

HARRIET BROWN

Why I Don't Write Fiction

Listen—I'm incapable of making things up. Everything I say comes straight out of real life. The few times I've tried—OK, the *hundreds* of times I've tried to write a short story—have all been miserable failures. I just don't have the right little wrinkle in the brain.

Still, people keep telling me and telling me. My English professor takes me out for a drink the day after I defend my dissertation (a comparison of the works of Hardy and Faulkner) and asks, "What's next?" What's next, I tell him, is to move to New York City and become a famous poet.

"Forget poetry," he says, running one hand through his gleaming blond hair. "You should write fiction."

I smile, the way 20-year-olds do when the teacher they have a crush on takes them to a bar in the middle of a May afternoon, when they're wearing the perfect shade of lipstick and know the world will be good to them. "So," I say, "what time do you have to be home?"

What I should have said was simple: How do we know where to start, what to zoom in on, what to elide? Every story requires a Darwinian pruning of possibilities, a striptease to the bottom. Just when you think you've got the storyline down, it changes. *You* change. The story you thought you were telling turns out to be the tiniest protruding lip of an underwater boulder that displaces the sea and alternately charms and crushes its inhabitants.

To put it another way, it's the backstory, stupid.

What I should have said to the blond teacher: To write fiction you have to reach into the great nothingness inside you and pull something—a plastic bag, a typewriter ribbon, a stone—out. Whereas in my case there's just nothingness. How about another drink, a walk by the river, a kiss instead?

Back in my dorm room, I open my black-and-white composition notebook to a new page, pull out a purple ballpoint, and write:

The girl sits beside the window.

Already I'm in trouble. What girl? What window? Is it the kind that slides up easily or has to be propped up with a stick? Where are the bones of the story in this jet stream of irrelevancies? But more than that: What part of the story am I telling? The raw and hopeful beginning, the long dry middle, the sturm-und-drang denouement, the coda with its whiff of sadness?

Maybe the girl is looking out the window, waiting for her grandmother to pick her up. It's Friday, the day they will go shopping together, stopping at the greengrocer's for lettuce, the butcher's for chicken. The bakery woman comes out from behind the counter—she *always* comes out from behind the counter—and gives her a buttery swirl with a cherry in the center, and the girl notices, as she always does, the numbers inked onto the woman's bony arm. The grandmother hums a little as she drives, a melody that for the rest of the girl's life will mean comfort and love.

So: *The girl sits beside the window.* From this we know she is waiting for everything important in her life to begin.

But wait, maybe the girl and the grandmother are setting out candlesticks, arranging fruit cup in parfait glasses. The grandmother smiles, and the girl feels her heart expand with love and gratitude. How she wishes she could live here. She looks out the window, knowing how the evening will end. She knows she can do nothing to change it. She stares out the window, sees the familiar car moving too fast down the street. She doesn't flinch or turn away.

So: *The girl sits beside the window*. She is full of dread, wishing she could put out her hands and ward off what is coming.

Or maybe the story has already unraveled: The rest of the family, the dinner, the shouting and punching, the grandmother's lips compressed to a line. The mother's weeping, the father's steady eating, the sister's shouting and punching. The bruise that is forming. The girl's heart contracts to the size of an olive pit.

She hunches at the table, the food like ashes in her aching mouth. Later, in her darkened room, the door will burst open, the next part will begin. She will not cry. She will not feel a thing. She sits beside the window, waiting.

Or maybe the girl (no longer a girl) sits beside the window in her own house, trying to make sense of the story, its characters, feeling around with her toes in the dark, dark water. She waits for something to swirl up inside her, make its way out of her empty mouth. She waits for a long, long time.

So: One morning the blond professor (no longer quite so young), whose life work is a dead poet no one has ever heard of (but they will, they will), gets on a train for the city. He buys a black leather jacket, then heads uptown on the subway to see his former student. He should be home grading senior projects and reviewing dissertations. He should be home making love to his wife, rocking one of his sons, smoking a cigarette beside an open window.

Or maybe this is right where he should be. Maybe he and his leather jacket crash on the former student's floor, or in her bed, and the next time he sees his sons they're at his walk-up in a grungy corner of the city, where they are shocked into silence and cry in their sleep. Maybe he's happier than he's ever been. Maybe he's made the biggest mistake of his life.

He doesn't know what he's talking about, that day in the bar. Maybe that's *his* dream, to tell his own stories instead of writing the life of a man he'll never meet. Maybe it's just the cheap wine that makes his mouth open, his teeth and tongue and breath form just that combination of vowels and consonants.

And meanwhile the girl, the former student, the unreliable heroine of our story, walks alone in a cloud of lovely, impossible words. They stream from her eyes like tears and fall to the ground behind her, a trail of memory and longing and intention. They're all she has, all that keeps her safe from the terrible past, from the great nothingness inside her.

Every word of this is true. I swear it.