

Rachel Cline

A POSTCARD FROM THE VELVET REVOLUTION

WENT TO FILM SCHOOL IN THE EARLY 1980S. THE FACULTY was thick with Eastern Europeans, especially Czechs who had studied together in Prague and left after 1968. In screenwriting class, we worked through thirty pages of writing exercises that, it entertained me to believe, had come over with our professor—I never actually asked, but the typeface was strange and the letters had been broken up into artifacts by generations of photocopying. On the other hand, the document was written in English. It didn't make a screenwriter out of me, but it provided hours or possibly even years of fun.

After the publication of my first novel, in 2004, I discovered the problem of “show, don't tell.” I didn't actually discover it; it was pointed out to me. Repeatedly. It did sound awfully familiar. “You must write only what the camera sees,” my screenwriting professor liked to tell us. His was even more of an injunction, but a friendlier one, I still think. Maybe it was the accent. In any case, I went looking again for the exercises in our screenwriting samizdat, but I couldn't find them. What follows is therefore a mash-up. (Read it to yourself with a Czech accent for best results.)

THE EXERCISE

Picture a postcard with a girl alone on a road. What do I mean by a girl, how old? How can you tell at this distance? Get closer. Is she sitting or standing? Well or ill? And what do I mean by a road? Where is it? What can you see on either side? Decide who your girl is and what she's doing there. Decide where she came from and where she's going. Decide why. Now, what does she have with her? What time of day is it? What year? Describe the girl on the road. There is no one she knows nearby. Use only what can be seen, smelled, touched, heard, and possibly tasted to dramatize her situation. If she speaks, it can only be in reaction to something that occurs in her surroundings. No interior monologue, no recollections, no omniscience. In essence, you are a camera, but a camera with five senses and a decent vocabulary, and the film is free. Keep shooting until something happens.

If you get stuck, try a genre: suspense, romance, science fiction, sure—but even surrealist, postmodernist, absurdist, fairy tale. Use conventions of setting, appearance, and mood to create expectations that you can later satisfy or subvert (or both). “Suspense is the tension between hope and fear; pull the strings!” said my professor. When you think of your girl and your road, what do you hope will happen? What do you fear might happen instead? The most fun things to read, in my opinion, are the ones that allow me to entertain the possibility of more than one outcome. Do that.

After you've gotten to a stopping place, and after you have put this exercise away for a day or a week or ten years, reread what you wrote and ask yourself what it would mean if this piece came at the end of the story instead of at the beginning. What if your girl is not the main character at all but a bystander in someone else's story?

What if this scene is a dream or a memory and the real story is happening somewhere else or at some other time? Write about that for a while and then put the whole thing away, again.

The third time you look at this story (for this is a film school exercise and so it must have three acts), go back and break all the rules. Add the memories and interior monologues that I forbade you earlier. Decide that Prague is really Mexico and your girl is an old woman now. Introduce a character who can answer some of the questions that stumped you earlier and, then, remember that *that* character is a liar.

Lee Martin

WHAT IF IT WAS MORE THAN THAT?

HERE'S SOMETHING I CAN'T GET OUT OF MY MIND THESE days, which seems as good a place as any for me to begin to see what I have to tell you about writing creative nonfiction.

So much of the genre centers on exactly what the writer doesn't know. It's that curiosity and uncertainty that requires the essay, which is ideally an attempt on the writer's part to discover what he or she really thinks and feels about a particular topic. A good essay is an act of exploration, an examination of character and situation, but also an examination of the writer's own intellectual and emotional responses to something that simply won't let him or her go.

What do you have right now that you can't stop thinking about? Something from the present? The past? The future? Something you lived through or, as in what I'm about to tell you, something you heard told or something you read about in print?

I come from a rural part of southeastern Illinois, and from 1969 through 1975, I lived in the small town of Sumner, population in the neighborhood of one thousand at the time. Just prior to my birth, in 1955, the town celebrated its centennial. My parents purchased one of the books, *Trails of Yesterday*, printed to commemorate the occasion, and that book has survived these last fifty-one