

THE ART OF FICTION

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*Y*our first paragraph must contain everything in your story, and your story must contain everything in your first paragraph.

You meet him at a party. He introduces you to Lily, a short woman with a weak handshake and a pretty face. Everything about her seems round, especially her head, which is covered in short hair that makes you think of indoor/outdoor carpeting. Lily, it turns out over coffee the following Tuesday, is his girlfriend—but not, he says, “the one.” You might be, he says, swallowing your suddenly small hand in his gorgeous broad palms. He watches you so ardently that you have to look away, as if from the midday sun; everything you want, you might get. A week later, he’s broken up with Lily to see about you. Before Lily, there was Rachel; and before Rachel were Andrea, Becky, Lisa, and other names you don’t remember. (Why would you?) None of them, he says, anything like you. He bites his lip and looks down, as if he can’t believe what he just said. It’s such a line, but you catch it. Desire lurches in your gut like shifting gravel.

For anything worthwhile to come of an initial situation, it must be unstable.

Tuesday nights, he teaches Aikido to seniors. You visit the dojo to watch him steer the stiff and arthritic through the simplest of postures. He is tall with strong white teeth; good cheekbones; a model’s jaw, dusted with stubble; quarter-inch dark hair over a well-shaped skull. When it looks to you as if he might hurt a smaller, darker man, the other man turns and twists, and they part not only unharmed but grinning with the satisfaction of a successful throw and defense. They bow to each other.

You could love someone so powerful and kind. You could have those hands on you.

Show don't tell.

He's in your kitchen. You pick a mug from the drying rack, put it on the counter, fill it with hot water. You rinse a plate and leave it in the sink, close a cupboard, open it again, wipe the counter, squeeze out the sponge. The kettle whistles, and you face him on freshly mopped linoleum to offer peppermint, orange pekoe, Earl Grey. Milk? Sugar? Honey? He grips your arm above the elbow and turns you to stand at his side. He grins. "See? *Katate dori*. You use your opponent's energy to bring you together."

Use precise, specific examples.

He says he's in love with you, citing the reasons—the questions you ask; the way your stovetop espresso pot bubbles over; the flare of your waist into your hip; how openly you cry when you talk about your mother; the long muscles of your back; your attention to grammatical parallelism—and punctuating each with a kiss on your ear, your cheek, your nose, your sacrum.

Exploit setting to convey mood and meaning.

Canyon Road, early spring, cherry blossoms explode in pale pink. Buckeyes bud green, leaves furled tight and round like capers. In six months, you imagine, the branches arching the road will drop brown leaves you'll crunch underfoot on your walk home together. He takes your hand, says "Yes."

Dialogue must do more than one thing.

You can say anything—and do. Schoolyard humiliations; your mother's dying words; how your father still calls you Pit because you loved olives as a child; what you want most from this world. "Fuck" and "come," words you've never said aloud in this context. After a lifetime of measuring words like teaspoons of honey or vinegar, you pour the whole five-pound bag of flour on the table. *Here I am.*

"I could listen to you the rest of my life," he says. "I was a work in progress 'til I met you." And later that evening, his body pressing yours into the pebbled wall outside a movie theater, "I want to fuck your mind."

Use Anglo Saxon diction rather than Latinate.

You bring him his favorite mug, full and lightened with the amount of half & half you know by now he likes. "Coffee in bed. What more you could you want?"

He grins. "A blow job."

Aim for unity of time and place.

You have a business trip to New York coming up. "Let's drive!" he says. If love is a mineshaft, you fall another ten feet: How can he know driving cross-country with a lover is something you've always wanted to do? He pulls out the atlas and flips to the double-page spread of 3,000 miles, moves your finger slowly south and east. You think, not for the first time, that his hands—long-fingered, octave-spanning—are the most beautiful part of him. It's all happening so fast, but you welcome fast. You are forty and making up for lost time.

Stopping your hand on Arizona, he strokes the underside of your wrist: "We'll stay with my folks so they can see how wonderful you are." Pausing on east Texas to press his hip against yours, "we'll sleep in a field and I'll taste you under the Milky Way," and somewhere on Louisiana, where your fingers, now intertwined with his, brush the fly of his jeans, "we'll have really good gumbo." On Alabama, his other hand brushing the seam of your jeans that runs underneath, "we'll fuck in a cheap motel," and Georgia, where that hand moves up to unbutton the clasp and find you wet, "here, too, staying at my sister's, we'll have to be quiet so we don't wake the baby," and South Carolina, where his finger slips in and his hard-on presses your flank, "and here," all the way up 95, your fingers sliding along each other's and your head pulled back and his breath hot in your ear as you bend over the table, he slides down your jeans, and the atlas falls to the floor.

Use significant detail.

At first the orange is just this: sweet and juicy, something to share. You begin pulling the skin off in chunks, fat confetti littering the tablecloth, yellow wax staining your fingers. He grins, takes it from you, finishes the job in one long peel. "Do it this way."

"Does it matter?" you ask, sweeping the chunks and curl of peel

into your palm and then into the trash. It's your kitchen, after all, your tablecloth, your trash, your orange. His eyes are green flecked with brown: *When did you get so petty?* they seem to ask.

"It's just an orange." He splits it in two, hands you half.

Vary your syntax.

When he says (after a week together), "I love you," you tell him to wait and see how he feels after two. When he asks (after two) when you'll be ready to move in with him, you suggest that it might be a good idea to have an argument first. When he declares that he can't live without you, you wonder why not. When he predicts pregnancy by Christmas, you ask when he plans to stop coming all over your belly. When he says that his upstairs neighbor—who stomps on her bare floor every morning for the express purpose of waking him up—doesn't deserve to live, you consider the Dalai Lama quotation magnetized to his refrigerator. When he says, after dinner with friends, that you didn't draw him out enough, you say that's not your job. Stay awake all night staring at the window. Begin to have doubts.

Anchor pronoun references with clear antecedents.

One day, you splay on the sheets, your body blotting paper. "God," you say, voice hoarse, "that's what it's all about, isn't it?"

Later, he tells you that No, sex is not what it is all about.

But "sex" wasn't what you meant.

Good artists borrow; great artists steal.

He calls you Bug, Lover, Sweetie, and Layla. None sticks.

At a dinner party, he calls out, "Hey, Pit."

He tells a friend of his about your brother's research in Antarctica, quoting from Brandon's last letter—which was written to you.

Your mother, he says, sent him your way.

"You never knew my mother," you say.

"I do now."

Kill your darlings.

"As soon as possible," he says on the topic of children. He loves the fact you're forty, asks you never to dye your hair, and clips child-rearing philosophy from magazines. You visit the OB-GYN with your notepad,

jot down "frequent intercourse" and "folic acid." You chart your cycle. He places bets each month on which ovary has sprung the egg. You make a lot of love—fast furious love; slow sweet rocking before falling asleep love; satiating, flat-as-a-pancake-afterward afternoon love; love with pleasure and joy, with tedium and impatience, with mixed signals and, once, in spite; storybook, happy-ever-after love; love after waking pungent with doubt.

Each month, drops of blood bloom in the toilet bowl.

90 percent of your story lies submerged like an iceberg.

He catches you with his digital camera one night as you walk by. "Wow. That is sexy." On the screen, a blur of silk and thigh. You wear his favorite nightgown, but he doesn't touch it or you. He looks at the screen, repeats "Wow." You look over his shoulder at the image. It has cut off your head.

He shows you shots of him and Lily, their faces filling the frame. Realization runs cold down your arm. You didn't see it until now: The hair. Hers is darker, but other than that, it's the same. They both keep it no longer than a quarter inch. You point this out. He grins: "Yeah."

Don't use dreams to convey meaning.

You climb a cliff that crumbles like wet sand beneath your fingers. The harder you grasp, the more it gives.

Another: He lectures you on proper temperature and compression to avoid the spurt of espresso all over the white enamel stove, and you watch as his skin melts away like a leper's.

At the heart of successful fiction lies an anguished question.

You hear yourself saying "Because I love him." You think of his line: "I love you" really means "I love the way you make me feel." You think of the fact that no other man trembled the first time he put his hands on you.

Get out while the getting's good, your father advises. "Don't wait until you're saddled with a mortgage or, good god, a baby."

"Love takes a lot of work," you reply.

Doesn't it?

If a gun hangs on the wall in the first act, it must go off by the third.

He climbs into bed after a day of helping Lily move. You hold him as he talks about what a mess she is. You've heard it before: *Lily's needy, Lily's weak, Lily has no core*. You ask (again) why he stayed with her so long, and he says (again), "Fair question." And then: "I'm with you now. All that's the past."

He falls asleep in your arms. You wake in the night to find him on top of you, pounding hard. He finishes fast. In the morning, he tells you he had a dream of fucking Lily.

The point of view character should undergo reversal.

You've changed. You don't draw him out the way you used to. You talk way too much. You suck all the air out of the room. Etc.

You're good at rhetoric, seduction, weeping—none of which gets you anywhere, and you stop wanting them to. No one has ever loved you like this, and thank God no one else ever will. Finally, you say it: "I can't do this anymore."

"I appreciate that," he says, as though you passed him the salt.

Dramatize, dramatize.

You pick up the shears, open the blades. A maroon shirt, man's XL, hangs off the back of the chair. You hack it to shreds. You carry dishes to the basement, white plates off which you both ate food cooked for each other now a wobbling stack in your arms, and smash each one on the cement floor. He brought wood for your fireplace from the stack outside his bedroom window, the window he kept closed because rats nested in the woodpile. You toss the wood in a box and leave it on the curb, with a large Magic Markered sign PLEASE TAKE.

Avoid sudden, trick endings.

It's not Lily. He'll never go back to her. But it's the fact that Lily—the woman with no core, the woman with his hair, the woman with a head like a pumpkin you imagine smashing—approaches you at the coffee shop and pulls up a chair. She knows you've left him, knows everything, she says, including that he's dating someone new. Lily crinkles her eyes, speaks sweetly. "Her name is Anna. He says she's just like you."

Victim stories are unusable.

You beat the walls. You scream and cry. How could he have done this to you? How could love turn so bad? You'll never be given a satisfactory answer, but you'll get to write the story.
