

the likelihood of failure. Brave failure does not diminish the importance of the effort. Many of the great stories we love are beautiful failures.

My failure as a basketball player was not beautiful. I was driven by vanity and arrogance and a bravado that was nothing more than a physical brand of intellectual denial. These are ugly traits in a person, but good traits to explore in fiction. One day I'll write a story about that dumb kid on the playground, and I'll continue drafting the story until I discover something about him that will surprise me. His redemption will not be on the court but the page, and maybe then I'll be able to forgive him.

ANDRE DUBUS

The Habit of Writing

I gestate: for months, often for years. An idea comes to me from wherever they come, and I write it in a notebook. Sometimes I forget it's there. I don't think about it. By *think* I mean *plan*. I try never to think about where a story will go. This is as hard as writing, maybe harder; I spend most of my waking time doing it; it is hard work, because I want to know what the story will do and how it will end and whether I can write it; but I must not know, or I will kill the story by controlling it; I work to surrender. I know a political scientist who writes books. Once I told him that I try simply to go to the desk and receive what will come. He said he did the same. I said: "I thought you guys used outlines. Don't you already know what you want to say?"

"No," he said. "It all happens at the typewriter. I never get any work done by thinking."

The Zen archer does not release the arrow; he concentrates, breathes; the arrow releases itself, and the target draws it to itself.

I gestate, and when I am blessed, I am working on one story while another is growing in me. I begin to see characters' souls, sometimes their faces. I give them bodies and names. That is all I need, for most of my ideas are situations, and many of them are questions: *What if?* What would happen if a man's daughter accidentally killed a man by hitting him with her car and did not stop but drove home and told her father? When I see the first two scenes, I begin writing. This truly means that the first two scenes show themselves to me. I may be watching a movie or driving my car or talking with a friend, and here come the scenes. It means it is time. The story is ready for me to receive it. Then I must write, with the most intense concentration I can muster.

In 1979 I was at someone's house, at a party, and I met a lawyer. By then I had been writing for a quarter of a century, since I was seventeen years old. He asked me what was the hardest part of writing. I said: "I just learned what it is. Concentration. I don't mean ridding the mind of bills and heartbreak and other things. I mean absolute concentration on one word. Becoming the word."

"I'm a Zen archer," he said, "and lately my concentration has been bad."

We talked about pitchers, how sometimes they lose concentration during a game and can't get it back. And he said: "In this country, they'll forgive you for losing concentration while writing a story, or trying a case, or pitching a baseball, or shooting an arrow. But there's one place they won't: in bed. They'll always say 'You don't love me.'"

I repeat this because it's funny and profound. If we can lose concentration—and we do, we do—performing a natural act that animals can perform as easily as some

of them kill, and if we lose concentration performing this with one we truly love, two lovers in harmony in body and spirit, how can we expect anything while writing but a very difficult and intense struggle simply to concentrate on discovering one word after another and putting them on a blank page till the page is no longer blank? And filling a page with words means nothing of itself. We have to make those words into human beings, while writing the story; and if we do it well enough, that reader will remember these fictional people, as if they actually walked the earth, and entered, however briefly, the reader's life. Anyone who wants to write should read Joseph Conrad's Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*: I have read nothing better about writing prose, giving life to imagined characters.

I told the lawyer *concentration* because of a story I was working on then. It's called "Anna." A few years earlier, I'd read in the *Boston Globe* about a man who robbed a bank in Boston and then went to a phone booth and called his girlfriend in Florida to tell her about it; she asked him where the phone booth was and then whispered to her boyfriend to go next door and call the Boston Police; then she kept the cuckolded bank robber on the phone till the police came. I wrote this in my notebook, and wrote: "story of betrayal." In those days I was still planning stories. I only wrote one of them, in 1968 or 1969, exactly as I had planned it, and it was dead long before I put the final period on the page; I had not given free will to the young woman in the story I dropped into the wastebasket. So I knew stories would never become what I planned them to be and that, with draft after draft, they would tell me what they were. I usually wrote five or six drafts; generally the first draft was terrible and several only showed me what the story was not, and generally what it was not was precisely what I had thought it would be. A novella, *Adultery*, took seven drafts, four hundred typed pages (I write in longhand, then type) to get the final sixty pages. This was foolish, or seems foolish now, but perhaps I needed it for those twenty-five years before I confronted "Anna," which threw me on my back and then raised me up to a new way of working.

Of course I have to plan some things. With "Anna" I had to plan a robbery. I went to see my pharmacist, told him what I was doing, and asked him how much money someone could steal from a drugstore. He said very little from his, because he had regular customers who charged everything; but he said that from a drugstore on a highway, especially one that sold money orders, a robber could get two thousand dollars. So I made up a drugstore in a shopping center on Route 1, north of Boston, not far from Haverhill, where I live, and where Anna and Wayne lived, a young, unmarried couple, he a maker of hamburgers at Wendy's, she a clerk at a convenience store. But I planned too much, still, after a quarter of a century, believing these things would happen. Even though, in my late twenties, I had written a novel, *The Lieutenant*, and my protagonist had broken my heart when he failed to climb one more rung on the moral ladder; even though character after character in stories had broken my heart, doing things I wished they would not. The young man in "Anna," because he had no money, had only a hunting knife as a tool for their first robbery of the drugstore. I planned how later he would get a gun. They lived upstairs in an apartment building and on the ground floor was a widow. She would kill herself with gas from the stove. He would smell the gas and go into her apartment, open the windows, and find, in her bedside table, a pistol she had chosen not to use. He would escalate, robbing now with a gun, robbing several places, and Anna, in fear and maybe good conscience,

would betray him to the police. I actually wrote all of this nonsense in my notebook; writing it down makes it feel like it must happen. That is why I call it nonsense.

The story is in Anna's point of view. I began it slowly, writing about her, then moved to the robbery. But it was very difficult for me to become her. I kept telling friends: "As far as I know, I don't know anyone who's committed armed robbery." I kept writing, trying for those five pages a day, but each day I felt as though I were watching Anna from a distance, and I could not get inside of her, become her. Then one day or night I decided to try a different approach. I told myself that next day at the desk I would not leave a sentence until I knew precisely what Anna was feeling. I told myself that even if I wrote only fifty words, I would stay with this. By now Anna and Wayne had robbed the drugstore and had driven to a liquor store in their own town, but the store was closed, so they went to the neighborhood bar where they were regulars.

At my desk next morning I held my pen and hunched my shoulders and leaned my head down, physically trying to look more deeply into the page of the notebook. I did this for only a moment before writing, as a batter takes practice swings while he waits in the on-deck circle. In that moment I began what I call vertical writing, rather than horizontal. I had never before thought in these terms. But for years I had been writing horizontally, trying to move forward (those five pages); now I would try to move down, as deeply as I could.

I always stop writing for the day in mid-sentence, a trick I learned from Ernest Hemingway when I wrote a paper about him while I was a college freshman. That was his method and his advice to writers: stop in mid-sentence, while it is going well (I stop in mid-scene too), then exercise your body and forget the story and let the subconscious do the work. On that first morning of vertical writing, I read the half-sentence, with Anna and Wayne in the bar, hunched my shoulders and leaned toward the page one more time, and then slowly dove. Very slowly. I worked on feeling all of her physical sensations. There are probably too many tactile details in that story, there are probably too many in every story I've written since "Anna," but that is the only way I can work. And something happened, in that bar with Anna.

I did become her, through her senses. *You must know what a glass of beer feels like in her hand*, I told myself; *you must know everything*. While they stood at the bar, I learned this: she truly loved Wayne. Now, I was excited. I had not written many words, and suddenly I knew that this was a story about two people who loved each other. It was not a story of betrayal. Walls fell down and everything was open: I knew nothing of what would happen next, and that was frightening—although simple to solve—but it was wonderful, it was elating, I was both lost and free. There were no more plans. The widow remained in the story, but there would be no suicide, no gun, no more robberies. Now what?

They were still in the bar. *Just follow them home*, I told myself, and since then I have believed that you can write a story simply by becoming a character and following that character home. Or through a day or a night. Who among us is not a story, or several of them, every day? So I went home with Anna and Wayne. Next day I woke with her, felt her bad hangover, went to work with her. Then what? I followed her home. Now, when working on a story, I keep telling myself: *Just follow the dots; become the character and follow; there will be a story*. So that night after work, Anna and Wayne went to the

mall. Her hangover was still bad. They bought things. They went home and carried the things upstairs: a record player, a television set, a vacuum cleaner. They left the things and walked to the bar. They had not bought food or beer; I noticed that; I did not plan it. They had forgotten their nearly bare refrigerator. On the way to the bar they walked past a car dealership. I almost wrote that, through the large windows, the new cars showed them what they would never be able to buy, showed them the economic futility of their lives. But I decided not to point this out; maybe a reader would notice. I was still following the dots: they went to the bar because of their hangovers and the spiritual fatigue caused by the mall's stimulation and by their spending money on dead yet good things that would give them comfort but not hope. In the bar they drank and then went home, where in bed they sadly talked, knowing now that they could never get everything. And then I knew it was a story about America too, about the things we are expected to buy and love and the things that are supposed to give us equality with other Americans and fulfill our souls. The next day Anna took their clothes to the laundromat and washed them. The story was done. I had written slowly every day, and in one draft it was done.

It was done because I wrote it vertically; if I had written it horizontally, I would have discovered in the first or at least an early draft that it was not a story of betrayal or even a story about robbers. In the fifth or sixth draft I would have written the story as it wanted me to. When I have finished a story in longhand, I read it into a tape recorder. Doing this makes me see things I had not seen before, probably because reading aloud is a physical act that heightens my concentration. Remember: before each day's work I read the manuscript from the beginning; so, by the time I have finished a story, I have read sentences as many as a hundred times or more. While reading aloud I change things: often I cut or compress. The day after I record the story, I listen to it and usually have a few changes to make, but not as many as when I read it aloud. Then it is ready to type. When I wrote horizontally, I wrote an average of three stories a year, in a good year. Writing vertically, I still write three stories a year, in a good year.

My stories often stop; I think this happens less since I began writing vertically. While I was writing horizontally about sixty-five percent of my stories stopped and would not move. I do not believe in forcing a story. If it stops, it is telling me that I am not seeing it or hearing it. I could force it, impose action on it, but it would be false. So I lay it aside, and start another story, and wait for the motionless story to put itself into motion and to tell me it is moving now, and I should turn to it. A story called "The Fat Girl" stopped after the young woman's roommate put her on a diet and she lost weight. Simply stopped. I put it in a drawer. A year or more later I was walking on a small town sidewalk when those words came into my mind, from the air, the sky, from God knows where: *Get her married*. That night I wrote, and the next day, and the story was done.

I gestate. In 1985 I wrote a story, "A Father's Story," which came in one longhand draft, one tape recording, then a typed draft. I don't remember how many weeks or months I spent writing the story, but the work truly began years before I wrote the first sentence. I used to walk, fast and happily, for five miles, for conditioning and peace of soul and clearing of clutter from my mind. On one of these walks, an idea came: *Write about a man of faith. Make him a good-field no-hit infielder who plays triple A ball and knows he will never play in the major leagues*. When I got home, I wrote that in my notebook.

Much later, months, maybe a year, while I was on my conditioning walk, another idea came: *What is the morality of a hit-and-run accident? I know the civil law; but what is the moral obligation, if you have accidentally killed someone? Can you flee? I wrote that in my notebook. At least a year later—oh, I miss those conditioning walks, now that I am in a wheelchair; they gave me transcendence and opened me to the voices—another idea came: Why not make the man of faith not a ballplayer but the father of a hit-and-run driver? I wrote that in my notebook and it felt right.*

Now I did have to think. Unlike my government, or American voters, or both, I believe I have to give jobs to my characters. I also had to decide whether the driver would be a son or a daughter. An instinct told me to make her a daughter, because the father may treat her differently than he would a son. I did not know how or even if he would treat her differently. It was an instinct, and I have faith in those. Nearly absolute faith, when the instincts are about writing. So: a father and a daughter, and a false start. I gave the father a convenience store with a coffee and lunch counter; probably he had a wife and other children; I don't remember. Nor do I remember why he did not work as a character. I was interested in his owning this store where police officers from his small town would come to drink coffee; they would be his friends—casual ones, but still friends—and he would be concealing his daughter's crime from them. But the story stopped, and I laid it aside. I do not understand these things: I think part of my work is not to understand. Not long ago I wrote a story called "All the Time in the World." Again and again, it stopped about midway through, when the woman in the story met a man whom she would love and marry. All I wanted to do was write a story about how and why a man and woman met each other. But when the man—Ted Briggs—entered the story, it stopped. He was a slender, angular man; I gave him the body of a man I know. One day, while I was not writing the story, I saw him differently: he was a broad and strong man with a cane and a limp from a knee wounded in Vietnam and an alcoholic who no longer drank. This new body gave Ted Briggs something richer: he was a man, wounded in body and spirit, and from this I got another story I wrote later, "Falling in Love," about Ted when he was drinking and taking erotic love too easily. With Ted's new body and soul, "All the Time in the World" moved dot after dot after dot.

I imagined a new man for "A Father's Story": I used the body of a man who owned a riding stable where I used to bring one of my daughters for Sunday afternoon lessons, in the 1970s, when she was in high school. I gave this man the riding stable. Now he had a body and a job. And I took away his wife, made him a divorced Catholic, so that his faith would be action: he will not remarry and he tries to be celibate and almost perfectly is. His children are grown, and he lives alone, and I gave him a priest as his best friend.

But I was not ready to begin. He had a name, Luke Ripley, and work, and he went to daily mass and cared for his horses. It was time for me to immerse. I read William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Then I reread Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*; this was in the winter of 1983 while I was teaching at Bradford College in Haverhill. I asked a woman friend, a philosophy teacher, if she would like to team-teach *Fear and Trembling* in an open seminar, without grades or credit, and she said she would. We somehow announced this seminar, saying we would meet one night a week, for as long as all of us wished. Then we started, and students came to the classroom; I don't

remember how many times we met, only that, for the last night, the woman and I met with one female student in the neighborhood bar. Now I was ready, and the story did not take a long time to write; I finished it in April. A blizzard came one school day that April, canceling classes. At my desk, while snow blew outside, I knew my story was ending. I stopped, in mid-sentence, mid-scene. Next day the sky was clear, but I called the registrar and told her I wasn't feeling well and could not teach, and I went to my desk. I had to know how this story would end. And that day it did end, and in its closing lines, I knew.

Nearly everything in that story surprised me. I had planned how the accident would happen. That was all. The story is in the first person, and I knew that its beginning would have to establish, for a reader, that Luke was a man of faith. All I had to work with was his going to daily mass and his nearly perfect refusal to make love out of wedlock, therefore his refusal to date women and to consider marriage forbidden by the Catholic church. I had nothing more.

But on the first page Luke took my pen and moved: he talked about his solitary life, about his rituals of loneliness, about God, and his priest friend, and his marriage and children. I kept telling my wife: "He won't stop talking. *Nothing* is happening, and I can't make him shut up." That was at times when I was away from the desk and worrying about those words in the notebook on the desk, but I should not have been worrying or thinking about Luke Ripley. This is hard work: trying to free yourself from thinking about what you have written that day and will write tomorrow.

I taught two classes every weekday afternoon, and that freed me. At night I had homework, reading novels and stories for the literature classes; and my wife and I always, on weeknights, went to a movie or watched one on video. Then there was sleep. Of course the day after the April blizzard, I could no longer wait, and I went to my desk. I should not have worried about Luke talking on and on; for at the desk, I did not worry. I was him, I spoke; I also listened to him. But not from a distance, the kind I had had from Anna till I began to write vertically. No, I listened to him as he listened to himself. I will paraphrase E. M. Forster because I don't remember where I read this: How can I know what I think about something till I hear what I have to say about it? This is profound, I believe, and universal; when we speak from the heart, with no plan, no point to make, we discover truths we did not know that we knew. So at the desk Luke's talking filled me, surprised me, and I was one with it and with him.

I believe "A Father's Story" was twenty-six typed pages, and for the first thirteen of those—in longhand, slowly, vertically—Luke Ripley talked. Finally he stopped and told the story of the accident and his daughter coming home to him. Then I could tell my wife: "He's finally stopped talking; something is finally *happening*." There is a strong wind blowing that night, in the story, only because one night I woke up to go to the bathroom and outside a strong wind was blowing and I thought: *I should put wind in a story*. Near the end of the story's action, I began, while writing, to see images: Luke and his daughter riding horses together, and I thought that would be the final scene. Only because I was seeing it. It did not become the final scene. And, as Luke was helping his daughter conceal the crime, I discovered something: in his first thirteen pages of talking he had said, that, in love, feeling should be subordinate to action. Yet here he was, acting only because of his feelings—love for his daughter—and paying no heed to his belief in good action, no matter what one feels.

The story's action ends; Luke's daughter drives home to Florida. He talks again. On my last day of longhand work, the sunlit day after the blizzard, I left my desk to make another cup of tea and said to my wife, "He's talking again. Now he's talking to God." I took the tea to my desk, picked up the pen Luke was holding anyway, and held on, while he talked to God. God talked too; Luke gave Him his lines. Then he stopped and, with gratitude and joy, I placed at the end of the story its final period.