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Crafting characters: How to write characters from a beginning writer's perspective

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CRAFTING CHARACTERS: HOW TO WRITE CHARACTERS
FROM A BEGINNING WRITER'S PERSPECTIVE

A Thesis Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Designation
University Honors with Distinction

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The day I walked into my first fiction writing class at the University of Northern Iowa, I thought I knew what it took to be a successful writer. All I needed was a fancy ink pen, a leather-bound notebook, and some obscure coffee shop to induce my first bestselling novel. Then my professor, Vince Gotera, walked into the room and started stacking desk-chairs on top of each other, until they were a convoluted heap in the center of the room. He said, "Write me a story about these desks." My delusions did not last long.

I have developed as a writer by leaps and bounds since that first day of Beginning Fiction Writing. My thesis is based on my journey to understanding how to write stories through effective character development. My thesis is to serve as a tool for other beginning writers by providing advice for those difficult cases when ideas for character development are elusive. I will provide six basics of writing to build off of and some ways to improve the depiction of character through the element of sympathy. Learning about building strong characters allows for beginning writers taking their first creative writing courses (like I once was) to be able to improve the quality of their stories and find encouragement to keep on writing. Practice makes improvement. We will always need more good writers.

I will use examples from two of my short stories, "Maple Street" and "Sunday Mail," to explain certain elements that go into writing characters. I will also be using the craft books *Ron Carlson Writes a Story* by Ron Carlson, *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft* by Janet Burroway and Elizabeth Stuckey-French, *The Art of Fiction* by John Gardner, and *Burning Down the House* by Charles Baxter. Some of these are books were used as textbooks in my classrooms or are books recommended by my professors to serve as tools for writing my stories. This is the collection of the essential lessons I have learned during my college experience, from that overconfident freshman to the more experienced writer I am today. Combing the wisdom I

have absorbed from my professors and from books on the craft of fiction with my personal experiences, I can provide a unique and relatable perspective on writing to new writers. I have been where they are, sitting in the back of a Beginning Fiction Writing class wondering, “How do I do this?” Let me tell you.

What I think Dr. Gotera was trying to teach us that first day is that being a writer means taking what can be observed and trying to make sense of it. (I never asked him specifically what he meant by that writing exercise, but that is what I chose to take from it.) It illustrates how writers write their stories. We take a combination of our observations of the world around us, the experience of others we have heard of, and our personal experiences, unravel the heap, and turn those discoveries into the inner workings of our stories. I am choosing to focus on characters in short stories specifically because characters are essential to any story, and short stories are the building blocks of novels. There are many books on craft that provide explanations and advice on things such as plot, time, point-of-view, and other elements of fiction. Each provides helpful information on how to craft your stories, but characters are the most important element to first understand because characters are what we are ultimately writing about. We’re writing about people, about humanity, about ourselves.

The other elements are important because all aspects of writing fiction are connected, but start with some solid characters and most of the other pieces will fall into place. Characters are the people who live the story authors create. They are also what drive a story forward and give it a purpose. It would be very hard to write a story without anyone to live the story (even though I have read an almost successful attempt by one of my classmates, so do not be afraid to challenge me). There are an infinite number of characters that can be created because humans do not have limits on personality traits, emotions, or opinions. The choices authors make when building their

characters influence how the story will be perceived and what the audience will take away as the message of the story. First, I will break down the basic classifications of characters and how they can function within your stories. Then, I will go into the six basic tools I use to write successful characters and narrow in on the most basic tool of characterization, building sympathy.

I am sure you have heard of major and minor characters before (or else you might have been sleeping a little too much in your high school language arts class). It is the broadest way to define characters. Major, also called main, characters are who the story is based around and are why the story is being told. They give the story a purpose and are the most significant. Nina in “Maple Street” is an example of a main character. Her choice to lie on the street beside Bobby is why the story is being told. Main characters are the most important and complex characters in the story. The audience may not like them the most (it is not about like or dislike when it comes to significance), but they care the most about what happens to them because the story is based around their lives. The story could not exist without the main character.

Minor characters are just as essential as main characters because they help to move along the plot, but they are not the focal character of the story. Bobby is a minor character because he triggers events in the plot, but Nina’s choices are what the story is centered on. Minor characters are needed in most stories to help create conflict, serve as signifiers of setting, or draw out certain character traits or flaws of your main character. Each type (main and minor) serves a different purpose in a story, and how you choose to write about them will influence how your characters are understood by the audience.

I have read in many craft books where the idea of major and minor characters are compared to the idea of “round” and “flat” characters. The terms are connected, but they mean different things when describing characters. In their most straightforward form, flat characters

are built around a single quality or idea. The quality they are based around is usually exaggerated and completely defines who they are as a character. Since they revolve solely around one idea, flat characters can also be called types or caricatures. Real life people are not actually flat characters that can be defined by one concept (we are far more complex than that), but flat characters can produce an appealing story. They never change, so a story can be built around the abnormality or perverse nature of their existence.

One of my professors, Dr. Jeremy Schraffenberger, once explained the idea of round versus flat characters as being on a spectrum. I have found this to be true. Most characters in your story are not going to be defined by one character trait, but they might be defined by only two or three, which makes them almost flat (like a pancake) but not completely flat (like a piece of paper). There is usually a mix of both round and flat characters in one story. In these cases, the flat characters exist as sidekicks or supporting characters in the story. Since these types of characters are not the main focus of the plot and are minor characters, less is written about them, and their flatness can come from the author's choice to limit their character development. Burroway and Stuckey-French write, "This is not to say that all characters must be fully drawn or 'round.' Flat characters—who exist only to exhibit a function or a single characteristic—are useful and necessary" (144). The story is not based around their lives or their decisions; they exist solely to move the plot forward or to highlight your main characters. If every character in your story was fully drawn and described, then the reader would be overwhelmed and most likely bring your story down. That is not what any writer wants.

In "Maple Street," a long biography of Pam, the gas station employee, would not be necessary. The reader does not need to know why she works at the gas station, her favorite color, or even what she looks like. She serves as a way to bring out how things have changed since

Andrew died, and that is all she is needed for. The simplicity of a flat character's whole personality revolving around certain traits (such as the "stern" Pam) turns them into plot pushers. These characters give the plot more depth and keep your reader turning the pages. They can even serve as a nice contrast for your round main characters, making them a foil character. Whatever quality that your flat minor characters represent can bring out different aspects of your main characters' personalities, and they provide a way to help manipulate your audience's perception of your characters.

Round characters are more common in short stories and fiction in general than flat characters. They are used more often because they have the complexities of real people, and stories can be crafted completely around who they are. Round characters feel alive to us because they have their own faults, dreams, and desires; they are not defined by one trait like flat characters. They are the characters that could exist in real life. They do not necessarily have to be complicated, but they face a conflict and are affected by it in some way. The conflict they face does not always change them dramatically, but a story develops from their reaction or lack of reaction to the conflict and how strongly it influences them. This leads to another way of differentiating types of characters. The way characters react to conflict can define them as "static" or "dynamic" characters in stories.

Static characters do not change in the story. They stay the same from the beginning to the end. Most minor characters are static because they are only serving a certain purpose in the story. Dynamic characters change within the story. Their personality, perspective, or motivation in the plot changes as a result of something that happens or does not happen (such as expectations being crushed like in "Sunday Mail") in the story. The change in the character could be called learning a lesson or an adjustment in understanding. Main characters are usually dynamic

characters because the story revolves around them and is based on how the events described have impacted their lives.

Oftentimes, static is only associated with flat characters while dynamic is connected to round characters. That is not necessarily true of all stories. In “Maple Street,” Nina is a round character because she is defined by more than a few character traits and feels like a real person. She is not dynamic because she does not learn a lesson that changes her personality. The story is about the fact that Nina cannot understand how to handle death and deal with grief; it is the conflict she faces. In the end she has a moment of intimacy with her friend, Bobby, but the reader is left with the feeling that nothing much will change because of this event. They will continue in their lives as before; she has only been affected by this moment because it is an emotional moment in her life and it shows the importance of friendship. Keep this in mind when writing your stories. An epiphany is not needed in order for the story to be successful. How many people do you know who actually change after an event has happened to them? Most people are set in their ways and stories about this facet of humanity are often very intriguing. Of course stories about human growth are just as successful, so write whatever feels true to your characters within your story.

Another way to define characters is as protagonists or antagonists. The easiest way to understand protagonists and antagonists is to first discuss sympathetic and unsympathetic characters. Sympathetic characters are the characters that are described in a way to cause the audience to identify with them. Readers can connect to them and are rooting for them. They are the main characters in most stories because, through the sympathy the writer creates, the fate of the character becomes the most important to the reader. Sympathy increases the character’s significance to the plot in this case. There can be characters in your stories that are sympathetic

but also minor characters to the overall plot, so think of sympathetic characters as the ones the readers become attached to and view in a positive light.

The reverse can then be said of unsympathetic characters. Unsympathetic characters are the characters that are cast in a negative light and described in a way that makes the readers dislike them. They are the characters that readers do not want to see triumph in the story. There can also be a crossover so that a character is a combination of both sympathetic and unsympathetic qualities.

Protagonists and antagonists are created when sympathy is combined with significance to the plot and the story is based in person vs. person conflict. Main characters can be unsympathetic or sympathetic, but a protagonist can only exist as a sympathetic main character. Antagonists are the opposite. They exist as unsympathetic characters acting against the main character. The antagonist creates obstacles or problems that the protagonists must overcome. Do you remember how in middle school classes we read stories and then had to classify the source of conflict in the story (person vs. self, person vs. person, person vs. society, person vs. fate, etc.)? Protagonists and antagonists can only exist in stories where the conflict is based on the person vs. person dynamic, unless there is a situation where the source of conflict (such as fate) is characterized as alive and becomes an actual character in the story.

These stories can also be understood as the ones where there is a hero and a villain. There is a clear conflict between two people, and the protagonist is clearly the one the reader is encouraged to like the most. The audience is told the most about protagonist and the protagonist's fate matters most to the story, which then makes them the main character. There is no confusion on who is in the right within the context of the story.

Most stories written by my classmates or given as examples to learn from for my classes have not so clearly defined which character is in the right and which character is in the wrong. So the use of protagonist and antagonist cannot apply to these stories. Baxter explains this as “begin[ning] to move away from fiction of protagonists and antagonists into another mode, another model. It is hard to describe this model but I think it might be called the fiction of finger-pointing, the fiction of the quest for blame” (7). Consider the real-life, breathing people who surround you. Most of them (hopefully) are not purely evil and are defined by more than the poor choices they have made in their lives. Who is the bad guy in real life? There are as many sides to a story as there are people who participated in it. That is why it is more important to consider sympathy in your stories. Within certain stories, the person who is in the right can be explained very clearly to a reader, but most stories have multiple sides, which complicates things.

How you manipulate your readers’ opinions of your characters is what will factor the most into how they function in the story. Stories without a clear protagonist and antagonist require you to be more conscious of how you craft the connection between their lives and your audiences’ perceptions. I’ll go more into how to manipulate sympathy and the opportunities it provides for character development later.

I have thrown a lot at you. Let us recap. The broadest way characters can be split up is as main and minor characters. Main characters are the reason why the story is being told and are who the story is based around. Minor characters fill in the gaps in plot and serve a certain purpose in the story. Then there are round and flat characters, static and dynamic characters, sympathetic and unsympathetic characters, and protagonists and antagonists. Round characters are characters that could exist in real life, while flat characters are based on one or a few character traits. Characters who are static do not change in the story, whereas dynamic characters

have a change in their personality or motivations because of something that has happened in the plot. When characters are relatable and likeable, they are sympathetic, while characters that are shown in a negative light are unsympathetic. Protagonists are sympathetic main characters, and antagonists act against the protagonist, making them unsympathetic lesser characters to the plot. The way that characters can be defined is like a network of crossing lines. They will have varying elements and be defined in different ways depending on what story is being told. Now I will turn the corner and go into how to make these various types of characters successful in your stories.

There are six basics about writing characters that I have learned and found to be helpful when writing. Start with finding a location. Where you write does matter, but it seems to matter more to some writers than others. I have discussed this before with my fellow classmates and each craft book expresses a different opinion on it. What I have discovered is that it takes some experimenting to figure out what works for you. Some writers have one specific spot they write, some have a couple, some like to be alone, some like public locations, some like music, some like absolute silence, some like to write in the morning, some like to write at night, some like to drink coffee, and some like to drink tea. It is all about what works for you and keeps you writing.

Personally, I have a couple of places I write depending on how I feel (a mix of public and private places that are so familiar they do not break my writing momentum). It has taken me some time to find these places and make them my own. Along with these places I usually choose music, late nights, and coffee. It is what fits me. One of my places is the library on campus. It is where most of this has been written. Surrounded by books, I feel at home and protected, yet open enough to the world around me.

Most craft books that I have read recommend putting yourself in room secluded from the outside world, making it so the only two entities in the room are you and your story. Ron Carlson says he writes this way. Frankly, it is not practical for my lifestyle. With a roommate I would have to hunt down a secluded space, and I already barely have time for the amount of writing I would like to do. This is why I have certain locations where I write. They are places that feel like my own because of how often I write there. The familiarity is what allows for me to ignore everything else and become only conscious of my story. Plus I get a little claustrophobic and overly aware of my loneliness in secluded rooms. Find what works for you. If you are overly distracted by things around you, then following Carlson's example might be for you.

Secondly, you need to be writing every day. Every day you need to write. Every single day you need to write. Each and every day you need to write. Has it stuck yet? Writing is the only way to improve writing. Life is a busy thing, but that is never an excuse to not write. You can set aside at least ten minutes to jot something down, to get the juices flowing. But remember it is like most things in life: the more you do it, the better you are.

Sometimes a character might simply appear to a writer and feel so alive that it is like they have stolen the pen from your hand and are writing their own story. This is not always the case. Do not be discouraged if your pen has not been stolen. Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but writing stories is work; that is why it takes practice and dedication. Carlson explains, "The writer is the person who stays in the room" (24). Do not be discouraged. If you are writing every day, leaving the distractions of the outside world behind (that includes Facebook), the voices of your characters will become so loud you will be compelled to write their stories.

Thirdly, a writer is always watching and listening. I do not mean to encourage you to be openly staring at or overhearing conversations between people; be subtle about it. That may

sound a little weird to you (to always watch people), but if you are not willing to be weird, then you may want to consider how much you want to write good stories. The people around you are going to give you the basics of your characters. They are the people you know, are familiar with, and can strike you with inspiration. If you are not watching and are not maintaining a writer's eye on the world (the eye that is always open to creativity and searching for that writing spark), then you will find yourself more likely to be stuck when you sit down to write.

This connects to where ideas for characters come from. Honestly, they can come from anywhere. Nina and Bobby, from "Maple Street," were inspired by a pack of pink Bubblicious at the gas station. I wondered what it would have been like to grow up with parents that would let me chew the sticky, cavity inducing stuff. You can see how things grew to be much larger than a pack of gum, but that is where I found my "spark." I learned somewhere around my second creative writing class that no ideas are useless. If the spark is too small to light the fire of a whole story, it can at least get me started writing or add to the spark of another idea. Carlson explains it this way, "Sometimes (perhaps all times) you have to be tolerant of your story 'ideas' and see where they want to help you go" (12). I say, "If something struck you enough to become an 'idea,' then you have to keep it." Write it down. I have notebooks full of scribbles of things that I have noticed about people. I know they will be useful later.

Like right now. Looking up from my computer screen, I see two people whispering and laughing silently to each other in the library. Their chests move, they smile, but no sound comes out. It is something I have experienced before, but there is something about these two people in front of me that I know will stay with me. I'm stopping to write down, "Silent library laughter." I cross my fingers and hope that I can squeeze some sort of truth, some sort of authenticity, from this detail I have observed.

The more conventional places to find inspiration for characters are through experiences like the one I had in the library. Go to locations where you can find a variety of people. Try to look at things as an outsider and as a part of the group. If you are constantly watching, keeping your writer's eye sharp, then you will have no shortage of beginnings for characters. Inspiration for a great story can be found anywhere, especially in the peculiarities of people.

To build the substance behind those ideas you find from the world around you, look to the traits and motivations of the people you know. Mooch from the people around you: their thoughts, feelings, and personality, even. Carlson explains, "People ask if a story is based on your own personal experiences. It's a better question than it seems because its aim is to try to determine where 'real life' was so that we can measure, consider the distance to fiction" (9). You can base your characters on the people around you, but making them completely like your best friend or your father or your ex-boyfriend will restrict you. You need to maintain the correct "distance to fiction," as Carlson calls it. Characters need to have the ability to evolve, to change, to grow. They need to be able to breathe on their own. "You need him to be free to be true to the vicissitudes of your story and not be locked into the events that actually transpired" (Carlson 33). If you keep yourself trapped in the box of staying true to the facts of real life, then you are stymieing your creativity, which is why you are writing in the first place. Do not be afraid to make stuff up; that is the fun of writing short stories.

Maribel and Doreen from "Sunday Mail" have certain character traits of my grandmother split between the two. The obsession with propriety of Maribel and the chatterbox nature of Doreen are things I know well because of my grandmother. Separated into two different characters, I was free to throw in other traits and motivations in order to create my story. I manipulated these traits I knew so well into two different characters because, when writing from

real life, changing something allows you to see it more clearly. What I mean is, it is an attempt to eliminate your bias. You want the bias your audience builds, through reading your story, to be the one that matters. It also frees you to fill in the gaps and break free of the box sticking to reality can trap you in.

Another way you can take more from something that inspires you is to not write about that something right away. I give a spark some time to ferment in the back of my mind or somewhere in a journal. If I write about something too soon I am more likely to be caught up in sticking to the facts (not good). It seems that I can get more out of an idea, event, or spark when I sit down to write about it if I let the edges fade a bit. After some time, things begin to connect and build. Time blurs the details of the events and the people I have seen, allowing for my story to develop its own details.

No matter how hard you try, some part of you will always end up in your stories. It is inevitable because the original idea was discovered through a filter of your own motivations, opinions, desires, and personality traits. You most likely do not even notice you are leaving pieces of who you are behind in your fiction. “We usually cannot recognize ourselves in a piece of fiction unless we have been taken down a path in which we find ourselves split and we meet ourselves coming in the other direction” (Baxter 38). If you cannot help it happening, why not use it to your advantage? If you want your characters to be real to your audience, then willingly offer up a part of yourself to ground them in reality. Burroway and Stuckey-French tell beginning writers, “if the character is created primarily out of your observation or invention and is unlike yourself, try to find an internal area that you have in common with the character” (150). Which takes me to the fourth basic tool you need to have before you start writing; you need to have empathy.

Empathy is the nice way of saying you are willing to throw who you are out the window in order to put on a new personality, jump into a new skin. Carlson describes it this way:

“Having a feeling for my material means sending myself on each journey, whether I’ve actually been there or not, and it involves the powerful act of the imagination that good writing requires: empathy” (10). In order to write successful characters, empathy is a tool you need to have readily at hand and constantly take advantage of. For the time you are writing, you need to lose consciousness of yourself and bring forward in your mind the characters you are writing about. “Write don’t think” (Carlson 52). If it flows and feels true to the character, then let it happen. If you are truly in their shoes and have a strong connection to your character (or even a timid connection) then you will know how they act, think, and feel. It is like playing dress up with your imagination. When you are no longer yourself, the characters are able to exist through you.

The easiest way to create empathy with a character is through that idea of putting a piece of who you are into their character traits. If you can see the reflection of yourself, then you can reach out and touch the smooth surface of the mirror through their fingertips. You can relate to them, become them, through that connection: “Even if the character is presented as a villain, you have something in common, and I don’t mean something forgivable” (Burroway and Stuckey-French 151). The saying “nobody is perfect” is one truth to life that is unavoidable. Everyone has something that complicates them and makes them human. If you are writing about someone who does unforgivable things, use something in your own life that you have done that you view in a negative way. Those emotions, even if they do not fit the experience exactly, will feed the authenticity of what you are writing. It is all about being immersed in the mind of your characters. You may not want to feel empathy for them; you most likely hate them because they contain the dark bits of you. But if you want them to exist in the minds of your readers as truly

evil, then you need to be willing to be honest with yourself. Honesty is what will open you to raw emotion that can be channeled into your characters.

I do not like Doreen from “Sunday Mail.” I find her to be irritating. The possibility of her sleeping with her best friend’s husband makes me want to be absolutely nothing like her. I do not want to step into her shoes, the shoes that reek of betrayal. But I have to as a writer. As the writer, I have no right to judge her. My only obligation is to give her life. You may be wondering about what part of me I gave her in order to connect to her character. What dark piece of me floats around within Doreen? That is for me to know and you to enjoy. That is the beauty of it.

People are interesting creatures. Once you have empathy in your hands and a spark in your eye, you have the basics of building characters. Most of my stories come from a question that I feel compelled to answer through characters. Stories can sprout out of many different things, but the need to understand people is one of the many reasons why stories are written. I am either trying to understand motivations of choices, or I simply want to take a step into another person’s life for a while. That is what is great about being a writer and not solely a reader. Instead of being set on the journey, you get to create the path.

I have mentioned writing things down and keeping a journal. This is the fifth basic tool you need to write solid characters. If you do not have somewhere to compile all of your ideas and observations, then I suggest you head to your local dollar store and pick up a notebook. Make it your best friend and constant companion. I have a few notebooks scattered around places I am in daily like my car, backpack, and headboard. You never know when something is going to strike you and, if you are as busy as I am, that initial spark will fade into the mundane tasks you must accomplish during the day. Write it down right away, and you have a better chance of harnessing that initial feeling or image that struck you.

You need a notebook around constantly because it gives you the option of writing no matter where you are. It will make writing everyday something that can be accomplished in those between gaps of time a day might have such as between classes, while waiting for the bus, or any other small period of time you can squeeze in some practice. Like I discussed earlier, where you write only matters as much as you let it, and practice is the only way to make improvement.

If you are really struggling to write, consider taking a step away from the computer. Your notebook companion can oftentimes serve you better than that intimidating blank document glaring at you from the screen of your computer. Hand writing things are the first way you learned to write anything, so it comes more naturally to most people. It takes away some barrier that can exist when you sit down to write. Handwriting things oftentimes will take you out of your head easier than a computer, and that is ultimately what you need to do to be a good writer. Leave your head for a while to explore the minds of your characters.

Burroway and Stuckey-French discuss the usefulness of a journal for more than a way to keep track of your ideas. They explain that “the journal lets you coax and explore without committing yourself to anything or anyone. It allows you to know everything about your character whether you use it or not” (142). They believe you should go into a story knowing everything about your character, from their favorite color to their hair color. I don’t write this way, but it is worth noting. If you are having a difficult time figuring out a character, try to think of the mundane characteristics they have. Those small things (such as their favorites) can help you to build the larger picture, or at least get you started in a direction.

I cannot say I have ever started a story with a complete understanding of each and every one of my characters. I don’t always start with a precise and clear image of who everyone is because I prefer to learn about my characters as I write them. Carlson explains that what a

veteran writer has going for them over a beginner is their acceptance of the unknown. “An experienced writer has been in those woods before and is willing to be lost; she knows that being lost is necessary for the discoveries to come” (Carlson 15). This is the final foundational tool you need to have before you can write effective characters. You need to be willing to not know everything and trust the writing trance, that trance where you leave this world and immerse yourself in the fictional lives of your characters.

If everything is predetermined, then you have cancelled any opportunity of finding truth through writing. Writers are truth seekers that become accidental truth creators. Predetermined characters do not work because it takes away your ability to make unexpected discoveries and connections in your story that lead to these truths. I like to be surprised by my characters and let things about them appear to me as I get to know them through the story. If my characters are surprising me, then I know I am doing something right: “When writers overparent their characters, they understand them too quickly. Such characters aren’t contradictory or misfitted” (Baxter 26). People are not conscious of all the aspects of their personality, so you do not need to know absolutely everything about your characters or have it all written out in a journal as Burroway and Stuckey-French suggest. Characters can work in your story and feel authentic even if the only thing you know about them when you start is that they chew Bubblicious.

These are the first tools you need to have and work on before you will be able to write anything worth reading. They may seem to be obvious things that are needed for writing stories, but knowing them and practicing them are two different things. After you have decided to practice these skills and use these tools, you can work on strengthening specific areas of character development. These basic tools open up the door to writing characters that come to life off of the page and make successful stories. Remember the tools are:

1. Find Your Location(s)
2. Practice Writing Every Day
3. Always Be Watching and Using a Writer's Eye
4. Use Empathy
5. Make Your Journal Your Constant Companion
6. Trust the Writing Trance

Now that you have the tools to lay a solid foundation, I will explain how sympathy is used as a tool of characterization to build successful characters. There are many elements that contribute to and affect character development, and if I were to cover all of them this would turn into a book. I focused on the element of sympathy because it connects to a lot of the mistakes that beginning writers usually make when trying to write solid characters.

I already discussed the difference between sympathetic and unsympathetic characters and how that applies to protagonists and antagonists. Remember I defined sympathy as the element of characterization based on how much your reader identifies with, roots for, and in general likes your characters. That is the simplified definition. It is not necessarily always about how much your readers like the characters but how well they understand and can accept what those characters are going through and their actions.

Not all of your stories have to contain characters that are sympathetic in order for them to be good stories, but I would argue that the best stories have sympathetic characters. Sympathy for characters is essential to a story because it is based on how much your readers care for that character. If your readers do not care, then they will not keep reading. Burroway and Stuckey-French describe it perfectly: "Only people care. If this is so, then your fiction can be only as successful as the characters who move it and move within it. Whether they are drawn from life or

are pure fantasy—and all fictional characters lie somewhere between the two—we must find them interesting, we must find them believable, and we must care about what happens to them” (81). Writing stories is always about keeping the momentum moving forward and your readers turning the page. If you build a bond between your character and your readers through sympathy, then you have given them a reason to read your story.

Conventionally, the main characters in your stories are the one you want to be the most sympathetic because the story revolves around them. So if main characters are the motivation for your readers to keep living in your stories, then the reader should be able to relate to their experiences. It is the purpose of your story. Of course having a sympathetic minor character or two in your story can help the development of plot, so do not restrict yourself when developing your characters if it feels natural to the events you are writing about. I also want to point out that just because a character is a main character does not automatically make them sympathetic. Your character has to earn your readers’ sympathy. How do you create that important bond between reader and character? There are three central ways that you can create sympathy for a character: give them contradictory complexities, find their motivation and desires, and make them work for those desires.

In order for a reader to become emotionally invested in a character, that character needs to have complexities in their personalities that make them interesting. Contradictions in those complexities are what make your characters feel human and authentic. No one in real life is one sided. Carlson explains complexity in this way: “Character, the human heart, is paramount in the best stories, and the human heart is a complicated and evolving organ. It is not a single thing that reacts a single way” (51). Contradictory complexities are those traits that include inner conflict and the unseen aspects of the character that create their unique personality and quirks. The more

round and complex your characters are the more significant they become to the story and the stronger the impact they have on the plot. It is what brings your characters to life because those unique characteristics of their personalities are what make them who they are.

Consider an acquaintance you have met recently. You only know the surface things about him and it is through the growth of your understanding of who he is that causes your relationship to change from acquaintance to friendship. That person becomes more interesting and significant to you once you start to see what is going on beneath the surface. This is the exact process of relationship and connection-building you are trying to manipulate between your characters and your readers through sympathy. As your reader gets to know a character throughout the story, your reader will judge your character and decide whether that character is interesting and worth getting to know more about or if that character is boring and not worth developing a connection to. Your goal is to keep your readers' attentions by making your characters draw them in, keeping them glued to the story through the need to find out what happens to the person they have grown to know and connected with.

People are much more complicated than to be narrowly defined by one set of personality traits. If you want your readers to connect to one of your characters, then make sure to give your reader an insight into that character or give that character an attribute that people can relate to right off the bat. Then you are free to add in complexities as the story continues through conflict. Just make sure not to trip into the pitfall of stereotypes. A character may start off with real potential, but as soon as they start to become the overwritten, selfless hero or emotional heroine pining for love, I cannot resist rolling my eyes and finding something else to read.

We all might have traits that are typical of our class, gender, or age, but no one has had the experience of living your life specifically. That automatically makes you a different person

from every other person you will meet in some way, no matter how small that trait may be. You should view your characters in the same way as yourself. Stereotypes can serve you in some situations because they can serve as a quick way for a reader to understand a minor and insignificant character or because they can contain small grains of truth. But it is very easy for a reader to become bored by the predictability of a stereotypical personality. Everything in that character's personality points in one direction, there are not any contradictions: "When all the details fit perfectly, something is probably wrong with the story" (Baxter 26). If everything is lining up perfectly in your characters' personalities and everything they do makes complete sense or follows a stereotype, then they are not real to the human condition and you are lying to the reader.

In "Sunday Mail," I made an effort to mock a lot of the stereotypes that surround women over the age of sixty-five. I put in little glimpses of the stereotypes that surround elderly women, (such as owning many cats becoming wanting kitten stamps), but Doreen and Maribel have their own personalities and complexities that break them free of that stereotype. Stereotypes are too easy and will bore your reader. It may be more comfortable to write your characters in this way because it's not a risk, other writers have written it before you. That is what helped cause the stereotype to exist in the first place. Why would you want to be unoriginal? Doreen would have been boring if she had not come to life through the way she subverts the stereotypical image of a wise and nice old woman. She is a spitfire and a vivacious woman who is still living life like she is twenty. It is what makes Doreen who she is and what creates conflict between her and Maribel.

Strive to have your round, main characters be memorable, to have your stories be memorable, and not get lost in the bland oatmeal of stereotypes because no one wants to connect

to someone who does not have a unique and personal sense of self. Form your own truth by staying true to the human condition. Please prevent bland characters from populating your fiction. You can do better.

Round characters need to be able to capture an audience through their peculiarities or their realistic nature. It is important to remember when an idea for a character comes to you that humans are not usually straightforward with their emotions or thoughts. Characters can seem simple, but a story is much more engaging if there is something more going on beneath the surface. Baxter explains the hidden as a mask: “Masks are interesting partly for themselves and partly for what they mask” (Baxter 88). Everyone has attributes that they try to hide because, like I said earlier, no one is perfect. Characters, if you want them to feel like real people, should have strengths and weaknesses. And more often than not, your characters will not reveal their weaknesses right off the bat. The revealing of the hidden builds tension in the story, moves the plot forward, and develops the connection your reader feels with your character.

A character needs to have strengths and weaknesses to build sympathy. The whole reason why the story is being told is often based in the conflict that arises from the conflicting and contradictory traits that we have because of our strengths and weaknesses. You may think the more positive attributes a character has, the more that the reader will like this character, but that is not necessarily true. If a character is purely good and does not have any negative attributes, then they will come off as unbelievable and your audience will not be able to relate to them. Perfection is annoying and boring: “Characters who are entirely likeable or admirable—who are remembered in the way that funeral elegies remember people—have a tendency to become either allegorical or bland” (Baxter 23). If you write characters that are only good and do not contain faults, then you make it so your reader cannot connect to those characters. Sympathy is built

through understanding and a shared experience. No one has lived a perfect life, so no one can relate to that.

Imagine if I had made Maribel perfect. She never dated Frank, her best friend's ex-boyfriend. She never married him. She does not have an obsession with letters. She does not have an obsessive nature at all for that matter, which causes her to expect things to be a certain way. She does not judge Doreen's life or say anything about how she feels about the mailman, Richard. They do not fight. Nothing happens. Maribel is perfect. You see how this would not work for my story "Sunday Mail"? There is no way to create conflict and interest in a character who always makes the right decisions. If Maribel was written without weaknesses, she would come off as unbelievable or, at the very least, bland and unrelatable.

Your characters do not have to be likeable or even remotely good and moral for them to capture a reader's attention and make them want to keep turning the page. Baxter says characters are only obligated to be interesting, and I agree with him (23). But a main character should not be unsympathetic the whole time. There needs to be some small bit of light that a reader can cling to and root for, or else they will get frustrated by your character and wonder what is the point of the story. I would even suggest that all of your characters have something sympathetic about them. If you create an antagonist or dark character who is completely unsympathetic, then you are forced to keep things on a very surface level. Think of children's stories where the villain is defined as only being evil, such as the tale of the *Three Little Pigs*. The wolf is confined to the characterization of being a terrifying figure who runs around breaking pigs' houses and eating them—nothing positive about that. It is a story, but it is not the type of story we are trying to write when we sit down to build relatable and authentic characters. The story can be moralizing

and even a little bit humorous, but it only skims the surface of what it is like to be human (which is why it is a story originally meant for children).

A lack of sympathy can work for your story, but just like with the constant dose of positivity and perfection, a parade of negativity is not something most people want to read. Throw in some sympathy by including contradictory complexities and you will have a much better story. It is more compelling to read about a villain who has twists in their character that complicate their evil actions. Maybe the pigs stole the wolf's favorite blanket, and that is why he goes around knocking their houses down. That small detail does not make him a positive character—he is still evil in the story—but it gives a glimpse of his side and builds a small dose of sympathy through understanding.

Your characters can be unforgivable but you should attempt to make them understandable. Even mean and horrible people are still people. There is a reason why they are doing what they are doing, even if it does not make sense to anyone but them, and that is most likely where you will find a slight bit of sympathy for their character. Doreen from “Sunday Mail” is made relatable because of her motivations. The audience is left suspicious of whether or not she had relations with Maribel's husband Frank, but she is still not made completely evil because we know she is unlucky in love and has a past relationship that complicates the relationships in the story. The small hints of back story and her personal motivations create some understanding for her character. This is where character motivation becomes the tool for creating sympathy.

Character motivation is the second way to create sympathy for a character. Motivation is based in why characters act the way they act. It is what they desire, what their goals are, why they get up in the morning. Motivation is the driving factor behind their actions and what gives

the characters a purpose. If a character does not have sympathetic character traits, motivation can be used to create the sympathy. A relatable or understandable motivation can provide a sympathetic framework for unsympathetic character personalities, and it can provide an even deeper connection between readers and sympathetic character personalities.

The motivation gives the story a purpose because it gives your characters a purpose. Think of your number one desire or goal for yourself. It contributes a large chunk to what makes you who you are and why you make the decisions you make. It is the same for characters. You always need to have your finger on the pulse of your characters' motivations because that will be the guiding force of their actions and choices. It is what makes them who they are and what makes us want to know them. We want to live in their skin and feel compassion or comprehension for their story.

Now that you know your character's motivation, you need to consider how this person would attempt to achieve it. You know which way the character's compass arrow points in life and where that character wants to be headed, but how does that specific person get there? The how is important because it should connect characters' contradictory complexities to their motivations. It is the way you can show who they are through their actions, and those actions should reflect an attempt to achieve their desires through their character strengths and despite their weaknesses. Burroway and Stuckey-French make a good point about achieving desire. They write, "Achievement of our desire would be easy if the thought process between desire and act were not so faulty and so wayward, or if there were not such an abyss between the thoughts we think and those that we are willing and able to express" (Burroway and Stuckey-French 98). Because of the inner conflicts everyone has and the unpredictable events life throws at us, it is not a straightforward path to accomplishing the things that we desire and believe will make our

life fulfilling. Your characters need to toil for their motivations like we do every day. That is the final tool of sympathy building.

Making your characters struggle, toil, and work for the things that motivate them creates sympathy because it strengthens the importance of their desires and the reader's understanding of the type of characters they are. Most stories should have two struggles going on that take turns moving the plot forward: an inner conflict and outer conflict: "Certain forces, within and outside the character, must press him toward a certain course of action, while other forces, both within and outside, must exert strong pressure against that course of action" (Gardner 187). The interior conflict is what is at odds within the character, while the exterior conflict is the force outside of the characters' control that works against their achievement of their goal. The outer story can be summarized and are the events of the story, while the inner conflict is not necessarily as simple and can be inexplicable. Depending on point of view, you may not even be able to tell the reader the inner conflict of each character (or any characters for that matter), but you should always keep in mind that how a character acts provides clues to what is happening beneath the surface.

Everyone has something going on beneath the surface in any situation; in "Maple Street," Nina is facing the exterior struggle of riding her bike up a hill in hot weather, but internally she is considering how to deal with the death of a friend. Both of these forces working against Nina create sympathy for her. It allows readers to understand who Nina is through her attempt to ease the combined strain of emotional and physical discomfort. Toiling for her desire allows for the readers to understand her contradictory complexities, therefore creating sympathy through struggle.

You have to make your characters struggle for what they want because if you do not, there would not be a story to be told. Struggle is what forms the conflict. It can be either an

internal struggle, external struggle, or a combination of both that causes the story to exist. But keep in mind stories that succeed in combining inner conflict with exterior conflict, putting them at odds with one another, are creating the strongest form of sympathy. That is the human condition: attempting to make our lives match our goals and our desires. It is an experience all readers will be able to relate to and connect with.

When considering the struggle your main characters are going through, make sure you give them agency, the ability to make choices. The reason why you must give them agency is so they do not come off as passive or pathetic. You do not need your audience to feel sorry for them in order for them to see your characters' struggling and begin to cheer them on. Remember, we want sympathy, not pity. Your audience will respond more to characters who take action and are actively making choices that affect the story: "A character is what he or she does" (Carlson 54). Characters' actions show who they are and characterize them. If they do nothing, then why do they matter? "No fiction can have real interest if the central character is not an agent struggling for his or her own goals but a victim, subject to the will of others" (Gardner 65). Your characters should not feel like they are floating through life on the decisions others make or on the events that happen around them.

Nina from "Maple Street" could have become a character that lacks agency. She is a little bit of a follower and goes along with what Bobby decides, but she is the one who makes the final decision to break the physical barrier to touch hands with Bobby to try to provide some sort of comfort. It is this choice that shows her struggle to be there for Bobby. Agency creates sympathy. You can make a story in which the character is a pushover, but imagine if you gave them a choice. Bam! Much better story.

While giving your characters contradictory complexities, finding their motivation and desires, and making them toil for those desires, you still need to make them believable within the context of who you have established them to be. You have to have credibility. Burroway and Stuckey-French say, “If you are to succeed in creating an individual character, particular and alive, you will also inevitably know what is appropriate to that sort of person and will let us know as much as we need to know to feel the appropriateness of the behavior” (145). Even if your character is a weirdo, that person you have created has behaviors that are appropriate to the sort of weird behavior only that person would display. If you write to find out what will happen when characters behave a certain way (based on their motivations and contradictory complexities) and face a specific struggle, then you will create characters your readers will believe and sympathize with.

Thanks to my professors and the experience I have gained since that first writing class, I know what it takes to be a writer. It is not the pen, notebook, or coffee shop. It is sitting in my location, practicing my writing, keeping my writers’ eye open to find inspiration, using empathy to write, making my journal my constant companion, and trusting my writers’ trance. It is using sympathy to form moving characters by giving them contradictory complexities, finding their motivation and desires, and making them work for those desires. It is my dedication to improving the way I capture the stories of the characters I am writing about, my dedication to my attempt to understand the world around me and myself and share that experience with others through my craft. These are the things that make us writers.

Maple Street

Last summer after Bobby's brother Andrew died, Bobby and I would ride our bikes to his dad's gas station, Gas and Go, to buy bubble gum before the ballgame started. The concession stand at the baseball field closed down years ago, when the school couldn't afford to maintain it anymore, forcing us to buy our gum somewhere else. One dollar got you ten pieces of the stuff at the Gas and Go, just enough to fit in my jean shorts' pockets without falling out. We liked to gnaw on Bubblicious while mocking the other team's batters, rolling the sweet pink flavor around our mouths with our angry taunts. It was something Andrew taught us to do when we used to watch him play first base last year. To be a true baseball fan means lots of Bubblicious and cussing.

Sometimes Bobby would whine the ears off his dad, and we'd get an extra piece to chew on during our ride to the field. But lately his dad wasn't spending much time at the station, leaving it up to his hired help (a stern lady named Pam who would never give us a free piece) to run the place without him.

On one particularly hot day, pockets filled with bubble gum and sweat building on our faces, Bobby looked over at me from riding his bike down the street and said, "The hill."

"The hill" was the highest point of elevation in our small town and would take us the long way to the diamond behind our local high school. Next year Bobby would be wandering the halls of the big brick building as a scared freshman, while I was stuck finishing my final year of middle school at the smaller building next door. He liked to point this out to me whenever I was winning an argument, like being a high schooler suddenly made his logic better than mine.

I didn't want to risk missing the first pitch, but I knew leaving Bobby to take the shorter route would mean watching the whole game suffering through Bobby's silent treatment. It's not

nearly as much fun to banter alone. So I followed him down Main Street toward the hill, even though my legs were already aching with fatigue, and I could feel the blazing sun sucking the sweat from my pores.

Rounding the corner onto Maple, the steep incline loomed in front of us. Bobby didn't hesitate and started the steady climb up the hill. He stood on the pedals of his red bike and pumped them. The back of his head bobbed with the pace of his feet. I swallowed the little bit of moisture left in my mouth, took a deep breath, and slowly made my way up the hill behind him.

My body felt suspended in warm molasses. The sticky, golden air made me gasp for breath with each turn of my pedals. Bobby had a nice rhythm, a consistent turning of the chain, and gradually started to make the distance between us grow. The thick heat pushing against me worked with gravity to slow my climb. I refused to get off my bike and walk it up the rest of the way, even though there was too much hill in front of me and not enough behind. Huffing and puffing, my only consolation was the easy downhill ride on the other side.

Bobby reached the top and pumped his fist. "C'mon Nina, hurry up."

I glared at him then went back to focusing on remembering to breathe.

When I finally reached the top, I was more than ready for gravity to do the pedaling for me. Bobby stood with his bike underneath him, looking down the hill and toward the high school. One foot was on the ground to hold him steady, while the other poised on the pedal ready to launch himself over the edge. He appeared to be lost in thought and ignored my panting. I wondered if he thought about Andrew.

Bobby looked at me and frowned. "You all right?"

I nodded, swung my leg off my bike, and let it fall to the grass on the side of the road. I bent over and planted my hands above my knees to keep myself from falling. While I panted a

part of me panicked about missing the game, but my inability to breathe overrode my love of baseball.

“You’re such an old lady.” Bobby scrunched up his face at me and stuck out his tongue.

I expected him to fly down the hill without me, leaving me with those words. But he didn’t. Bobby got off his bike, dropped it to the ground, and lied down in the road. He stared up at me from his sprawled position in the street, beckoning me to join him.

Our town barely had traffic. Bobby’s dad always used to joke there weren’t enough cars in town to keep the business running, but I still felt my stomach drop at the forbidden nature of lounging in the street. I thought back to when my mom accidentally hit the Louis’s cat. The flash of movement, the jerk of the car, a bump, a thud, a cry. It was over so quickly.

I shivered. “Get up, Bobby. Stop being stupid.” Even though Bobby could be a nuisance sometimes, he was still my best friend. Seeing him become road kill was not on my to-do list.

Bobby took a piece of Bubblicious from his pocket, twisted open the wrapper, and popped the gum into his mouth. He obnoxiously chewed and smacked it, trying to blow bubbles above him while squinting up at the sunlight.

“You’re always such a chicken.” He tried to make clucking noises with the wad of gum in his cheek but ended up sounding like a suction cup.

I cautiously looked down both sides of the hill for any oncoming traffic. “Bobby, if you get me killed I will haunt you for all eternity.” I pushed my bike out of the way and slowly started to stretch out onto the road next to him. “Even when you die. I’ll haunt you into the afterlife.” I winced at the mention of death, cursed my dumb mouth with its broken censor, and tried to think of something to quickly change the topic.

“You’re such a pussy.” Bobby was obviously unaffected by my slip up.

I was surprised by how cool the concrete road felt on my hot skin. Despite my fear of getting hit by a truck, I started to relax. The sun above me glared sharply in my eyes, so I closed them. I tried to keep my ears open and alert for the sound of incoming vehicles, but soon my thoughts began to wander. I didn't want to think about him, but it seemed he was all I thought about anymore. The memories were so large in my head. I remembered how he loved to wash his new Grand Am on Sundays, and how he would spray Bobby and me with the hose if we came too close. I remembered the way he used to tell me to, "Chin up," after a missed ground ball. I remembered waking up to a quiet house and my mom gently brushing my hair away from my face as she said, "It was his time."

"Do you really believe in that stuff?" Bobby's voice sounded loud next to me.

"What stuff?"

A cloud rolled in front of the sun, making shadows on my eyelids.

"Ya know, the afterlife. All that stuff."

Lying so close next to Bobby in the street felt uncomfortably intimate. "I guess I sort of do."

I opened my eyes and turned my head to look at how Bobby would react to what I said. His dark brown eyes were already staring at me in a frown. Bobby chewed on his bottom lip, trying to free pieces of bubble gum stuck to the edges of his mouth. I waited for him to ask me to clarify what I said, but he just kept gnawing on his lip.

"I don't want to be gone forever."

Bobby finally stopped munching on his lip. It was now bright red and dripping with slobber. A small piece of pale pink Bubblicious still clung to the bottom right corner of his mouth.

“You never liked me as much as you liked him,” Bobby said, looking away from me and back up at the sun.

This was the first time Bobby had said anything about Andrew since the day after the funeral. My mom hadn’t let me go, but Bobby was there. Our walk to school the next day had been completely silent except for Bobby’s quietly whispering to me, “He was wearing makeup. He’d hate that.”

I watched a drop of sweat fall down Bobby’s forehead and into the hair stuck to the side of his face. He looked nothing like Andrew, but the hair was the same thick brown waves. I wanted to deny what he said, to make him feel better. But I had the biggest crush on his older brother Andrew ever since I was born, and Bobby knew it. Drew just had this thing about him that made you want to love him. Growing up living across from Bobby and Andrew, Drew was the one that always made sure we made it safely to school and soothed my tears whenever Bobby pulled my hair and called me ugly. He always made time for Bobby and me, even when he became a cool high schooler and we were both still in middle school. His being gone left me feeling sick when I looked out my bedroom window at the brown house across the street. Knowing that he would never play catch with me again, or pick on me about middle school boys, or tilt his head and look at me with that crooked smile one last time made me want to hide in my room, crawl beneath my covers, and pretend that a world without Drew didn’t exist.

Bobby sighed. “It’s okay. Everyone loved him.” He didn’t sound bitter. He sounded sad.

Bobby wiped the back of his hand across his eyes. I wondered if he was crying. Instead of looking, I turned away from him and went back to closing my eyes. I moved my hand across the pavement and let it rest against his. He let our hands lay touching side by side. I wanted to reassure him that things would get better. That my mom said sadness goes away with time. That

Drew was in a better place. That we'd get to see him again someday. I wanted to pick Bobby up off the road and take him away.

We laid there side by side in the sunshine. Neither one of us spoke. Neither one of us moved. Sweat clung to where our hands met. The humidity pressed in on us, two children resting on Maple Street.

Sunday Mail

Maribel didn't get letters in the mail often since her daughter, Juliet, took over paying the bills a month ago when Frank died. But those had all been addressed to Frank anyway. This one had her name on it. Written right across the center of the envelope: Maribel Marie Harris.

Every Sunday Doreen would come pick Maribel up from her house in her shiny yellow Corvette, leftovers from a past husband Doreen called it, and they would fly down the hill to the church with the top down. Luckily, Doreen was the best hairdresser in town and had access to some of the strongest hairspray in the business. They always arrived right on time with perfectly set domes of hair coiffed so high up on their heads that the Grierson family, who sat in the row behind them, had a nice view of Pastor Rick through wisps of grey and white strands. As Doreen always said, "A lady is only as big as her hair." Maribel didn't understand what she meant, but she wasn't one to disagree.

Richard, the mailman, opened up the post office for two hours after church on Sundays for the convenience of the people who lived out of town. Hurston Grove was a farming community and consisted of only the post office, church, a Casey's, Bubba's Bar, and Doreen's salon, The Golden Comb. After church the two ladies would stop by the post office to pick up the mail and flirt with Richard. Well Doreen did all the flirting, while Maribel found their P.O. boxes along the wall of gold plated numbers and collected the mail from each of them. She didn't see the appeal of pursuing another husband. Frank had given her forty-seven years of memories for companionship, but Doreen was always on the prowl for the next one.

Maribel liked the post office. It was a small room with walls covered in dark wood paneling, a type of wood she didn't know the name of, which some people in town said made the small room feel even smaller. Along one wall were the postboxes. Rows of small silver doors

with golden plaques displaying the numbers that identified which box belonged to which citizen of Hurston Grove. Hers was on the right, number 125, while Doreen's was on the far left, number 15. On the opposite wall was the teller window that opened the back of the post office to the public. That is where Richard stood every Sunday, leaning halfway over the counter that divided him from the rest of the world.

The day Maribel got her letter, Doreen was complaining to Richard about a clog in one of the sinks at her salon. Richard was also the go-to repairman and plumber for their small town. He knew how to fix most things that were broken. Maribel shook her head at Doreen while she scanned through Doreen's mail. Doreen's pipes needed taking care of too often for Maribel's taste.

Doreen always got the most interesting mail—thick catalogs of beauty concoctions and letters from her many sisters, each of them smelling of some floral perfume. Maribel rarely got any. There was always a sense of excitement before she turned the key to her own box that would soon fade when she found it to be empty. But not today. Today there was a letter with her name on it: Maribel Marie Harris. A letter just for her.

Maribel wanted to open it as soon as she took it from her box. But a proper lady doesn't open her mail in public. What if it was something to do with Frank's will or something even more personal? She would have to wait until Doreen dropped her off at the house.

Doreen had this absurd laugh, like the sound of a choking canary, which she saved specially for her suitors. Richard must have said something she found humorous because she was squawking when Maribel joined her at the post office counter.

"Hey Maribel. How goes it?" Richard was one of those men who had a slow, easy way of talking and made even the formal uniform of a postman look casual.

“Everything is well. Thanks for asking, Richard.”

He smiled at Maribel, which made her uncomfortable. She told Doreen, “I have the mail. We can go now.”

“Oh, silly me. I almost forgot. I could use another book of stamps if you wouldn’t mind, Richard.” Doreen didn’t need any more stamps, and Maribel knew it.

“I have plenty at my house. I can give you some when you drop me off.”

Doreen frowned at Maribel. “But I want the ones with the kittens on them. My sisters just find them so adorable.”

“I have lots of those. You can pick out whichever kittens you’d like.” Maribel did have a collection of stamps in various designs and even had a few different sets with kittens on them. She always loved letters. It meant someone cared enough to take time out of their day and sit down to share a part of their life with her. It gave her the same feeling of childhood happiness as getting gifts during Christmas, the excitement of having something new that’s just for her. Letters were important. It was how her Frank had kept in contact with her while he was over fighting in Vietnam. The only memories she had of her senior year of high school were those long mornings of church with her parents, trying to pay attention to old Pastor Paul, while she anxiously waited to go to the post office to see if she had another letter from Frank. Each letter said about the same thing. “I’m doing good.” “Can’t wait to come home.” “I love you.” He wouldn’t tell her much else, but she didn’t want to know much else. Their daughter, Juliet, never could understand why her mother obsessed over letters like she did. Juliet always insisted on telephone calls or e-mails, but Maribel had no desire to sit for an hour with a plastic phone held up to her ear or to even try to figure out the bulky computer Juliet bought for her and put in Frank’s old office. It just wasn’t the same as a letter.

“You’re better off taking some of Maribel’s stamps. We ran out of the kittens when Mrs. Burton threw that big birthday party for her kid. She had to have all of them for her invites.” Richard scratched his chin and leaned toward Doreen. “I’ll be over to the salon tomorrow to fix that clog you’ve got, if you’ll be around.”

Doreen never had the salon open on Mondays. “Yes. I’ll be there. Thanks so much Richard.” She touched his hand that was resting on the counter.

Maribel had enough of waiting. There was a letter in her hand that needed to be opened. “Goodbye, Richard.” She walked outside, knowing that Doreen would be forced to follow.

It was a cool fall day. The wind blew just enough to make Maribel’s skirt wave in the wind. She tightened her grasp around the stack of mail in her hands. Her back ached from sitting in the wooden church pews, which caused her to walk slowly to Doreen’s waiting Corvette. She put Doreen’s pile of mail on the center console as she took her seat on the passenger side. She put her letter on her lap. It looked so white and clean in the sunlight against the lilac purple of her skirt. Maribel wondered what could be inside it. The address was typed, so not something from Juliet, too official looking for something like that. Maribel found it strange that there wasn’t a return address, which made her think it was from someone in town who had gone around the postal system and asked Richard to just slip it into her postbox. She knew some people in town did that because they thought stamps were just too pricey anymore. The letter wasn’t thick, but it wasn’t thin either. Not a bill, or else Juliet would have had it forwarded to the mailbox at her house. Plus it didn’t have one of those see-through windows with her name peeping through that all bills seemed to have nowadays. Her name was printed clearly in black ink straight on the envelope.

Maribel held her letter up to the sunlight. She couldn't see much through the envelope besides that there was something in it. She wished Doreen would hurry up.

Doreen burst out of the post office door and marched over to the car. Maribel admired how fast she could move in heels. Even with a cane, Doreen knew how to get places. She threw her cane between the two seats and got in the car.

“Why are you in such a hurry today?”

Maribel was about to tell Doreen about the letter, but she knew it Doreen would only think her silly. She also didn't want Doreen snooping around. After being friends for so long, sometimes she wanted to keep some things to herself.

“The girls are coming to visit today.” Not a lie exactly because Juliet and her two daughters were coming over for supper that night. Doreen didn't need to know the precise time they were coming to visit.

Doreen was not only the best hairdresser in town, but also the biggest gossip. She knew the dark things about the people of Hurston Grove most people didn't even want to admit to themselves. Something about those magic hands of hers, they turned anyone into a chatterbox. She collected her clients' secrets along with the trimmings of their hair. Doreen could have made a living off of keeping those secrets, if she wasn't so busy chasing husbands.

All those years of friendship and fishing for secrets made Doreen suspicious of her answer, but she didn't bother questioning Maribel. Maribel liked things a certain way, and Doreen didn't like to upset her.

“I guess we'll have to hurry then.” She started the car, reversed, then peeled out of the parking lot.

Doreen liked to ignore the speed limit in town, which she could get away with since the cop Hurston Grove borrowed from the next town over never worked Sundays. Maribel usually hated that Doreen had a lead foot. Being a mother, she worried about children playing near the road and running in the street, things Doreen never thought about. But today Maribel was happy to be headed home so quickly.

Doreen licked her lips and yelled over the wind, “Don’t you think Richard is handsome?”

Maribel wondered if Doreen was really paying attention to the road in front of her or if she was more preoccupied with picturing Richard cleaning her pipes.

“He’s attractive, but talking to him makes me feel—” Maribel searched for the right word, “greasy.”

Doreen’s mouth popped open and she huffed at Maribel. “I can’t believe you would say that. You know I like him.”

“It’s why I said it.” Doreen was always chasing after the wrong man, and she would get snippy with Maribel whenever she told her that her most recent choice in companion wasn’t the right choice. They’d been having this argument since they were school girls, and Doreen invited that ding-bat Jimmy Jones to the Hurston Grove town hall dance. The only good man Doreen had ever dated was Frank, but Frank married Maribel after Doreen cheated on him with the captain of the football team. Maribel wished Doreen could see that a real man would do the chasing, but even after six divorces, a million different hair-dos to “reinvent” herself, and gallons of tears, Doreen still hadn’t learned.

Doreen sped up even faster than usual. Maribel thought she had to be going at least five over the speed limit. She knew Doreen was annoyed with her, but it was no excuse to become reckless.

“Slow down, Doreen.”

Doreen slammed on the breaks, making both of them jerk forward into their seatbelts, and stopped the car. Maribel’s letter fell off of her lap and onto the floor at her feet.

“Why are you so finicky? You’re always so picky. Nothing is ever good enough for you.”

Maribel shook her head at Doreen’s dramatic behavior. Doreen took a deep breath.

“It’s why Frank wanted to leave you in the end.”

Maribel felt a sharp pop in her chest. It felt like every part of her body was screaming at once.

“What?”

“Frank came to the salon the week he died.” Doreen’s voice grew quiet, “He told me he wanted to leave you. Everyone knew he wasn’t happy.”

A car passed them going the other direction. The Benson family stared while Doreen waved at them as they drove by. Maribel didn’t notice.

“You slept with him didn’t you?”

“I can’t believe you think I would do that.”

They sat there for a long time in silence until a car drove up behind them and honked. The car drove around the motionless Corvette as Maribel considered crying. But instead she got out of the car and started walking back to town. Doreen drove off. Maribel’s letter lay forgotten on the floor of her passenger seat.

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