when he is being cute or funny, even if he is hurting your feelings. And it's relatively easy to look tenderly at, say, a chipmunk and even to see it with some clarity, to see that real life is right there at your feet, or at least right there in that low branch, to recognize this living breathing animal with its own agenda, to hear its sharp, high-pitched chirps, and yet not get all caught up in its cuteness. I don't want to sound too *Cosmica Rama* here, but in those moments, you see that you and the chipmunk are alike, are a part of a whole. I think we would see this more often if we didn't have our conscious minds. The conscious mind seems to block that feeling of oneness so we can function efficiently, maneuver in the world a little bit better, get our taxes done on time. But it's even possible to have this feeling when you see—really see—a police officer, when you look right at him and you see that he's a living breathing person who like everyone else is suffering like a son of a bitch, and you don't see him with a transparency over him of all the images of violence and chaos and danger that cops represent. You accept him as an equal.

Obviously, it's harder by far to look at yourself with this same sense of compassionate detachment. Practice helps. As with exercise, you may be sore the first few days, but then you will get a little bit better at it every day. I am learning slowly to bring my crazy pinball-machine mind back to this place of friendly detachment toward myself, so I can look out at the world and see all those other things with respect. Try looking at your mind as a wayward puppy that you are trying to paper train. You don't drop-kick a puppy into the neighbor's yard every time it piddles on the floor. You just keep bringing it back to the newspaper. So I keep trying gently to bring my mind back to what is really there to be seen, maybe to be seen and noted with a kind of reverence. Because if I don't learn to do this, I think I'll keep getting things wrong.

I honestly think in order to be a writer, you have to learn to be reverent. If not, why are you

writing? Why are you here?

Let's think of reverence as awe, as presence in and openness to the world. The alternative is that we stultify, we shut down. Think of those times when you've read prose or poetry that is presented in such a way that you have a fleeting sense of being startled by beauty or insight, by a glimpse into someone's soul. All of a sudden everything seems to fit together or at least to have some meaning for a moment. This is our goal as writers, I think; to help others have this sense of—please forgive me—wonder, of seeing things anew, things that can catch us off guard, that break in on our small, bordered worlds. When this happens, everything feels more spacious. Try walking around with a child who's going, "Wow, wow! Look at that dirty dog! Look at that burned-down house! Look at that red sky!" And the child points and you look, and you see, and you start going, "Wow! Look at that huge crazy hedge! Look at that teeny little baby! Look at the scary dark cloud!" I think this is how we are supposed to be in the world—present and in awe. Taped to the wall above my desk is a wonderful poem by the Persian mystic, Rumi:

*God's joy moves from unmarked box to unmarked box,
from cell to cell. As rainwater, down into flowerbed.
As roses, up from ground.
Now it looks like a plate of rice and fish,
now a cliff covered with vines,
now a horse being saddled.
It hides within these,
till one day it cracks them open.*

There is ecstasy in paying attention. You can get into a kind of Wordsworthian openness to the world, where you see in everything the essence of holiness, a sign that God is implicit in all of creation. Or maybe you are not predisposed to see the world sacramentally, to see everything as an outward and visible sign of inward, invisible grace. This does not mean that you are worthless Philistine scum. Anyone who wants to can be surprised by the beauty or pain of the natural world, of the human mind and heart, and can try to capture just that—the details, the nuance, what is. If you start to look around, you will start to see. When what we see catches us off guard, and when we write it as realistically and openly as possible, it offers hope. You look around and say, Wow, there's that same mockingbird; there's that woman in the red hat again. The woman in the red hat is about hope because she's in it up to her neck, too, yet every day she puts on that crazy red hat and walks to town. One of these images might show up dimly in the lower right quadrant of the imaginary Polaroid you took; you didn't even know at first that it was part of the landscape, and here it turns out to evoke something so deep in you that you can't put your finger on it. Here is one sentence by Gary Snyder:

*Ripples on the surface of the water—
were silver salmon passing under—different
from the ripples caused by breezes*

Those words, less than twenty of them, make ripples clear and bright, distinct again. I have a tape of a Tibetan nun singing a mantra of compassion over and over for an hour, eight words over and over, and every line feels different, feels cared about, and experienced as she is singing. You never once have the sense that she is glancing down at her watch, thinking, "Jesus Christ, it's only been fifteen minutes." Forty-five minutes later she is still singing each line distinctly, word by word, until the last word is sung.

Mostly things are not that way, that simple and pure, with so much focus given to each

syllable of life as life sings itself. But that kind of attention is the prize. To be engrossed by something outside ourselves is a powerful antidote for the rational mind, the mind that so frequently has its head up its own ass—seeing things in such a narrow and darkly narcissistic way that it presents a colo-rectal theology, offering hope to no one.

The Moral Point of View

If you find that you start a number of stories or pieces that you don't ever bother finishing, that you lose interest or faith in them along the way, it may be that there is nothing at their center about which you care passionately. You need to put yourself at their center, you and what you believe to be true or right. The core, ethical concepts in which you most passionately believe are the language in which you are writing.

These concepts probably feel like givens, like things no one ever had to make up, that have been true through all cultures and for all time. Telling these truths is your job. You have nothing else to tell us. But needless to say, you can't tell them in a sentence or a paragraph; the truth doesn't come out in bumper stickers. There may be a flickering moment of insight in a one-liner, in a sound bite, but everyday meat-and-potato truth is beyond our ability to capture in a few words. Your whole piece is the truth, not just one shining epigrammatic moment in it. There will need to be some kind of unfolding in order to contain it, and there will need to be layers. We are dealing with the ineffable here—we're out there somewhere between the known and the unknown, trying to reel in both for a closer look. This is why it may take a whole book.

I'm not suggesting that you want to be an author who tells a story in order to teach a moral or deliver a message. If you have a message, as Samuel Goldwyn said, send a telegram. But we feel morally certain of some things, sure that we're right, even while we know how often we've been wrong, and we need to communicate these things. For instance, I used to think that paired opposites were a given, that love was the opposite of hate, right the opposite of wrong. But now I think we sometimes buy into these concepts because it is so much easier to embrace absolutes than to suffer reality. I don't think anything is the opposite of love. Reality is unforgivingly complex.

When you start off writing, if you are anything like me, you may want to fill the page with witticisms and shimmering insights so that the world will see how uniquely smart and sensitive you are. Over the course of time, as you get the knack of doing some writing every day, what seems to happen almost organically is that you end up wanting your characters to act out the drama of humankind. Much of this drama does not involve witticisms and shimmer. Yet this drama is best couched in moral terms; the purpose of most great writing seems to be to reveal in an ethical light who we are. My favorite moment in Jeanne Moreau's latest movie—a comedy called *The Summer House*—takes place in a kitchen, when she proclaims that every human has something to cry about. When mocked by the owner of the kitchen and pressed to say what it is that we have to cry about, she tosses back her head of flaming red hair and says, "The winds of solitude roaring at the edge of infinity." How do we, as individuals and communities, behave with that wind blowing behind us? Are we well behaved, striving for dignity and compassion, or is it every man for himself?

As we live, we begin to discover what helps in life and what hurts, and our characters act this out dramatically. This is moral material. The word moral has such bad associations: with fundamentalism, stiff-necked preachers, priggishness. We have to get past that. If your deepest beliefs drive your writing, they will not only keep your work from being contrived but will help you discover what drives your characters. You may find some really good people beneath the packaging and posing—people whom we, your readers, will like, whose company we will rejoice in. We like certain characters because they are good or decent—they internalize some decency in the world that makes them able to take a risk or make a sacrifice for someone else. They let us

see that there is in fact some sort of moral compass still at work here, and that we, too, could travel by this compass if we so choose.

In good fiction, we have one eye on the hero or the good guys and a fascinated eye on the bad guys, who may be a lot more interesting. The plot leads all of these people (and us) into dark woods where we find, against all odds, a woman or a man with the compass, and it still points true north. That's the miracle, and it's astonishing. This shaft of light, sometimes only a glimmer, both defines and thwarts the darkness.

Think of a medieval morality play as the model. We love to hear that goodness will triumph over evil, that the fragile prize—humanity, life—will be saved. In formula fiction, evil wins out until the very end, and then against all odds goodness prevails and the hero gets to kiss the girl with the big bosoms. Life is somewhat more complicated than it was in the Middle Ages, but in many ways it is so much the same—violent, terrifying, full of chaos and plague, murderers and thieves. So the acknowledgment that in the midst of ourselves there is still a good part that hasn't been corrupted and destroyed, that we can tap into and reclaim, is most reassuring. When a more or less ordinary character, someone who is both kind and self-serving, somehow finds that place within where he or she is still capable of courage and goodness, we get to see something true that we long for. This is what helps us connect with your characters and with your book. This is what makes it a book we will foist on our friends, a book we will remember, that will accompany us through life.

But you have to believe in your position, or nothing will be driving your work. If you don't believe in what you are saying, there is no point in your saying it. You might as well call it a day and go bowling. However, if you do care deeply about something—if, for instance, you are conservative in the great sense of the word, if you are someone who is trying to conserve the landscape and the natural world—then this belief will keep you going as you struggle to get your work done.

To be a good writer, you not only have to write a great deal but you have to care. You do not have to have a complicated moral philosophy. But a writer always tries, I think, to be a part of the solution, to understand a little about life and to pass this on. Even someone as grim and unsentimental as Samuel Beckett, with his lunatics in garbage cans or up to their necks in sand, whose lives consist of pawing through the contents of their purses, stopping to marvel at each item, gives us great insight into what is true, into what helps. He gets it right—that we're born astride the grave and that this planet can feel as cold and uninhabitable as the moon—and he knows how to make it funny. He smiles an oblique and private smile at us, the most delicious smile of all, and this changes how we look at life. A few small things seem suddenly clear, things to which we can cling, and this makes us feel like part of the solution. (But perhaps we have the same problem with the word solution as we do with the word moral. It sounds so fixative, and maybe we have gone beyond fixing. Maybe all we can do is to make our remaining time here full of gentleness and good humor.)

Or look at the fourteenth Dalai Lama, who is, for my money, the sanest person currently on earth. He says simply, "My true religion is kindness." That is a great moral position—practicing kindness, keeping one's heart open in the presence of suffering. Unfortunately it does not make great literature. You will need to embroider it a little. Otherwise you will have a one-sentence book, and potential agents will look at you as if—as the Texans say—you are perhaps not the brightest porch light on the block.

So a moral position is not a message. A moral position is a passionate caring inside you. We

are all in danger now and have a new everything to face, and there is no point gathering an audience and demanding its attention unless you have something to say that is important and constructive. My friend Carpenter says we no longer need Chicken Little to tell us the sky is falling, because it already has. The issue now is how to take care of one another. Some of us are interested in any light you might be able to shed on this, and we will pay a great deal extra if you can make us laugh about it. For some of us, good books and beautiful writing are the ultimate solace, even more comforting than exquisite food. So write about the things that are most important to you. Love and death and sex and survival are important to most of us. Some of us are also interested in God and ecology.

Maybe what you care most passionately about are fasting and high colonics—cappuccino enemas, say. This is fine, but we do not want you to write about them; we will secretly believe that you are simply spiritualizing your hysteria. There are millions of people already doing this at churches and New Age festivals across the land.

Write instead about freedom, freedoms worth fighting for. Human rights begin with and extend to your characters, no matter how horrible they are. You have to respect the qualities that make them who they are. A moral position is not a slogan, or wishful thinking. It doesn't come from outside or above. It begins inside the heart of a character and grows from there. Tell the truth and write about freedom and fight for it, however you can, and you will be richly rewarded. As Molly Ivins put it, freedom fighters don't always win, but they are always right.

Broccoli

There's an old Mel Brooks routine, on the flip side of the "2,000-Year-Old Man," where the psychiatrist tells his patient, "Listen to your broccoli, and your broccoli will tell you how to eat it." And when I first tell my students this, they look at me as if things have clearly begun to deteriorate. But it is as important a concept in writing as it is in real life.

It means, of course, that when you don't know what to do, when you don't know whether your character would do this or that, you get quiet and try to hear that still small voice inside. It will tell you what to do. The problem is that so many of us lost access to our broccoli when we were children. When we listened to our intuition when we were small and then told the grown-ups what we believed to be true, we were often either corrected, ridiculed, or punished. God forbid you should have your own opinions or perceptions—better to have head lice. If you asked innocently, "Why is Mom in the bathroom crying?," you might be told, "Mom isn't crying; Mom has allergies." Or if you said, "Why didn't Dad come home last night?," you might be told brightly, "Dad did come home last night, but then he left again very early." And you nodded, even though you knew that these were lies, because it was important to stay on the adults' good side. There was no one else to take care of you, and if you questioned them too adamantly, you'd probably get sent to your room without dinner, or they'd drive a stake through your ankles and leave you on the hillside above the Mobil station. So you may have gotten into the habit of doubting the voice that was telling you quite clearly what was really going on. It is essential that you get it back.

You need your broccoli in order to write well. Otherwise you're going to sit down in the morning and have only your rational mind to guide you. Then, if you're having a bad day, you're going to crash and burn within half an hour. You'll give up, and maybe even get up, which is worse because a lot of us know that if we just sit there long enough, in whatever shape, we may end up being surprised. Let's say it's only 9:15; now, if you were to stick it out, the image or situation might come to you that would wedge the door open for a character, after which you would only have to get out of the way. Because then the character could come forward and speak and might say something important; it might even be the thing that is most important to him or her, and your plot might suddenly fall into place. You might see how to take that person from good to bad and then back, or whatever. But instead you quit for the day, and you feel defeated and shaken and hopeless, and tomorrow is going to be even harder to face because today you've given up only fifteen minutes after you sat down to work. Remember the scene in *Cat Ballou* where a very drunk Lee Marvin goes from unconscious to ranting to triumphant to roaring to weeping defeat, and then finally passes out? One of the men watching him says, with real awe, "I never seen a man get through a day so fast." Don't let this be you.

You get your confidence and intuition back by trusting yourself, by being militantly on your own side. You need to trust yourself, especially on a first draft, where amid the anxiety and self-doubt, there should be a real sense of your imagination and your memories walking and woolgathering, tramping the hills, romping all over the place. Trust them. Don't look at your feet to see if you are doing it right. Just dance.

You get your intuition back when you make space for it, when you stop the chattering of the rational mind. The rational mind doesn't nourish you. You assume that it gives you the truth, because the rational mind is the golden calf that this culture worships, but this is not true. Rationality squeezes out much that is rich and juicy and fascinating.

Sometimes intuition needs coaxing, because intuition is a little shy. But if you try not to crowd it, intuition often wafts up from the soul or subconscious, and then becomes a tiny fitful little flame. It will be blown out by too much compulsion and manic attention, but will burn quietly when watched with gentle concentration.

So try to calm down, get quiet, breathe, and listen. Squint at the screen in your head, and if you look, you will see what you are searching for, the details of the story, its direction— maybe not right this minute, but eventually. If you stop trying to control your mind so much, you'll have intuitive hunches about what this or that character is all about. It is hard to stop controlling, but you can do it. If your character suddenly pulls a half-eaten carrot out of her pocket, let her. Later you can ask yourself if this rings true. Train yourself to hear that small inner voice. Most people's intuitions are drowned out by folk sayings. We have a moment of real feeling or insight, and then we come up with a folk saying that captures the insight in a kind of wash. The intuition may be real and ripe, fresh with possibilities, but the folk saying is guaranteed to be a cliché, stale and self-contained.

Take the attitude that what you are thinking and feeling is valuable stuff, and then be naive enough to get it all down on paper. But be careful: if your intuition says that your story sucks, make sure it really is your intuition and not your mother. "I see this character in a purple sharkskin suit," you suddenly think, and then the voice of the worried mother says, "No, no, put him in something respectable." But if you listen to the worried mother, pretty soon you'll be asleep and so will your reader. Your intuition will make it a much wilder and more natural ride; it may show you what would really jump out from behind those trees over there. You won't always get a clear, panting, "Aha! Purple sharkskin suit!" More often you will hear a subterranean murmur. It may sound like one of the many separate voices that make up the sounds of a creek. Or it may come in code, oblique and sneaky, creeping in from around the corner. If you shine too much light on it, it may draw back and fade away.

I think a major step in learning to rely on your intuition is to find a usable metaphor for it. Broccoli is so ridiculous that it works for me. A friend says that his intuition is his animal: "My animal thinks this," he says, or "My animal hates that." But whatever you come up with needs to suggest a voice that you are not trying to control. If you're lost in the forest, let the horse find the way home. You have to stop directing, because you will only get in the way.

Writing is about hypnotizing yourself into believing in yourself, getting some work done, then unhypnotizing yourself and going over the material coldly. There will be many mistakes, many things to take out and others that need to be added. You just aren't always going to make the right decision. My friend Terry says that when you need to make a decision, in your work or otherwise, and you don't know what to do, just do one thing or the other, because the worst that can happen is that you will have made a terrible mistake. So let the plot go left in this one place instead of right, or let your character decide to go back to her loathsome passive-aggressive husband. Maybe it was the right thing, maybe not. If not, go back and try something else. Some of us tend to think that what we do and say and decide and write are cosmically important things. But they're not. If you don't know which way to go, keep it simple. Listen to your broccoli. Maybe it will know what to do. Then, if you've worked in good faith for a couple of hours but cannot hear it today, have some lunch.

Radio Station KFKD

I need to bring up radio station KFKD, or K-Fucked, here. It is perhaps the single greatest obstacle to listening to your broccoli that exists for writers. Then I promise I'll never mention it again.

If you are not careful, station KFKD will play in your head twenty-four hours a day, nonstop, in stereo. Out of the right speaker in your inner ear will come the endless stream of self-aggrandizement, the recitation of one's specialness, of how much more open and gifted and brilliant and knowing and misunderstood and humble one is. Out of the left speaker will be the rap songs of self-loathing, the lists of all the things one doesn't do well, of all the mistakes one has made today and over an entire lifetime, the doubt, the assertion that everything that one touches turns to shit, that one doesn't do relationships well, that one is in every way a fraud, incapable of selfless love, that one has no talent or insight, and on and on and on. You might as well have heavy-metal music piped in through headphones while you're trying to get your work done. You have to get things quiet in your head so you can hear your characters and let them guide your story.

The best way to get quiet, other than the combination of extensive therapy, Prozac, and a lobotomy, is first to notice that the station is on. KFKD is on every single morning when I sit down at my desk. So I sit for a moment and then say a small prayer—please help me get out of the way so I can write what wants to be written. Sometimes ritual quiets the racket. Try it. Any number of things may work for you—an altar, for instance, or votive candles, sage smudges, small-animal sacrifices, especially now that the Supreme Court has legalized them. (I cut out the headline the day this news came out and taped it above the kitty's water dish.) Rituals are a good signal to your unconscious that it is time to kick in.

You might also consider trying to breathe. This is not something that I remember to do very often, and I do not normally like to hang around people who talk about slow conscious breathing; I start to worry that a nice long discussion of aromatherapy is right around the corner. But these slow conscious breathers are on to something, because if you try to follow your breath for a while, it will ground you in relative silence.

So. You sit down to work at nine in the morning, and do the prayer or the small-animal sacrifice or whatever, and then breathe for a moment, and try to focus on where your characters are, only to discover that your mind has begun to wander just a little. Typically, you may find yourself wondering how some really awful writer you know is doing, and why he is doing so much better than you, and what it will be like to be on David Letterman's show, and whether he will mock you or laugh at all your jokes and let you be his new best friend, and what you should eat for lunch, and what it would feel like for your hair to be on fire or for someone—like a critic or something—to stick a sharp object into your eye. Not to worry. Gently bring your mind back to your work.

Let's say your character is sitting with his grown son beneath a cypress tree on a lion-colored hillside, chewing over in the sourest possible voice the few ecstatic moments of his life, and all you are going to do this morning is to squint along with him, and listen, and possibly find out what some of those moments might have been. After a minute, you begin to see your man in someone's grassy backyard, not long ago, playing Ping-Pong with a younger man, a hippie, and they are not competing, just hitting together, and you begin to capture this on paper, and after two sentences you begin to worry about complete financial collapse, what it will be like to live in

a car, and then your mother calls joyfully to tell you that something fantastic just happened to someone who was mean to you in the eighth grade. You get off the phone, and your mind has become a frog brain that scientists have saturated with caffeine. You may need another minute to bring it back to the man's moment in that grassy backyard. Close your eyes. Breathe. Begin again.

I'm sorry, I wish that there were a sharper, slicker way to do this, but this seems to be the only solution. Believe me, I hate natural solutions, or at any rate they are the last ones I turn to. Two nights ago I showed up to teach my class with a raw chest and a raging sore throat, the kind that feels like cancer of the trachea. I happen to have two doctors in this class, and one of them tried to assure me that it probably wasn't tracheal cancer, that in fact the viral cloud of mid-autumn had descended and many people were having similar symptoms. The other doctor recommended drinking really, really hot water. "Hot water?" I said. "Hot water? I should be home hooked up to an epidural, drinking codeine cough syrup, and you're prescribing hot water?" Then I threatened to lower his grade. (Of course, this is not a graded workshop, so my students tend to roll their eyes when I threaten them.) At the break, that doctor brought me a cup of boiling water, as though for tea but without the tea bag, and I drank it. My throat and chest stopped aching about twenty seconds later.

I hate that.

Still, breathing calmly can help you get into a position where the workings of your characters' hearts and the things people say on the streets of your story can be heard above the sound of KFKD. When you are in that position, you will know. I am struggling very hard not to use the word harmony here. So let me tell you a quick story.

Last summer I got a call from a producer in New York who wanted me to fly east two days later, stay in town overnight, do her TV talk show, and fly home. I thought long and hard about whether I should—for about thirty seconds. Of course I wanted to go. But I would have to make arrangements for Sam to stay overnight with his grandparents, and I needed to catch a return flight that would get me back in time to teach my workshop the next night, and the only one that could do that involved a layover at Dallas-Fort Worth. A layover at Dallas-Fort Worth is something for which, believe me, I am not remotely well enough. So I shared all this with the producer and took off for a committee meeting I had at church.

I was a mess. Out of the right speaker, KFKD was playing a dress rehearsal of the TV talk show and of subsequent appearances with Dave and Arsenio. Out of the left speaker was a call-in program on airplane crashes, with descriptions of what happens to the body on impact.

I got to church and my committee had not yet assembled, but four of the church's elders—all women—three African Americans and one white, were having a prayer meeting. They were praying for homeless children. "Can we discuss my personal problems for a moment?" I asked.

They nodded and I told them all about my airline fears and how many moving parts there were to this trip east. They nodded again. They seemed to believe that between Jesus and a travel agent, things could probably be worked out. I sighed. My meeting was starting in another room, so I trudged off. My mind spun with images of the talk show, the airplane crash, and the madman with the Uzi at Dallas-Fort Worth. I was having a little trouble concentrating. The meeting ended, and on my way out, a little book on prayer caught my eye. I picked it up and stuck it in my purse, figuring I could look at it over dinner and then return it the next Sunday.

All the way to the hamburger joint, I worried that I would be involved in a car accident and the book would be found on me. My survivors would know I had finally snapped, that I had become

one of those fundamentalists who think the world is going to end tomorrow right after lunch. I made it to the restaurant, though, and when I sat down, I took out the little book. I opened it before I got it out of my purse so the cover wouldn't show, as if it were the rankest sort of pornography, like *Big Beautiful Butts* or something. I started to read and within a page came upon this beautiful passage: "The Gulf Stream will flow through a straw provided the straw is aligned to the Gulf Stream, and not at cross purposes with it. "

To make a long story short, I flew to New York and everything went fine. I didn't have to stop in Dallas-Fort Worth, and I got home in time to teach my class. So now I always tell my students about the Gulf Stream: that what it means for us, for writers, is that we need to align ourselves with the river of the story, the river of the unconscious, of memory and sensibility, of our characters' lives, which can then pour through us, the straw. When KFKD is playing, we are, at cross purposes with the river. So we need to sit there, and breathe, calm ourselves down, push back our sleeves, and begin again.

Jealousy

Of all the voices you'll hear on KFKD, the most difficult to subdue may be that of jealousy. Jealousy is such a direct attack on whatever measure of confidence you've been able to muster. But if you continue to write, you are probably going to have to deal with it, because some wonderful, dazzling successes are going to happen for some of the most awful, angry, undeserving writers you know—people who are, in other words, not you.

This is going to happen because the public herd mentality is not swayed by the magic that happens when mind and heart and muse and hand and paper work together. Rather, it is guided by talk shows and movie producers and TV commercials. Still, you'd probably like the caribou herd to run in your direction for a while. Most of us secretly want this. But maybe the herd is going to stuff itself on lichen and then waddle after some really undeserving writers instead. Those writers will get the place on the best-seller list, the movie sales, the huge advances, and the nice big glossy pictures in the national magazines where the photo editors have airbrushed out the excessively long eyeteeth, the wrinkles, and the horns. The writer you most admire in the world will give them rave reviews in the Times or blurbs for the paperback edition. They will buy houses, big houses, or second houses that are actually as nice, or nicer, than the first ones. And you are going to want to throw yourself down the back stairs, especially if the person is a friend.

You are going to feel awful beyond words. You are going to have a number of days in a row where you hate everyone and don't believe in anything. If you do know the author whose turn it is, he or she will inevitably say that it will be your turn next, which is what the bride always says to you at each successive wedding, while you grow older and more decayed. It can wreak just the tiniest bit of havoc with your self-esteem to find that you are hoping for small bad things to happen to this friend—for, say, her head to blow up. Or for him to wake up one morning with a pain in his prostate, because I don't care how rich and successful someone is, if you wake up having to call your doctor and ask for a finger massage, it's going to be a long day. You get all caught up in such fantasies because you feel, once again, like the kid outside the candy-store window, and you believe that this friend, this friend whom you now hate, has all the candy. You believe that success is bringing this friend inordinate joy and serenity and security and that her days are easier. She's going to live to be one hundred and twenty, he's never going to die—the people who are going to die are the good people, like you. But this is not true. Money won't guarantee these writers much of anything, except that now they have a much more expensive set of problems. The pressure on their lives has actually intensified.

Good, fine, you think. I'm into intensity; those are the problems I want.

But do you really?

Yes. I really do.

But some of the loneliest, most miserable, neurotic, despicable people we know have been the most successful in the world.

Right—but it would be different for me. I would not fall for my own press clippings. I would not mention my achievements all the time. I would not say things like "Boy, you think it's raining hard today? I remember one day—I think it was the year I got the Guggenheim—it really rained hard." You'd never do that, unlike other people you could mention.

That's very nice. It's all going to happen to somebody else anyway. Bank on it. Jealousy is one of the occupational hazards of being a writer, and the most degrading. And I, who have been

the Leona Helmsley of jealousy, have come to believe that the only things that help ease or transform it are (a) getting older, (b) talking about it until the fever breaks, and (c) using it as material. Also, someone somewhere along the line is going to be able to make you start laughing about it, and then you will be on your way home.

I went through a very bad bout of jealousy last year, when someone with whom I am (or rather was) friendly did extremely well. It felt like every few days she'd have more good news about how well her book was doing, until it seemed that she was going to be set for life. It threw me for a loop. I am a better writer than she is. A lot of my writer friends do very well, hugely well, and I'm not jealous of them. I do not know why that is, but it's true. But when it happened for her, I would sit listening to her discuss her latest successes over the phone, praying that I could get off the line before I started barking. I was literally oozing unhappiness, like a sump.

My deepest belief is that to live as if we're dying can set us free. Dying people teach you to pay attention and to forgive and not to sweat the small things. So every time this friend called, I tried to will myself into forgiving both of us. I had been around someone from the South that summer who was always exclaiming, "Isn't that great?"—only she made it almost rhyme with "bright." So when my friend would call with her latest good news, always presented humbly like some born-again-Christian Miss America contestant, I'd say, "Isn't that gright, huh? Isn't that gright?"

She would say, "You are so supportive. Some of my other friends are having trouble with this."

I'd say, "How could I not be supportive? It's just so darn gright."

But I always wanted to ask, "Could I have the names and numbers of some of your other friends?"

Sometimes I would get off the phone and cry.

After a while I started asking people for help.

One person reminded me of what Jean Rhys once wrote, that all of us writers are little rivers running into one lake, that what is good for one is good for all, that we all collectively share in one another's success and acclaim. I said, "You are a very, very angry person."

My therapist said that jealousy is a secondary emotion, that it is born out of feeling excluded and deprived, and that if I worked on those age-old feelings, I would probably break through the jealousy. I tried to get her to give me a prescription for Prozac, but she said that this other writer was in my life to help me heal my past. She said this writer had helped bring up a lifetime's worth of feeling that other families were happier than ours, that other families had some owner's manual to go by. She said it was once again that business of comparing my insides to other people's outsides. She said to go ahead and feel the feelings. I did. They felt like shit.

My friend, the writer I was so jealous of, would call and say, like some Southern belle, "I just don't know why God is giving me so much money this year." And I would do my Lamaze for a moment, and say, "Isn't that gright?" I have never felt like such a loser in my life.

I called a very wise writer I know who's been in Alcoholics Anonymous for years, who spends half his time helping others get sober. I asked him what he would tell a newcomer who was in the throes of insanity or, say hypothetically, jealousy.

"I just listen," he said. "They all tell me these incredibly long, self-important, convoluted stories. And then I say one of three things: I say, 'Uh-huh,' I say, 'Hmmm,' I say, 'Too bad.' " I laughed. Then I started telling him about this awful friend I had who was doing so well. He was silent for a moment. Then he said, "Uh-huh."

Next I talked to my slightly overweight alcoholic gay Catholic priest friend. I said, "Do you get jealous?"

He said, "When I see a man my own age in great shape, and I feel all conflicted, wishing I were that thin and yet at the same time wanting to lick him, is that jealousy or is that appreciation?"

It was hard to get anyone to say anything that would make the jealousy go away or change into something else. I felt like the wicked stepsister in a fairy tale. I told another friend, and she read me some lines by a Lakota Sioux: "Sometimes I go about pitying myself. And all the while I am being carried on great winds across the sky." That is so beautiful, I said; and I am so mentally ill.

Those lines, however, offered the beginning of a solution. They made the first tiny crack in my prison wall. I was waiting for the kind of solution where God reaches down and touches you with his magic wand and all of a sudden I would be fixed, like a broken toaster oven. But this was not the way it happened. Instead, I got one angstrom unit better, day by day.

Another piece of the solution came when a poem by Clive James, called "The Book of My Enemy Has Been Remaindered," appeared one Sunday in The New York Times Book Review. "The book of my enemy has been remaindered," it begins, "And I am pleased." It helped more than words can say. Oh, what blessed relief for someone to be as jealous and spiteful as me and to make those feelings funny. I called everyone whose advice I had sought and read it to them. Everybody howled with recognition.

Yet another piece of the solution dropped into place when my friend Judy said that the problem was trying to stop the jealousy and competitiveness, and that the main thing was not to let it fuel my self-loathing. She said it was nuts for me to try to be happy for this other writer. I cannot tell you how much this helped. I was raised in a culture that promotes this competitiveness, this insatiability, this fantasy of needing hundreds of thousands of dollars a year, and then, in the next breath, shames you for any feelings of longing or envy or fear that it will always be someone else's turn. I was only doing what I had been groomed to do.

So I started getting my sense of humor back. I started telling myself that if you want to know how God feels about money, look at whom she gives it to. This cheered me up no end, even though my closest friends have lots of money. I told myself that historically when people do too well too quickly, they are a Greek tragedy waiting to happen. I, who did not do too well too quickly and who was in fact not doing too well over time, was actually in the catbird seat. I was not going to end up the cocky heroine in an ugly hubris drama. This is not to be underestimated. My nerves are shot as it is; the last thing I need would be an onslaught of thunder and silent screams, with cymbals, fangs, winds pushing forest fires across the land; I mean, who needs it?

Then I started to write about my envy. I got to look in some cold dark corners, see what was there, shine a little light on what we all have in common. Sometimes this human stuff is slimy and pathetic—jealousy especially so—but better to feel it and talk about it and walk through it than to spend a lifetime being silently poisoned.

Now I felt like I was getting somewhere, after all those weeks of emotionally swimming the English Channel, cold and afraid. Then I saw a documentary on TV about a couple with AIDS. And all the pieces of the solution finally came together.

There was a lot of footage in that movie of ravaged bodies, the sorts of bodies we usually recoil from. One of the men in the couple had an emaciated back entirely purple with Kaposi's. But once you, the viewer, got to know the spirit inside, you could see the beauty of that sick person lying under the mounds of quilts that friends had made. You could see the amazing

fortitude of people going through horror with grace, looking right into the pit and seeing that this is what you've got, this disease, or maybe even this jealousy. So you do as well as you can with it. And this ravaged body or wounded psyche can and should still be cared for as softly and tenderly as possible.

The more I wrote about it and the more I thought of the movie, the angrier I got at how often this writer friend mentioned her money to me, because that summer Sam and I had almost none, and she knew this. I kept writing about my childhood, about how often I had longed for what other girls had and for what other families seemed to be about. I taped Hillel's line to the wall by my desk: "I get up. I walk. I fall down. Meanwhile, I keep dancing." The way I dance is by writing. So I wrote about trying to pay closer attention to the world, about taking things less seriously, moving more slowly, stepping outside more often. Eventually what I was writing got funnier and compassion broke through, for me and also for my writer friend. And at this point I told her, as kindly as possible, that I needed a sabbatical from our friendship. Life really is so short. And finally I felt that my jealousy and I were strangely beautiful, like the men in the AIDS movie, doing the dance of the transformed self, dancing like an old long-legged bird.

Part Three

Help Along the Way

Writing Groups

So much of writing is about sitting down and doing it every day, and so much of it is about getting into the custom of taking in everything that comes along, seeing it all as grist for the mill. This can be a very comforting habit, like biting your nails. Instead of being scared all the time, you detach, watch what goes on, and consider it creatively. Instead of feeling panicked by those lowlifes on the subway, you notice all the details of their clothes and bearing and speech. Maybe you never quite get to the point where you think, "Ah—so that's what a gun looks like from this end." But you take in all you can, as a child would, without the atmospheric smog of most grown-up vision.

And all the while you are writing away, editing, revising, trying new leads, new endings, until finally, at some point, you want some feedback. You want other people to read it. You want to know what they think. We are social animals, and we are trying to communicate with others of our species, and up to now you have been alone in a hole getting your work done. You have no idea whether it sings to anyone but you. You wouldn't spend a month on an oil painting and then mummify it. You would hang it where people could see it. So the thought of a writing class or a writing conference may cross your mind.

Blooming writers really do not know what to expect when they sign up for a workshop or a creative-writing class. Some want to learn to write, or to write better. Others have been writing a great deal for a long time and want some feedback. These are realistic goals. A certain kind of person finds writing classes and workshops to be like camp, and just wants to hang out with all these other people, maybe with a writer he or she respects, to get and give response and encouragement, and to hear how other people tell their stories. Some people want other people with whom to share the disappointments and rejection letters and doldrums. A lot of people like to work on other people's writing because it helps them figure out what they themselves love in the written word, as well as what doesn't work for them. And others want feedback from people who aren't quite friends or editors but who will be realistic and honest and helpful.

But a lot of people come to my workshops or classes secretly hoping that I will have read their submission and absolutely flipped. I will take them aside after class and tell them that all the story needs is for them to put a little spin on the ending, maybe shorten the scene with Cammy and the ducks, and that then we'll send it off to my agent or *The New Yorker*, or maybe we'll just send it straight to Sonny Mehta. We'll fax it to Sonny; he would want it that way.

But I tell them that this is probably not going to happen. Every so often at a writing conference, people get taken aside by wonderful writers who love their story and who help them in some pivotal way. Every so often during one of my workshops, I'll take someone aside and say, "You're very good; work on this another six months and then give me a call, and we'll take it from there." But this is rare. Mostly what I do is listen, and encourage, and tell people what writing is like for me on a daily basis and what helps me and what doesn't. I tell people all the things I like about their piece—how wonderful the atmosphere is, for instance, and the language—and also point out where they got all tangled up in their own process. We—the other students and I—can be like a doctor to whom you take your work for a general checkup. We can give you a place to show up and a little benevolent pressure, which we hope will help you finish stories and sections. We can give you some respect, because we know what it takes.

But be warned that you may feel as though you have put your head in the lion's mouth. Creative-writing classes and ongoing workshops tend to be gentler than conferences, but in all of