

Jackson, Shirley. "Come Along
with me."



Experience and Fiction



It is most agreeable to be a writer of fiction for several reasons—one of the most important being, of course, that you can persuade people that it is really work if you look haggard enough—but perhaps the most useful thing about being a writer of fiction is that nothing is ever wasted; all experience is good for something; you tend to see everything as a potential structure of words. One of my daughters made this abruptly clear to me when she came not long ago into the kitchen where I was trying to get the door of our terrible old refrigerator open; it always stuck when the weather was wet, and one of the delights of a cold rainy day was opening the refrigerator door. My daughter watched me wrestling with it for a minute and then she said that I was foolish to bang on the refrigerator door like that; why not use magic to open it? I thought about this. I poured myself another cup of coffee and lighted a cigarette and sat down for a while and thought about it; and then decided that she was right. I left the refrigerator where it was and went in to my typewriter and wrote a story about not being able to open the refrigerator door and getting the children to open it with magic. When a magazine bought the story I bought a new refrigerator. That is what I would like to talk about now—the practical application of magic, or where do stories come from?

People are always asking me—and every other writer I know—where story ideas come from. Where *do* you get your ideas, they ask; how do you ever manage to think them up? It's certainly the hardest question in the world to answer, since stories originate in everyday happenings and emotions, and any writer who tried

to answer such a question would find himself telling over, in some detail, the story of his life. Fiction uses so many small items, so many little gestures and remembered incidents and unforgettable faces, that trying to isolate any one inspiration for any one story is incredibly difficult, but basically, of course, the genesis of any fictional work has to be human experience. This translation of experience into fiction is not a mystic one. It is, I think, part recognition and part analysis. A bald description of an incident is hardly fiction, but the same incident, carefully taken apart, examined as to emotional and balanced structure, and then as carefully reassembled in the most effective form, slanted and polished and weighed, may very well be a short story. Let me try an example.

I have lifted this from a story written several years ago by a college student I knew; it has always stayed in my mind as the most perfect nonstory I ever read. This is how the plot goes: In a small town the people are having a church fair, the high point of which is the raffling off of a particularly beautiful quilt made by one of the local ladies; the quilt has been the talk of the town for weeks, and the admiration and envy of all the women; all of them want it badly. The raffle is held, and the quilt is won by a summer visitor, a wealthy woman who has no use for the quilt and no desire for it. She sends her chauffeur over to the platform to pick up the quilt and bring it back to her car.

Now, this story written straight, as I just read it, is almost meaningless. It is a simple anecdote, and carries only the statement that the women in the small town resent the summer visitor, and dislike having her win the quilt; its only actual impact is the ironic point that the quilt should have been won by the only woman attending the raffle who really did not want it. Now, suppose this were taken apart and reassembled. We would then have to examine more particularly four or five people most concerned—the summer visitor, the chauffeur, the woman who made the quilt, the minister who raffled it off, and perhaps the one village woman—I believe there always is one—who was most open and loud in her disapproval; as things stand now, these people have no faces, only parts to play. Suppose we were to give them personalities, sketch in people, lightly at first, experimentally; suppose the summer visitor is actually a shy, friendly person who very much wants to be liked, and thinks that accepting the quilt will endear her to the villagers; suppose she is foolish enough to try to give the quilt back again after-

ward? Suppose the minister had intended this church fair as an attempt to make peace among the quarreling women in the village, and now sees their quarrels ended when they unite in hatred of the outsider? Then consider the chauffeur; as the story stands now he has the most agonizing two or three minutes of all—the walk from the car, through the people of the village, to the platform to take up the quilt and carry it back; if the chauffeur came from a small town himself, and knew what such people were like, how would he feel during those few minutes? Suppose the chauffeur were a boy from that town, hired for the summer to drive the wealthy visitor's car? And, beyond all else, how do the *men* in the village feel at the feuding over the quilt?

If the story is going to be a short one, it is of course only necessary to focus on one of these characters—I like the chauffeur, myself—and follow this character from beginning to end; in a short story the time would of course be limited to the actual moments of the raffle, with the background sketched in through conversation and small incidents—the way the village women look at the fancy car, perhaps, or the minister's nervousness when he comes to draw the number; the point of the story might be indicated early, telegraphed, as it were, if the story opened with the summer visitor buying a cake at one of the stands, while the village women watch her and make their private comments; I keep calling them "village women," by the way; I do not mean by that that they are primitive, or uneducated, or unsophisticated; I think of them only as a tightly knit group, interested in their own concerns, and as resentful of outsiders as any of us.

If it were going to be a longer story, these people would be examined in more detail, and there would have to be more incidents, all paralleling the final one, the characters would have to be more firmly drawn, and the scene of the fair made more vivid as a background. The longer story might open with the village ladies decorating the fair grounds in the morning, with their bickering and arguing over whose booth was going to have the best location, and the woman who made the quilt would have to be there, set in with a definite character—perhaps they all hate her, but will defend her and her quilt because the summer visitor is the outsider?

It is almost silly to say that no one will read a story which does not interest him. Yet many writers forget it. They write a story which interests *them*, forgetting that the particular emotional investment they brought to the incident has never been commu-

nicated to the reader because, writing the story, they wrote down only what happened and not what was felt. In our story of the quilt, the girl who originally wrote it had been, as a daughter of the woman who made the quilt, very much involved in both the excitement and the indignation, but there was nothing of that in the story. She only wrote down what happened when an outsider won a quilt at a church fair. She said she didn't want the story to be autobiographical, and so she had kept herself entirely out of it. She had kept herself out of it so successfully, in fact, that the story was hopelessly dull; it had nothing in it except its one small ironic point; the rest of the story was waste, and padding. The village ladies were named Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Jones and it was not possible to tell one from another. Even the minister merged into the general flat landscape, recognizable only by his name. She pointed out that these were real people, and if she described them any more clearly they might read the story and be offended. And she couldn't change any of it because that was the way it had really *happened*. What was the purpose, she thought, of changing the events when this ironic little incident *had* really happened, she had been there and seen it, and had always wanted, she said, to write it down because it seemed just perfect material for a story.

Now there are three elements here, three mistaken conceptions, which would keep this anecdote from ever turning into a story. I think it cannot be too firmly emphasized that in the writing of any kind of fiction no scene and no character can be allowed to wander off by itself; there must be some furthering of the story in every sentence, and even the most fleeting background characters must partake of the story in some way; they must be characters peculiar to *this* story and no other. A boy who climbs an apple tree to watch the raffling off of the quilt only wastes time and attention if that is *all* he does; the reader's mind is taken away from the story while he watches that boy climb the tree. But if the boy climbs the tree directly over the visitor's fancy car, and amuses himself by dropping green apples down onto the roof of the car and snickering, he is still a background character but he has added to the story by reinforcing the village attitude toward the outsider. The reader has, presumably, seen small boys climb apple trees before, but this boy exists nowhere else in the world than in this story and this village, and it must be made clear that that is where he belongs.

The second point I want to emphasize is that people in stories

are called characters because that is what they are. They are not real people. It is, of course, possible to choose a character and describe him so completely that the reader sees him as a whole personality, rounded and recognizable. The only trouble with that is that it takes several thousand pages of solid description, including a lot of very dull reading. Most of us have enough trouble understanding ourselves and our families and friends without wanting to know *everything* about a fictional character. A person in a story is identified through small things—little gestures, turns of speech, automatic reactions; suppose one of the women in our quilt story is excessively and foolishly modest; suppose that when someone praises her cakes she answers that they're really not very good, actually; she made *much* better cakes for the church fair last year; she just wishes that no one would even *taste* a piece of this year's cake, because it's really not any good at all; or if someone else remarks on how delicate her embroidery is, she will say that it's really nowhere near as good as everyone else's, and she could do much better if she had more time, although of *course* nothing she ever made could *begin* to be as good as Mrs. Smith's, although of course if she had as much time to spend doing embroidery as Mrs. Smith she might be able to do even *half* as well. That woman is identified for the reader permanently. If the reader comes to a conversation later, and he reads the remark: "Oh, it's not really anything good at *all*; anyone could have done better, really; I just get embarrassed if anyone even *looks* at my poor work"—he knows at once who is talking. It is not necessary to describe the woman any further; everyone has heard people who talk like that, and any reader will know at once exactly what she is like. Any minor character may be spotlighted in the background in this manner, and major characters will of course take on new depths of personality by being so clearly identified; suppose the minister in our story has a nervous or tired gesture that he makes over and over without thinking—suppose he covers his eyes wearily with his hand when he is worried—a small gesture like that will do more to describe him than a biography.

Further, let me stop briefly to quarrel with the statement that this event cannot be improved upon because that is the way it really happened. The only way to turn something that really happened into something that happens on paper is to attack it in the beginning the way a puppy attacks an old shoe. Shake it, snarl at it, sneak up on it from various angles. Perhaps the simple little

incident you are dying to turn into fiction may carry a wholly new punch if you wrote it upside down or inside out or starting at the end; many stories that just won't work out as straightforward accounts go smoothly and neatly if you start from the end; I mean, tell the ending first and then let the story unfold, giving the explanations which make the story plausible. In our quilt story, of course, the entire setup would fall apart if we tried writing it from the end—unless the end is really the girl who wrote the story in the first place, and would not put in real people because she was one of them. See what happens to the story then; it becomes a story about conflicting loyalties, the story of a girl who loves her home town and yet, having left it behind, finds also in herself a certain sympathy with the outsider, the wistful woman who does not belong anywhere. If we do what I call turning the story inside out, we can abandon the church fair and the raffle temporarily, give the summer visitor two small children, put the two small children on the outskirts of the crowd—say down by the brook, playing with some of the village children, and let their amiable play stand in the foreground against the raffle in the background, contrasting the children playing with the suspicion and hatred building up among the grownups. Or suppose we want to turn the story outside in—how about making the summer visitor a fairly stupid woman, who is determined to win the quilt, and puts through some highhanded maneuvering to make sure she wins it? By changing the emphasis and angle on this little plot we can make it say almost anything we like. There is certainly no need to worry about whether any of this is true, or actually happened; it is as true as you make it. The important thing is that it be true in the story, and actually happen *there*.

I can, in the last analysis, talk only about my own work; it is not that I am so entirely vain, but because there is really one writer I know well enough to say these things about; I would not dare discuss intimately anyone else. So I would like to show you a little of how my own fiction comes directly from experience.

I have recently finished a novel about a haunted house. I was [working] on a novel about a haunted house because I happened by chance, to read a book about a group of people, nineteenth-century psychic researchers, who rented a haunted house and recorded their impressions of the things they saw and heard and felt in order to contribute a learned paper to the Society for Psy-

chic Research. They thought that they were being terribly scientific and proving all kinds of things, and yet the story that kept coming through their dry reports was not at all the story of a haunted house, it was the story of several earnest, I believe misguided, certainly determined people, with their differing motivations and backgrounds. I found it so exciting that I wanted more than anything else to set up my own haunted house, and put my own people in it, and see what I could make happen. As so often happens, the minute I started thinking about ghosts and haunted houses, all kinds of things turned up to enforce my intentions, or perhaps I was thinking so entirely about my new book that everything I saw turned to it; I can't say, although I *can* say that I could do without some of the manifestations I have met. The first thing that happened was in New York City; we—my husband and I—were on the train which stops briefly at the 125th Street station, and just outside the station, dim and horrible in the dusk, I saw a building so disagreeable that I could not stop looking at it; it was tall and black and as I looked at it when the train began to move again it faded away and disappeared. That night in our hotel room I woke up with nightmares, the kind where you have to get up and turn on the light and walk around for a few minutes just to make sure that there is a real world and this one is it, not the one you have been dreaming about; my nightmares had somehow settled around the building I had seen from the train. From that time on I completely ruined my whole vacation in New York City by dreading the moment when we would have to take the train back and pass that building again. Let me just point out right here and now that my unconscious mind has *been* unconscious for a number of years now and it is my firm intention to keep it that way. When I have nightmares about a horrid building it is the horrid building I am having nightmares about, and no one is going to talk me out of it; that is final. Anyway, my nervousness was so extreme, finally, that we changed our plans and took a night train home, so that I would not be able to see the building when we went past, but even after we were home it bothered me still, coloring all my recollections of a pleasant visit to the city, and at last I wrote to a friend at Columbia University and asked him to locate the building and find out, if he could, why it looked so terrifying. When we got his answer I had one important item for my book. He wrote that he had had trouble finding the building, since it only existed from that one particular point of the

125th Street station; from any other angle it was not recognizable as a building at all. Some seven months before it had been almost entirely burned in a disastrous fire which killed nine people. What was left of the building, from the other three sides, was a shell. The children in the neighborhood knew that it was haunted.

I do not think that the Society for Psychic Research would accept me as a qualified observer; I think, in fact, that they would bounce me right out the door, but it seemed clear to me that what I had felt about that horrid building was an excellent beginning for learning how people feel when they encounter the supernatural. I have always been interested in witchcraft and superstition, but have never had much traffic with ghosts, so I began asking people everywhere what they thought about such things, and I began to find out that there was one common factor—most people have never seen a ghost, and never want or expect to, but almost everyone will admit that sometimes they have a sneaking feeling that they just possibly *could* meet a ghost if they weren't careful—if they were to turn a corner too suddenly, perhaps, or open their eyes too soon when they wake up at night, or go into a dark room without hesitating first. . . .

Well, as I say, fiction comes from experience. I had not the remotest desire to see a ghost. I was absolutely willing to go on the rest of my life without ever seeing even the slightest supernatural manifestation. I wanted to write a book about ghosts, but I was perfectly prepared—I cannot emphasize this too strongly—I was perfectly prepared to keep those ghosts wholly imaginary. I was already doing a lot of splendid research reading all the books about ghosts I could get hold of, and particularly true ghost stories—so much so that it became necessary for me to read a chapter of *Little Women* every night before I turned out the light—and at the same time I was collecting pictures of houses, particularly odd houses, to see what I could find to make into a suitable haunted house. I read books of architecture and clipped pictures out of magazines and newspapers and learned about cornices and secret stairways and valances and turrets and flying buttresses and gargoyles and all kinds of things that people have done to inoffensive houses, and then I came across a picture in a magazine which really looked right. It was the picture of a house which reminded me vividly of the hideous building in New York; it had the same air of disease and decay, and if ever a house looked like a candidate for a ghost, it was this one.

All that I had to identify it was the name of a California town, so I wrote to my mother, who has lived in California all her life, and sent her the picture, asking if she had any idea where I could get information about this ugly house. She wrote back in some surprise. Yes, she knew about the house, although she had not supposed that there were any pictures of it still around. My great-grandfather built it. It had stood empty and deserted for some years before it finally caught fire, and it was generally believed that that was because the people of the town got together one night and burned it down.

By then it was abundantly clear to me that I had no choice; the ghosts were after me. In case I *had* any doubts, however, I came downstairs a few mornings later and found a sheet of copy paper moved to the center of my desk, set neatly away from the general clutter. On the sheet of paper was written DEAD DEAD in my own handwriting. I am accustomed to making notes for books, but not in my sleep; I decided that I had better write the book awake, which I got to work and did.

It is much easier, I find, to write a story than to cope competently with the millions of daily trials and irritations that turn up in an ordinary house, and it helps a good deal—particularly with children around—if you can see them through a flattering veil of fiction. It has always been a comfort to me to make stories out of things that happen, things like moving, and kittens, and Christmas concerts at the grade school, and broken bicycles; it is easier, as Sally said, to magic the refrigerator than it is to wrench at the door. And it is certainly easier to sit there taking notes while everyone else is running around packing the suitcases and giving last-minute instructions to the moving men. I remember that once the income-tax people were making one of their spot checks in our locality, and, to our intense dismay, one of the spots they decided to check was us. Nothing can protect you at a time like that; no matter how conscientious you have been about your income tax, guilt overwhelms you when that man walks in. He was only at our house for about an hour, and all the time he was in the study with my husband, studying canceled checks and mortgage receipts, and I could hear my husband yelling "Depreciation, depreciation," I was in the dining room with my typewriter, defending myself. I had started to compose an impassioned letter to the United States Government about unjustifiable tyranny over honest law-abiding citizens, but I could not resist a few words of description of the way our family had re-

ceived the news that the man was coming, and by the time the conference in the study was over I was well along in a story about a quietly lunatic tax investigation—and guess who was going to be the villain. When the income-tax man was ready to leave he came through the dining room with my husband and stopped to say, oh yes; he gathered that I was a writer. Say, he went on, he had often wondered—where did writing people get the ideas for the stuff they wrote? Huh? He picked up one page of my manuscript and I barely got it away from him in time. I really don't know what would have happened to our tax returns if he had read it.

I would like, if I may, to finish with a story which is the most direct translation of experience into fiction that I have ever done. For one thing, I had a high fever the whole time I was writing it. For another thing, I was interrupted constantly with requests to take upstairs trays of orange juice or chicken soup or aspirin or ginger ale or dry sheets or boxes of crayons. For another thing, while I was writing it, my husband was lying on the couch with a hot-water bottle saying that writing stories was all very well, but suppose he died right then and there—was there anyone to care? I may even have whined a little myself, carrying trays and getting hotter hot-water bottles and telling everyone that they were just pretty lucky that they had me at least, to wait on them and take care of them in spite of the fact that I was every bit as sick as they were, and only the purest spirit of self-sacrifice kept me going at all, and they should be grateful. Actually, my husband and two of our children had the grippe, and I was only just catching it; only the fact that I had to finish the story kept me from abandoning them and going someplace quiet to lie down. We had only three children then, by the way—we didn't know when we were well off—and the one referred to variously as Sally, or Baby, is now of an age to read, and repudiate, an accurate accounting of her own behavior. The story was published as "The Night We All Had Grippe," and I got a letter about it from a lady in Indiana. I would like to make a little extra money writing, she wrote to me in this letter. Tell me, where do you get ideas for stories? I can never make up anything good.

[1958]



The Night We All Had Grippe



We are all of us, in our family, very fond of puzzles. I do Double-Crostics and read mystery stories, my husband does baseball box scores and figures out batting averages, our son Laurie is addicted to the kind of puzzle which begins, "There are fifty-four items in this picture beginning with the letter C," our older daughter Jannie does children's jigsaws, and Sally, the baby, can put together an intricate little arrangement of rings and bars which has had the rest of us stopped for two months. We are none of us, however, capable of solving the puzzles we work up for ourselves in the oddly diffuse patterns of our several lives (who is, now I think of it?); and along with such family brain-teasers as, "Why is there a pair of roller skates in Mommy's desk?" and, "What is *really* in the back of Laurie's closet?" and, "Why doesn't Daddy wear the nice shirts Jannie picked out for Father's Day?" we are all of us still wondering nervously about what might be called The Great Grippe Mystery. As a matter of fact, I should be extremely grateful if anyone could solve it for us, because we are certainly very short of blankets, and it's annoying not to have *any* kind of answer. Here, in rough outline, is our puzzle:

Our house is large, and the second floor has four bedrooms and a bathroom, all opening out onto a long narrow hall which we have made even narrower by lining it with bookcases so that every inch of hall which is not doorway is books. As is the case with most houses, both the front door and the back door are downstairs on the first floor. The front bedroom, which is my

Shirley Jackson

Shirley Jackson - Come Along w/ Me



Notes for a Young Writer



These are some notes, not necessarily complete, on the writing of short stories; they were originally written as a stimulus to my daughter Sally, who wants to be a writer.

In the country of the story the writer is king. He makes all the rules, with only the reservation that he must not ask more than a reader can reasonably grant. Remember, the reader is a very tough customer indeed, stubborn, dragging his feet, easily irritated. He will willingly agree to suspend disbelief for a time: he will go along with you if it is necessary for your story that you both assume temporarily that there really is a Land of Oz, but he will not suspend reason, he will not agree, for any story ever written, that he can see the Land of Oz from his window. As a matter of fact, you would do well to picture your typical reader as someone lying in a hammock on a soft summer day, with children playing loudly near by, a television set and a radio both going at once, a sound truck blaring past in the street, birds singing and dogs barking; this fellow has a cool drink and a pillow for his head, and all you have to do with your story is catch his attention and hold it. Remember, your story is an uneasy bargain with your reader. Your end of the bargain is to play fair, and keep him interested, his end of the bargain is to keep reading. It is just terribly terribly easy to put a story down half-read and go off and do something else. Nevertheless, for as long as the story does go on you are the boss. You have the right to assume that the reader will accept the story on your own terms. You have the right to assume that the reader, however lazy, will exert some small intelligence while he is reading. Suppose you are writing a

story about a castle. You do not need to describe every tower, every man at arms, every stone; your reader must bring his own complement of men at arms and towers; you need only describe one gardener to imply that the castle is well stocked with servants. In your stories, then, set your own landscape with its own horizons, put your characters in where you think they belong, and move them as you please.

Your story must have a surface tension, which can be considerably stretched but not shattered; you cannot break your story into pieces with jagged odds and ends that do not belong. You cannot begin a story in one time and place, say, and then intrude a major flashback or a little sermon or a shift in emphasis to another scene or another character, without seriously marring the story, and turning the reader dizzy with trying to keep up. Consider simple movement from one place to another; if some movement is necessary and inevitable—as of course it is in most stories—then let the reader come along with you; do not jolt him abruptly from one place to another; in other words, let your story move as naturally and easily as possible, without side trips into unnecessary spots of beauty. Suppose you are writing a story about a boy and a girl meeting on a corner; your reader wants to go to that very corner and listen in; if, instead, you start your boy and girl toward the corner and then go off into a long description of the streetcar tracks and a little discussion of the background of these two characters and perhaps a paragraph or so about the town improvement which is going to remove the streetcar tracks they are crossing, and the girl's father's long-time aversion to any form of wheeled traffic—you will lose your reader and your story will fall apart. Always, always, make the duller parts of your story work *for* you; the necessary passage of time, the necessary movement must not stop the story dead, but must push it forward.

Avoid small graceless movements. As much as possible free yourself from useless and clumsy statements about action. "They got in the car and drove home" is surely too much ground to cover in one short simple sentence; assuming that your characters did get into the car and did have to drive home, you have just the same wasted a point where your action might work for your story; let the process of their getting home be an unobtrusive factor in another, more important action: "On their way home in the car they saw that the boy and the girl were still standing talking earnestly on the corner." Let each such poten-

tially awkward spot contribute to your total action. In almost every story you will face some unwanted element, something your characters *have* to do to keep the story going at all; people have to get from one place to another, or get dressed, or eat their dinners, before the story can continue; try always to make these actions positive. For instance: "She dealt the cards; her fingers clung to each card as though unwilling to let go of anything they had once touched," or, "During all of dinner the singing went on upstairs, and no one said a word." (I would like to see someone write that story.) Or, "It was only one block to walk, so she counted her footsteps anxiously." Does your unfortunate heroine have to do the dishes before she can go out and meet her hero in the rose garden? "She washed and dried the dishes with extreme care, wondering all the time if she dared to smash a cup against the wall."

All of this has applied to necessary but essentially uninteresting action. The same thing is true of description and some conversation; certainly in every story there comes a time when you have to give in and let your reader know what something looks like, or that your hero and heroine said good-morning-how-are-you-today-isn't-the-weather-lovely-how's-your-mother before they got on to the most important business of the story, or to the rose garden. Try to remember with description that you must never just let it lie there; nothing in your story should ever be static unless you have a very good reason indeed for keeping your reader still; the essence of the story is motion. Do not let your chair be "a straight chair, with no arms and a hard wooden seat." Let your heroine go over and take a firm hold of the back of a straight wooden chair, because at the moment it is stronger than she. Naturally it is assumed that you are not going to try to describe anything you don't need to describe. If it is a sunny day let the sun make a pattern through the fence rail; if you don't care what the weather is don't bother your reader with it. Inanimate objects are best described in use or motion: "Because his cigarette lighter was platinum he had taken to smoking far too much." "The battered chimney seemed eager to hurl down bricks on anyone passing." Also, if your heroine's hair is golden, call it yellow.

Conversation is clearly one of the most difficult parts of the story. It is not enough to let your characters talk as people usually talk because the way people usually talk is extremely dull. Your characters are not going to stammer, or fumble for words,

or forget what they are saying, or stop to clear their throats, at least not unless you want them to. Your problem is to make your characters sound as though they were real people talking (or, more accurately, that this is "real" conversation being read by a reader; look at some written conversation that seems perfectly smooth and plausible and natural on the page, and then try reading it aloud; what looks right on the page frequently sounds very literary indeed when read aloud; remember that you are writing to be read silently). Now the sounds and cadences of spoken speech are perfectly familiar to you; you have been talking and listening all your life. You know, for instance that most people speak in short sentences, tending to overuse certain words. You know that whenever anyone gets the floor and a chance to tell a story or describe an incident he will almost always speak in a series of short sentences joined by "and"; this is of course a device to insure that his audience will have no chance to break in before he has finished his story. You know that in a conversation people do say the same things over and over; there is very little economy in spoken speech. There is a great deal of economy in written speech. Your characters will use short sentences, and will tell long stories only under exceptional circumstances, and even then only in the most carefully stylized and rhythmic language; nothing can dissolve a short story quite so effectively as some bore who takes up the middle of it with a long account of something that amuses him and no one else. A bore is a bore, on the page or off it.

Listen always to people talking. Listen to patterns of talking. Listen to patterns of thinking displayed in talking. Think about this: if a husband comes home at night and says to his wife, "What do you think happened to me? When I got onto the bus tonight I sat down next to a girl and when the conductor came along he had a live penguin riding on his head, a live penguin, can you imagine? And when I looked at it, it turned out it was a talking penguin and it said 'Tickets, please,' and there was this guy across the aisle and you really won't believe this but it turned out *he* had a parrot in his pocket and the parrot put out his head and he and the penguin got to talking and I never heard anything like it in my life," don't you know that after the husband has said all this his wife is going to say, "What did the girl look like?" Your characters will make their remarks only once unless there is a good reason for repeating them; people hear better in stories than in real life. Your characters will start all

their conversations in the middle unless you have a very good reason for their telling each other good morning and how are you. Remember the importance of the pattern, as important on paper as in real life; a character who says habitually, with one of those silly little laughs, "Well, that's the story of my life," is not ever going to turn around and say, with a silly little laugh, "Well, that's my life story."

Now look at this device: "I hate fresh asparagus," she said to her kitchen clock, and found herself saying it again ten minutes later to Mrs. Butler in the grocery; "I hate fresh asparagus," she said, "it always takes so long to cook." You are, at this moment, well into a conversation with Mrs. Butler; your reader, being a common-sense type, no doubt assumes that before the remark about asparagus your heroine and Mrs. Butler said good morning my aren't you out early and isn't that a charming hat. Your reader may also assume, if he is perceptive, that your heroine in some fashion turned away from her kitchen clock, got her hat and coat on, picked up her pocketbook, forgot her shopping list, and in some fashion either walked or drove or bicycled to the store. She is there, she is in the middle of a conversation with Mrs. Butler; not ten words ago she was at home talking to the clock. The transition has been relatively painless; your reader has been required to read only one sentence and get around one semicolon, and the asparagus remark has been repeated simply to tie together the two halves of the sentence.

Your characters in the story, surely, are going to be separate and widely differing people, even though they are not necessarily described to the reader. You yourself have some idea of what they are like and how they differ; there is, for instance, in almost everyone's mind, an essential difference between the hero and the heroine. They don't look alike, even if you are the only one who knows it; your reader will assume it; after all, he has seen people before. They don't dress alike, they don't sound alike. They have small individualities of speech, arising naturally out of their actions and their personalities and their work in the story. Suppose you are using three little girls talking together; you could distinguish them by saying that one wore a blue dress, the second had curly hair, and the third was on roller skates, but wouldn't it be simply better writing to identify them by their positions in the group of three; that is, making their actions and their conversations more meaningful because the girls are related to one another at once? They form a hierarchy: first there is

a leader who does most of the talking, makes the plans, and provokes the action. The second must be subordinate, but not too much so; she does not initiate, but by following the leader encourages the leader into further action; she will disagree and perhaps even rebel up to a point. The third is of course the tag-along, the one left out when three is a crowd, and her actions and conversation are echoing and imitative of the other two, particularly the leader. The third character will throw her support to whichever of the other two seems stronger at the moment, and can thus, although a very minor character indeed, bring force to bear and influence action. Once three such characters are determined, the entire course of their conversation, no matter how trivial it might be in the story, is predetermined and strong. Once again: people in stories tend to talk in patterns. If your heroine is prepared to be so violent about fresh asparagus it would be reasonable to suppose that her conversation and opinions would generally be a little more emphatic than another character's. She would "adore that silly hat," for instance, or "die if that noise doesn't stop." She will carry out this positive manner in her actions; she will put out a cigarette, for instance, with forceful little poundings, she will set the table carelessly and noisily, but quickly, there will be no nonsense about her likes and dislikes. You might oppose to her a character who is uncertain, who lets cigarettes burn out in the ash tray, who rarely finishes a sentence or who will substitute a phrase like "you know" for a finished thought: "I usually carry an umbrella but sometimes . . . you know." "I guess it's time I left. I guess you're pretty busy?" Your character, remember, must not talk one way and act another, and can only outrage this consistency for a reason; a character who breaks out of a pattern is shocking and generally insane.

Use all your seasoning sparingly. Do not worry about making your characters shout, intone, exclaim, remark, shriek, reason, holler, or any such thing, unless they are doing it for a reason. All remarks can be *said*. Every time you use a fancy word your reader is going to turn his head to look at it going by and sometimes he may not turn his head back again. My own name for this kind of overexcited talking is the-other-responded. As in this example: "Then I'm for a swim," cried Jack, a gallant flush mantling his cheek. "And I am with you!" the other responded.

Your coloring words, particularly adjectives and adverbs, must be used where they will do the most good. Not every action

needs a qualifying adverb, not every object needs a qualifying adjective. Your reader probably has a perfectly serviceable mental picture of a lion; when a lion comes into your story you need not burden him with adjectives unless it is necessary, for instance, to point out that he is a green lion, something of which your reader might not have a very vivid mental picture.

Use all the tools at your disposal. The language is infinitely flexible, and your use of it should be completely deliberate. Never forget the grotesque effect of the absolutely wrong words: "He swept her into his arms; 'I will always love you,' he giggled." "Top the finished cake with a smear of whipped cream." "I am not afraid of anything in the world," he said thinly."

Remember, too, that words on a page have several dimensions: they are seen, they are partially heard, particularly if they seem to suggest a sound, and they have a kind of tangible quality—think of the depressing sight of a whole great paragraph ahead of you, solidly black with huge heavy-sounding words. Moreover, some words seem soft and some hard, some liquid, some warm, some cold; your reader will respond to "soft laughter" but not to "striped laughter"; he will respond more readily to "soft laughter" than to "sweet laughter," because he can hear it more easily. There are also words like "itchy" and "greasy" and "smelly" and "scratchy" that evoke an almost physical response in the reader; use these only if you need them. Exclamation points, italics, capitals, and, most particularly, dialect, should all be used with extreme caution. Consider them as like garlic, and use them accordingly.

Do not try to puzzle your reader unnecessarily; a puzzled reader is an antagonistic reader. Do not expect him to guess why a character does something or how it happens that some remark is made; it may be that you want him to stop and wonder for a minute; if so, make it perfectly clear that everything is going to be all right later on. If you want the reader to be troubled by a nagging question, and go through a part of your story with a kind of expectancy, let one of your characters do something outrageous—turn, perhaps, and throw an apple core through an open window. But then be sure that before your story is finished you explain in some manner that inside the open window lives the character's great-uncle, who keeps a monkey who devours apple cores and catches them on the fly as they come through the window. The reader brings with him a great body of knowledge which you may assume, but he must rely on you for all

information necessary to the understanding of this story which, after all, you have written.

Someone—I forget who—once referred to the easier sections of his work as "benches for the reader to sit down upon," meaning, of course, that the poor reader who had struggled through the complex maze of ideas for several pages could rest gratefully at last on a simple clear paragraph. Provide *your* reader with such assistance. If you would like him to rest for a minute so you can sneak up behind him and sandbag him, let him have a little peaceful description, or perhaps a little something funny to smile over, or a little moment of superiority. If you want him to stop dead and think, do something that will make him stop dead; use a wholly inappropriate word, or a startling phrase—"pretty as a skunk"—or an odd juxtaposition: "Her hair was curly and red and she had great big feet," or something that will make him think back: "Fresh asparagus is most significant symbolically." Give him something to worry about: "Although the bank had stood on that corner for fifty years it had never been robbed." Or something to figure out: "If John had not had all that tooth trouble there would never have been any question about the rabbits." In all this, though, don't let the reader stop for more than a second or he might get away. Catch him fast with your next sentence and send him reeling along.

And if you want your reader to go faster and faster make your writing go faster and faster. "The room was dark. The windows were shaded, the furniture invisible. The door was shut and yet from somewhere, some small hidden precious casket of light buried deep in the darkness of the room, a spark came, moving in mad colored circles up and down, around and in and out and over and under and lighting everything it saw." (Those adjectives are unspeakable in every sense of the word, and wholly unnecessary; this is an example, not a model.) If you want your reader to go slower and slower make your writing go slower and slower: "After a wild rush of water and noise the fountain was at last turned off and the water was gone. Only one drop hung poised and then fell, and fell with a small musical touch. Now, it rang. Now."

Now I want to say something about words artificially weighted; you can, and frequently must, make a word carry several meanings or messages in your story if you use the word right. This is a kind of shorthand. I once had occasion to send a heroine on a long journey during which she expressed her loneli-

ness and lack of a home by imagining dream lives in various places she passed; this daydream is climaxed when at lunch she hears a little girl at a near by table ask for her milk in a cup of stars; the lonely girl thinks that what she too is asking for is a cup of stars, and when she finally finds her home she will drink from a cup of stars. Later, when other characters are talking of their own comfort and security the lonely girl announces proudly that *she* has a cup of stars; this is by then not only recognizable as an outright lie, but a pathetic attempt to pretend that she is neither lonely nor defenseless. "Cup of stars" has become a shorthand phrase for all her daydreams. Notice, however, that once such a word or phrase has been given a weighting you cannot afford to use the word or phrase *without* the weighting; my lonely girl cannot refer idly to cups of stars anywhere else, because those words are carrying an extra meaning which must not be dissipated.

If you announce early in your story that your lady with the aversion to asparagus is wearing a diamond-and-ruby wrist watch your reader will be intrigued: here is a detail apparently not essential to the story and yet you thought it worthwhile to put it in; the reader will be watching to see what you are going to do with it. If you then turn up another character who is wearing a solid-gold wrist watch your reader will begin to wonder whether you are just queer for watches or whether this is going to amount to something in the story. You must satisfy his curiosity. If you then remark that the diamond-and-ruby wrist watch was a gift from an old boy friend of the lady's, the watch is then carrying something extra, and when at the end of the story she throws the watch at her husband's head she is throwing her old boy friend too. The reader is also going to have to know who gave the other fellow the solid-gold wrist watch and whose head *that* one is going to hit; nothing can be left suspended in mid-air, abandoned. If you start your story on a small boy going home to pick up his football so he can get into the game in the corner lot, and then let him fall into one adventure after another until the end of the story, your reader is going to come out of that story fighting mad unless he is told whether or not the boy got his football and whether he ever got back to the game.

Now about this business of the beginning implying the ending, something which all the textbooks insist upon. You will actually find that if you keep your story tight, with no swerving from the proper path, it will curl up quite naturally at the end,

provided you stop when you have finished what you have to say. One device, of course, is beginning and ending on what is essentially the same image, so that a story beginning, say, "It was a beautiful sunny day," might end, "The sun continued to beat down on the empty street." This is not a bad policy, although it can be limiting. There is no question but that the taut stretched quality of the good short story is pulled even tighter by such a construction. You can tie your story together, however, with similar devices—how about a story which opens on a lady feeding her cat, and ends on a family sitting down to dinner? Or a story which opens on your heroine crying and closes on her laughing? The beginning and ending should of course belong together; the ending must be implicit in the beginning, although there have been stories which were defeated because the author thought of a wonderful last line and then tried to write a story to go with it; this is not wrong, just almost impossible. I am not going to try to tell you how to set up a plot. Just remember that primarily, in the story and out of it, you are living in a world of people. A story must have characters in it; work with concrete rather than abstract nouns, and always dress your ideas immediately. Suppose you want to write a story about what you might vaguely think of as "magic." You will be hopelessly lost, wandering around formlessly in notions of magic and incantations; you will never make any forward progress at all until you turn your idea, "magic," into a person, someone who wants to do or make or change or act in some way. Once you have your first character you will of course need another to put into opposition, a person in some sense "anti-magic"; when both are working at their separate intentions, dragging in other characters as needed, you are well into your story. All you have to do then is write it, paying attention, please, to grammar and punctuation.

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