

Midnight on Cherry Street

Sweat-soaked sheets and
an open window. Seals bark lustily.
With clock-like precision
Mr. Sigler scuffs out onto the sidewalk.
He coughs and turns his head
to no one in particular
and shouts:
Goddamn Sonofabitch.
Goddamn Sonofabitch.
Goddamn Post Office.
Goddamn Post Office.
Goddamn Bastards.
He gets this way sometimes
when it's hot
and the air is still.

Fiction Workshop

The story you have in your hands is like many works of fiction in that it contains references to the “real” world. But as you will see, I’m not writing about *any* real world, I’m writing about *your* world. This story is about you, the eleven students who have received this draft to review for our workshop next Tuesday, and your stories. Our class, ENGL 565 (Seminar in Short Fiction Writing), meets every Tuesday night at 7 PM in Franklin Hall, Room 401, Evergreen State University (ESU). ESU, sometimes pronounced Eee Soo, is located in Evergreen Terrace, an unremarkable municipality on the fringes of one of our nation’s principal conurbations. But why is it necessary to describe ESU or Evergreen Terrace given that we are all quite familiar with them? Do we tell a spouse or close friend, “I drove my beat-up blue car to work this morning?” No, we do not, because that person is well familiar with what kind of car we drive. My exposition here, however, is not gratuitous in this sense as this story is not only for your consumption, fellow students and Professor Gary Pilsner; ultimately I hope that it will travel beyond the bounds of ENGL 565 (a three-credit course offered in alternate semesters) where neither ESU nor Evergreen Terrace are familiar to the general reader.

I am the fifth person to distribute a story this semester. A woman in her early thirties with red hair, whose name I have forgotten, was the first. She brought her story, concealed in a blue binder with a whale on the front, to the first class. When Gary asked if there was anyone who would like to hand something out next week, she quickly raised her hand, “Actually, I have a piece with me tonight; I figured I’d bring it just in case.” At the break the woman went and photocopied the story. I think most of us were slightly annoyed; I know I was. Bringing a story to the first class! And then, cynically, I thought, oh you clever goose, you’re just recycling something you’ve done before: you’ll pass the story out, get comments the following week, and then do nothing the rest of the semester, all the while collecting brownie points for having been “brave” and gone first.

Gary, or perhaps I should say Professor Pilsner, at first seemed confused by this bold initiative on the part of the red-haired woman. He prefers “Professor Pilsner” to “Gary,” but believes calling him “Professor” might seem undemocratic or distant. This, of course, is just my impression; I don’t actually know what he is thinking. It does seem, however, that when you “Gary” him right off the bat he looks vaguely perturbed. What he really likes is when you call him “Professor Pilsner” and he can

then correct you and say "Gary," as if he is bestowing a great honor upon you. Regardless, when the red-haired woman took the story from the inside flap of the whale binder, he said, "Great, this is what I like to see." I'm sure he suspected she was trotting out something already workshopped in a previous class, but I don't think he cares. He's like a teacher I once had in high school who said cheating didn't bother him as at least it showed some initiative.

Classmates, you are, of course, entitled to comment on this manuscript; in fact, it is a course requirement that you not only submit your own writing, but also critique the work of others. As such, you may insert commas where they are missing (in fact such help would be welcomed) and can place a ? next to sentences that confuse you. If a paragraph seems awkward, or a part of the piece underdeveloped, I ask that you please let me know. I will take your comments under advisement and do appreciate them. I anticipate, however, that there will be criticisms that address more than matters of word choice, style or structure, and that some of you may take personal offense at what I have written, particularly given that this "story" mentions individuals in this class by name. What then? Well, let me provide this caveat: I am presenting this text as a work of fiction and you are duty-bound to treat it as such. You should ask yourself "How is this working as a story?" rather than, "How is this working as reality?" because it's not real. Naturally, I expect that some of you may respond, hold on a minute, how can you identify us (as you have already done with Professor Pilsner and the red-haired woman), make personal judgements about us, trash our writing (this is coming) and then say that we are allowed only to comment upon the story's effectiveness *qua* literature, as if this could be divorced from its content. Isn't the "hook" of the piece, after all, that you are writing about real people (us) in a very direct way that can't help but cause bad feelings? Given this gambit, isn't it a bit disingenuous to say, well, set all that personal stuff aside for the moment and just focus on the "story"? Well, yes, I admit this is a bit of sophistry on my part; regardless, I think you will get more out of this piece if you at least make the attempt to get beyond any immediate visceral reactions and consider this story as an exploration of that peculiar forum, the creative writing workshop, as well as an investigation into the nature of writing and the standards we employ to judge it.

That first class meeting was the last we saw of the red-haired woman with the binder that had a whale upon it. Where she came from, and where she vanished to, I have no idea; what our campus lacks in academic distinction, it compensates for in vast size. We learned of her disappearance at the beginning of our second meeting when Gary was telling

Lance that it was impossible to add anyone as the class was full. He was being a little nasty about it when Lance, too polite at first to interrupt, finally said that he had added the class through ETR (Evergreen Telephone Registration), which meant that someone had dropped. Since everyone else was present except for the woman with the red hair, it was obvious what had happened. Lance sat in the red-haired woman's chair at the end of the seminar table. Gary looked at him accusingly, as if it were somehow Lance's fault that the woman was gone, like Lance had had her killed so that he could have her spot. Lance truly occupies a seat; the sheer volume of the man is incredible. He is probably six feet six or seven and must weigh close to three hundred pounds. It's difficult to say exactly. It's like extremes in temperature: over one hundred or below zero and the numbers begin to seem less and less real. I do know that when I looked at his hand while he was getting a coffee from the machine downstairs, it resembled the paw of a bear that had tragically lost its fur. In fiction when someone is this big, one of two things follows: either the character will be menacing and threatening, or their size will in a sense be "ironic" and the character will be gentle, perhaps even like a "teddy bear." But Lance doesn't seem to be either of these. He is just too mild mannered to be menacing; on the other hand, I have never seen him crying, helping old women with their groceries or rescuing injured birds.

Since the red-haired woman, the author of the story, had literally disappeared, we shuffled our papers and made small talk for about ten minutes while trying to figure out what to do. I'm sure that Gary was tempted to dismiss us, but just as people were starting to get restless, he hit upon the idea that we discuss projects we were working on. I used to be intimidated by this type of talk as it always seems to me that everyone else is hyper-industrious, inspired and talented, forever churning out minor masterpieces, in contrast to my puny and pale literary offerings. You know how it is: one person is translating a collection of poetry she has written into Italian and plans further to adapt it into a one-act play, another claims he is working on a quartet of novels based on the letters and diaries of W.B. Yeats, a third is putting the finishing touches on a novel based on her experiences as a boat person in the Pacific (Part One), and opera singer in Boston (Part Two). Pronouncements such as these do tend to diminish one's own shallow efforts, cause one to think, *crap, I'm in big trouble, all I've got going is a story with a lousy ending about a lifeguard who is, ironically, a poor swimmer*. But this was before I learned that the gap between the real and the ideal is immense: the poems in the "collection" number no more than three, the quartet of novels consists so far of a three-page prologue, and the Boat Person doesn't much like writing, truth

be told. Furthermore, just because someone has completed a novel or a forty-page prose poem, doesn't mean that it is any good. And you really never know until you read the work: a person can be very sharp and an astute critic of other people's stuff, but be the most god awful writer him or herself.

A case in point is Alvin, who told us about his novel in progress involving Portuguese sailors, the CIA, Federico Garcia Lorca, Nietzsche and skateboarding. I'm sure we're all supposed to think, How wild! How did he tie all those together? What an imagination! What talent! But knowing Alvin as I do, I'm willing to bet that *Friedrich's Half Pipe* (his working title) is a pretentious, self-important, boring enterprise of great interest to him but not the reader. And, naturally, if people don't like it, he will assume that they don't "get it" and can't warm to what he believes are his avant-garde stylings, but what I think more accurately are self-indulgent doodlings designed to demonstrate how cool and smart he is. Anyway, enough with Alvin. When it was my turn to share, I only half-lied and said I was working on a collection of short stories linked by their water imagery. You all seemed suitably impressed; perhaps I successfully pulled the wool. Fortunately, I wasn't asked to elaborate on how many of these stories had actually been completed (two, with a third in progress) or if any had been published (none, although I did receive one rejection that had handwritten words of encouragement on it).

During this second class Gary tried to be a good sport about the red-haired woman's defection, but he wasn't happy. He's pretty much fed up with ESU and believes that his talents are being wasted but realizes that at age sixty, struggle is useless. I think he's probably lucky to be picking up checks at ESU at all; a lot of people would kill for his position, despite the grousing he does about it. Students are fascinated by Gary, not because he is any kind of dynamo in the classroom, but because he is a writer of minor celebrity and has a young wife. He scored a modest critical and commercial hit with his 1978 novel *Illuminated Stones*, wrote a screenplay for it in the mid 1980s, and apparently has been coasting ever since. I doubt anybody in class has actually read *Illuminated Stones*, or his other novel (a 1994 flop entitled *Off the Rails*) but that doesn't stop them from talking about them. And predictably, there are rumors that he is something of a drunk; and while it seems as if he would be (the usual: aging writer, bitter, creatively blocked, and so on), I don't know if he actually is.

While I haven't read his fiction, I have looked at a few of Gary's essays, and find that in them he comes off as a much warmer and more sensitive guy than my experience with him has been in person. I'm not sure what to make of this. Is he basically an asshole, and his writing is nothing more than a mask, a pretense? He could be using the oldest trick

in the book, putting on like he is a sensitive pained artist type, when in reality he is just a jerk. Or does the writing represent the more true, real him, and for whatever reason, shyness, or insecurity maybe, in person he comes off as arrogant? Perhaps writing liberates Gary and allows for his generous and compassionate side to come to the fore. I suppose it need not be an either/or question: maybe the Gary blubbering about his retarded brother in his essay "Who's Chosen," and the impatient guy at the head of the seminar table not shy about letting us know who the "real" writer in the room is, are both aspects of Gary Pilsner. Now if that's true, that doesn't mean that the "Compassionate Literary Gary" cancels out the "Arrogant Gary"; just because you write with sensitivity about the retarded, doesn't mean that it's ok to cut non-retarded people off when they are speaking, or savagely criticize a colleague in front of a group of students, as Gary sometimes does.

Regardless of how one resolves the sensitive guy/asshole binary, Gary generates an intense amount of gossip. There is a core group of about five students who go out for drinks after class, and if the time I accompanied them to the Red Hammer is a proper indication, Gary is all they talk about. I also gathered during the course of that evening that some of the women in class don't like Gary. Why? Well, because a) his wife is young and pretty, and b) this wife is his second. Kara, in particular, seems particularly exercised over Gary's domestic arrangements. I suppose she assumes that Gary left his first wife for a younger woman and this bothers her. I don't know how Gary's first marriage ended, but I find it odd that Kara somehow thinks it is her business.

But let's return to the ostensible *raison d'être* of ENGL 565, the writing. In our third meeting of the semester we workshopped Samantha's story. It was brutal. It was about a girl who was molested by her stepfather. And, of course, I thought, is this person you, Samantha? And if so, what am I going to say, that I don't think your story about being molested by your stepfather is believable? Not that I don't believe it in the literal sense—that I don't think it happened—but that I don't find the story believable. Now try that on for paradox. Nobody was going to ask if the story was autobiographical; that would, of course, be very bad form. I tend to believe that it was. The details—the stain on the stepfather's gray dress pants after he made the girl put her hand in his pocket and rub his penis, the pair of tennis shoes (why tennis shoes?) he bought her for being a "good girl" and keeping quiet—seemed too creepy not to be drawn from experience. The problem with the story was the language: it was clichéd, full of facile generalizations, overwrought, and showed the influence of made-for-television movies. The molester looked like "your average businessman," but there was "something odd about him." The mother

was "a typical Mom," the girl's teenage brother was "in his own world," and the girl's biological father had "packed up and left" when the narrator was three.

Is good fiction supposed to be like "real life"? Maybe, maybe not. Is good fiction supposed to make you think? Probably yes. But what if bad fiction makes you think? I wondered what Samantha's story would be like from the molester's point of view. From the molestee's POV, we've heard this sad story before, and of course, our sympathies are with the girl. But what about the molester? How would one write this story through his eyes? What is going through his mind? Does he feel guilt? How does he rationalize imposing himself on an eight-year-old? Or does he rationalize it? Does he loathe himself? Isn't he worried about getting caught? What does a perpetrator of sexual abuse think about his actions, himself, the world? Few writers would want to touch this material. Too much explanation of, say, the molester's childhood and such could make him sympathetic in a sense, and that likely wouldn't sit well with most people. Even worse, discussion of his actions could be leering and creepy, particularly if written by a man. But does this necessarily follow? Would a story written by a man from a molester's POV be intrinsically, *automatically* creepy, or would one just perceive it as such?

To return to Samantha's piece, the further difficulty with it was that she wasn't content to let it end in childhood. There was an odd coda in which the narrator was now an adult and a member of a women's group devoted to prosecuting sexual abusers. Everyone told her to remove this conclusion, but Samantha strongly disagreed. When Alvin started to get a little too insistent on this point, Samantha looked down at the table and began turning red. I have noticed that students in workshop settings are often reticent to criticize, yet sometimes once one person starts with a comment or suggestion, other class members will mercilessly pile on. And of course, this is painful for the writer as one tends to filter out generic positive comments, and hear only the "I thought the ending was clichéd," or the "principal character was underdeveloped" assessments. And while I certainly don't believe that there is much to be gained by having people sit around and provide each other insipid assurances about the magnificence of their stories, at a certain point criticism is no longer helpful. Perhaps in the workshop there should be some kind of sign to indicate a distressed student. It could be like in soccer, where the referee shows a red or yellow card to indicate a foul; instead, a notebook could be held aloft as signal: *student on the verge of tears, further comments unlikely to be helpful.*

Thankfully, we were spared Kara's thoughts on Samantha's story. Kara comments on the female characters in everyone's stories, and there

is absolutely no pleasing her. Either the female characters are not developed enough (they are "absent" in her parlance), or if they are present, then they are too stereotyped, or are cartoonishly anti-stereotyped, or are portrayed as victims or bitches. I have no idea what female character would be acceptable to her, but can tell you that no one in our class has produced one so far, women included. Kara's actually harder on the women than the men, although the men are in a particularly difficult spot because if they don't write strong female characters, then they are branded as sexist, and if they do, then they are under suspicion for "appropriating" women's voices. I suspect that the type of female characters that Kara actually likes closely resemble her and her friends, although we will see when she distributes a story of her own later this semester.

I give Kara points for not putting in her two cents about Samantha's story; she must really have hated it. It can't have been an easy story to write, or to have the class read, particularly if one assumes it was in fact drawn from real life. But should this enter into our evaluation of it? I don't know, but my reading of the story is somewhat dependent on whether or not it is "true." If the story was borrowed from TV movies of the week and expressed in their banal idiom, then it goes down in my estimation. But if it was autobiographical, yet clumsily expressed, then at least it has the sympathy and authenticity factors working in its favor. But how "authentic" is the story when I said that it didn't seem believable? And ultimately it is still a story, regardless of its provenance. What are we awarding points for? The life or the story? It is true that the combination of the tragic and the "true" has a particular hold on the reader, so perhaps we go easy on stories about sexual abuse or being a prisoner of war. On the other hand, the subject of the writing does matter: can one say that a memoir about being a POW and living in a bamboo cage for two years, or being raped by your stepfather, is "bad" in the same way that a story about "the touchdown pass" or "the first time I got high" is?

It is hard to bracket out what we know about the author when reading a story. Just last week Judy distributed a story. I love Judy. True, I don't really know her that well, but most weeks I talk to her both before class begins and during the break. When she mentions something in passing it goes right into my long-term memory: she likes potatoes, she thinks Star Trek is stupid, her cousin is an airline pilot. This will confirm my interest in her; I will not embarrass us all by recounting my erotic reveries. I almost didn't want her to distribute a story. What if it was terrible? She would then go down in my estimation. When she handed out her piece (seven pages, neatly stapled, smelling slightly of moisturizer it seemed), I thought, "Please don't let it be bad, please don't let it be bad." The story was about a zookeeper who reflects upon her family while tending to three

rhinos. It was not bad at all; in fact, it was insightful and beautifully written. But, of course, I can't be sure if my judgment is entirely objective; although if it was total crap, I think I would be able to spot that.

When it came time for comments, at first the class didn't say a great deal and usually that is not a good thing. I was hoping for Judy's sake that it would be well received. I weighed in first, "I think your choice of rhinos for an animal works well as their thick skin and unpleasant disposition are an interesting contrast to the openness and sensitivity of the narrator." I meant what I said, but the words sounded false and staged as they came from my mouth. Was I completely transparent? Did everyone know the feelings I held for Judy? Alvin, the know-it-all, said the use of zoo animals was "somewhat facile." Oh I see, Alvin, she lacks your gift for the sophomoric and pretentious (Nietzsche, Lorca, surfing) and is therefore facile. In the end, Judy's story got a mostly favorable response, particularly when it became apparent that Gary was quite keen on it. My thoughts while we discussed Judy's story in class were wildly irrational, absurd, really. First: "I have to say something," Second: "I just scored major points for praising her story," Third: "I hope she doesn't think I'm sucking up," and finally, "Oh no, her story is too good, she'll never be interested in a loser like me." The saga of the romantic crush: cunning strategy, followed by hope and exhilaration, culminating in doubt and self-loathing.

I was, of course, on edge during the class in which we reviewed Judy's story. I took the whole thing so personally; it all had such significance for me. I can't say that this was true the following week when Eve distributed her piece. I don't even know what to say about it. As soon as I saw that it was called "The Magic of the Cursed Encounter" (or was it "The Curse of the Magic Encounter?) and involved witches, gnomes, spells, talking trees and such, that was it for me. Was the story any good? I don't know. It's like being taken to a ball game if you're bored by baseball and don't know the rules. Even if it's a good game, you're unlikely to care. And would you even know what a good game was without someone telling you? I labored to fill up a page of comments—now that's creative writing—and said something about the story being both whimsical and sinister. And I corrected a bit of punctuation, which I think is helpful regardless. In fairness, Eve is trying to create a fictional universe, a magical take on "reality," and this is a worthwhile thing to attempt. I just don't want to know about gnomes, witches, or anything else having to do with the supernatural or magical. In general, the "fantasy" genre leaves me cold.

Bad writing seems pretty easy to identify, even specify. But what makes a story good? It's not subject matter, that's for sure. Some people

write hideously boring tracts about the most significant events, while others can turn waiting for a bus into a gripping narrative. Is good writing then a clever turn of phrase, an unusual metaphor, witty dialogue? Is that enough? What if these are overly self-conscious, or in the service of trivial, overused or blatantly racist or sexist subject matter? Very problematic, these aesthetic questions, and difficult to discuss abstractly. Ultimately, good writing is one of those elusive things that comes down to the old saw, "I know it when I see it."

I think I see it in Jeff's work. He is an exterminator by day and a creative writer by night. But he's not some intellectual slumming it, nor is his job as an exterminator a temporary one; he has been doing it for the last seven years. The story he distributed last week was, not surprisingly, about an exterminator. The narrator, "Mitch," traverses city and suburbs in a white van setting traps for rats, roaches and other pests. On one of his visits, he gets into a long conversation with a lonely woman. She keeps asking him back in spite of there being no more roaches in her apartment to kill. And he keeps going back even though they are both aware that all the bugs are dead, something which remains unspoken between them. The incidents in the back story, such as when Mitch clubs a rat over the head with a rake, or when he sweeps up an entire bucketful of roaches from a fancy restaurant, surely must have come from Jeff's own experience. The matter of fact tone in which they are related gives the story an immediate although understated quality. Maybe because the life of an exterminator has not been played out on the movie of the week, there is a vocabulary without cliché available to recount it. Jeff's piece, "The Roach Man," actually is "based on a true story," yet one which is rarely told and which seems much more "real" than Samantha's story about sexual abuse.

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Is the preceding a story? Does a story require a plot? What is the plot here? Were you to summarize the piece, you could say that this is a first person account in which the narrator writes what seems to be a journal reviewing the stories and personalities of his fellow writing workshop participants, occasionally musing about other matters as he does so. This journal masquerading as a story (or story masquerading as a journal) is to be distributed to his real life classmates, although the piece ends before this happens. I think the tension in the writing comes from anticipating how the students will react. The story would probably be less effective if it included narrative and dialogue from the class in which it was actually distributed, although that would present definite possibilities for moments of high drama and hilarity.

The non-ENGL 565 reader doesn't know how accurate the descriptions of Gary and the students in the class are, nor does he or she have Samantha, Judy, Eve or Jeff's work available in order to judge the narrator's skill as a critic. An interesting addition to this piece might be the attachment of these stories as an appendix. But this is jumping the gun; at this stage the "readers" are not some unspecified mass, but rather are you, Professor Gary Pilsner, and the students enrolled in ENGL 565 at ESU. What reactions can I expect when we discuss this story on Tuesday? What will you have to say about the Judy "character" when she is sitting right next to you? What will Judy herself have to say to me when we chat before class? Perhaps we won't be chatting before class anymore. Will Lance comment on the physical description that I have provided of him? Will he say, "For your information, I weigh 278 pounds, not 300"? Will someone approach Samantha before class and tell her they really like her work and that she's very brave and that I'm an asshole? Will Alvin sit sullenly and glare at me? And what will Gary say? If I were him, I might take control right away and say, "Look, I don't know if this is some kind of joke, but if we are going to discuss this thing, we should talk about the structure and concept rather than the narrative details." Now that I have suggested that he do this, he probably won't, however.

Have I been fair here? I think so. I may be wrong on some counts, but I've tried to be even-handed and can honestly say I have no particular agenda I am trying to advance, nor do I hold a grudge against anyone. I may have made some of you uncomfortable and angry, yet who could possibly be more uncomfortable next Tuesday than me? You can choose how you wish to respond to this piece, but I have to deal with your hostility, hurt feelings or even indifference. Am I now seeking points for my courage in writing this story? Maybe. Or is it simple spin and PR that I'm engaging in: anticipating criticism and addressing it beforehand, thereby blunting and even preempting it? Perhaps.

Denise Duhamel

I Dreamed I Was St. Francis in my Maidenform Bra

My earthly father told me that if I were giving up all my worldly possessions, I'd have to give my Maidenform Bra up as well. I reluctantly made a gesture to put it in the pile, then realized I could use my bra as a belt, instead of a rope, to close my robe. Not even the wolf sniffed my bra as he made peace by putting his paw in my palm. The birds listened to me preach in my Maidenform Bra, and if you look very closely at Giotto's fresco in the Upper Basilica, you may be able to make out my Maidenform sash. The Lord said, "Everything you have loved and desired in the flesh it is your duty to despise and hate, if you wish to know my will...." And though I loved my bra as a boy, I could not ever hate it as a man. I gave away my cloak to the destitute, but I could not part with my Maidenform Bra. I quenched the thirst of a poor man by making water gush from a rock in my Maidenform Bra. The Poor Clares knew about my Maidenform and said nothing, though sometimes at dinner they'd make little origami bras from the napkins on the table just to tease me. During the Fifth Crusade, I tried to convert the sultan of Egypt in my Maidenform Bra. When I freed a rabbit from a trap in my Maidenform Bra, it jumped on my lap. I was wearing my Maidenform Bra when I unhooked fish and threw them back in the water where they swam around the boat listening to me preach. The friars surrounded me as I levitated in prayer in my Maidenform Bra. I saw Christ in the form of a crucified seraph and received the stigmata in my Maidenform Bra. The sick prayed to me in my Maidenform Bra, and I often dispensed miraculous cures. Pope Gregory IX canonized me in my Maidenform Bra. And when I met the Lord in my Maidenform bra, He didn't even blink before giving me a spare set of keys to the Kingdom.