

The Trigger

WHAT GIVES RISE TO A STORY?

HERE IS my mother, in the early 1970s, with a group of Camp Fire Girls in Boston's Museum of Science. She is in a darkened (probably womblike) room with photographic displays of a developing fetus. As my mother tells it, and she does, often, in the years to come, the Camp Fire Girls are like so many kid ducks, waddling from photo to photo as she narrates the story of how babies are made. Other children, attracted by the explanation, wander over. An army of baby ducks! What my mother doesn't say but what I remember is that I am the laggard duck, ready to leave the exhibit. *The Miracle of Life*, I'm thinking. *Yeah, yeah*. Unlike the other girls, I've heard it all before. My mother is not uptight about the facts of life. For me, the cafeteria French fries, perfectly crisp and greasy, are the museum's greatest mystery. I'm wishing it were lunch. But we're still only three months into the wonder that is birth.

"OK," Terry says, finally. She is my across-the-street neighbor whom I envy for years for her early use of lipstick, her familiarity with boys and cigarettes. But today she is just a little girl. "OK," she says again to my mother, "but what I still don't *get* is how does the sperm get to the egg?"

Expectant faces. The Camp Fire Girls are now a different sort of baby bird. They are nestlings, necks craned upward, ready for a final worm of knowledge to be dropped into their open beaks. "Yeah," they might be chirping, "what about *that*?"

"OK," my mother says, brightly, "OK, everybody! Lunch!"

There is, after all, the moment of conception, and then there's the

moment of conception, which no one wants to *explain*, good God, especially to children.

And so . . . with writing and the simple, yet hopelessly awkward question of where things start. Simple because there's an easy enough answer to "Where did *that* come from?" And the answer is, "Oh, an anecdote I heard, an image that came to me, a crazy article I started (but didn't really finish) in the newspaper." And hard because that's not the full story. It leaves out what my mother left out, and I don't mean the mechanics of sex but the whole messy issue of attraction.

MY HABIT, when writing about writing, is to proceed by a sort of benign plagiarism. I take the question at hand and get on the horn with my writer friends, make *them* answer. Once I've found a way to embroider their quotes together, I have my essay. But when I pose the "What gives rise to a story?" question, half my friends answer with irritable "I dunno"s. And who can blame them? Talking about the origin of a story is a bit like talking about the origin of a successful relationship. It only makes narrative sense in hindsight. ("At first, I thought he was such a jerk, but then . . .") Ideas for stories, until they prove themselves, are just another bad date, another fruitless notion flitting through the brain. ("At first, I thought nothing of the idea. The truth was . . .")

And there are other reasons we hesitate to talk about story origins. One is that it's not like talking about, say, point of view. It isn't an issue only of craft but of psychology. Ours. And we may want to keep that hidden. What's more, such talk seems presumptuous. Sure, John Updike can do it, but the rest of us—baby writers, all of us, we're all always baby writers—may feel like we're assuming too much when we talk about our process. We're assuming we're real writers, and as soon as we do that, we're bound to be punished for hubris. The punishment, naturally enough, will be that "it" will be taken away. Inspiration will flee. Permanently.

I went back to my old high school, recently, to sit on a panel with other writers. We were asked to talk about narrative, our individual narrative processes. I had a fuzzy hold on what this meant. I kept thinking, "My narrative process? You mean, how *I* became a story?" Then the youngest among us confessed that the question discomfited her, for she feared that introspection would ruin every-

thing, destroy the magic. And I thought, “Yes, *that’s* why I can’t make myself understand the question: because I don’t want to answer.”

Just because I don’t want to tell, though, doesn’t mean I don’t want to hear. I’d have abandoned all thoughts of French fries if I thought my mother was going to answer Terry’s question. The truth is: I *like* hearing how people got their story ideas, just as I like hearing about how couples met. The same properties of attraction and repulsion, interest and doubt, seem to be at play. Then, there are the wrong turns and misperceptions along the path from there to *here*—here being the point at which the tale is finished and the story of the story has its own narrative.

Not that this knowledge helps me, exactly, when I sit down to write. After all, anything can occasion a story: an overheard conversation, image, sentence, family story, or book. Triggers are ubiquitous. They’re also idiosyncratic: one person’s method is never going to instruct another in how to go about “finding” a trigger.

My mother and me, on the phone, twenty years ago:

My mother: I met your father at a Hillel mixer, so why don’t you just head over to—

Me: No, Ma, no. You just don’t *get* it.

Still, triggers have some common characteristics—not in content as much as form. And we can learn something by looking at these shared traits. Perhaps we can even discover markers that will suggest whether our seeds have the potential to grow and blossom.

JOHN FOWLES’S *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* started with a visual image: a woman standing at the end of a quay and staring out to sea. “That was all,” Fowles writes in “Notes on an Unfinished Novel.” “This image rose in my mind one morning when I was still in bed half asleep. It corresponded to no actual incident in my life (or in art) that I can recall.”¹

According to Henry James, Ivan Turgenev’s fiction started with “the vision of some person or persons, who hovered before him, soliciting him.”² These were characters whom Turgenev imagined fully, in all their existential complexity. Similarly, Joan Didion’s *Play It as It Lays* began with a “picture in the mind,” an image of a woman in a white halter dress walking across a Las Vegas casino to pick up

a house phone. “Who is paging her?” Didion wonders aloud in her famous essay “Why I Write.” “Why is she here to be paged? How exactly did she come to this?” Unlike Fowles’s image, Didion’s came from “real” life. One day, while sitting in a casino, Didion saw a vaguely familiar woman paged to a phone. Didion explains that “it was precisely this moment in Las Vegas that made *Play It as It Lays* begin to tell itself to me.”³

But plenty of curious images, real or imagined, don’t trigger stories. Some good material becomes . . . nothing. For example, yesterday, my husband, two friends, and I walked by a deer’s head in the bed of a pickup. The head was unmounted, severed from its body, staring pointlessly up at the sky. Last week, I had lunch with a friend, and the squirming legs of the ladybug she found in her salad looked like an animated false eyelash. I don’t feel inclined to embroider these images with anything more than a simile.

But these two friends from yesterday: one is an old friend of my husband’s, the other is his lover of two years. They both have AIDS. The lover has a rather florid face. I don’t know why he’s so red. Perhaps it’s just his complexion, or maybe the drugs he’s taking. His wife died four years ago; he’d infected her with the virus. I sometimes think the red of his face is a form of combustion. He’s aflame with grief and guilt. Both emotions—he doesn’t need to say it, it’s too clear—are consuming him. I wonder, I can’t stop wondering, how it all worked out. The marriage, I mean. Was he always openly gay? Did they have an agreement? Or did he lead two entirely separate lives? The man and his wife were together for thirty years and had two children, whom he still sees on a weekly basis. Do they blame him for their mother’s death? Or are they touched, as I am, by how he speaks of how much he misses her? He mentions that in the end a Kaposi’s sarcoma grew over her eye, so she couldn’t quite open the lid. But I wait for him to volunteer all this. I don’t ask much.

What I do ask is, “How did you become an architect?”

His lover says, “Watch out. She’s a writer, anything you tell her might go into a story.”

I think: The dirt on how he chose a profession? No. Though I *can* see plundering his life for fiction. I’d have only to answer the questions I’ll never ask. So a generalization that *might* help: triggers give rise to questions. They’re “triggers” *because* they’re incomplete, *because* they require elaboration. The red of that man’s face

leads me to the heart of what I most wonder about his marriage, and since I won't ask, it leads me to a mystery that only my imagination can resolve.

Melanie Rae Thon says that her story "Punishment" sprang from "a double mystery."⁴ While reading an article about slavery, Thon came across a sentence about a woman hung for the murder of her master's son. Thon first wanted to know what the article didn't say: whether the woman did it. When Thon had pursued the fictional version of the slave's life long enough to realize she *had*, Thon wanted to know *why*. The answer seems easy to me. I'd say "hateful repression" and leave it at that. What's incomplete for one person isn't necessarily incomplete for another, which is why the anecdote is a trigger for Thon and not for me. On hearing the basic facts, I don't ask a question. Of course, this doesn't mean I wouldn't want to read Thon's story, just that I don't have the curiosity necessary to write it.

MOST PEOPLE who have tried to write—and shared the fact, if not the product, of their efforts with others—have at one time had an acquaintance lean over a dinner table and confide, "Oh, I have a great story idea for you." This happened to me just last night. I was with a group of friends, most of them young Ph.D.s, talking about the academic job market. One friend—a hip, supersmart English professor, given to saying things like "Man, Thomas Hardy rocks my world"—encouraged another, a French instructor, about her job prospects: "You've got great publications, you've been teaching in a good school, and now you're going to run an overseas program." The French instructor smiled dismissively, in the way of those uneasy receiving compliments. "I should be your agent," the English professor added.

"It's going to happen soon," the French instructor enthused, "agents for Ph.D.s!"

The English professor turned to me, "Debra, this is a *great* idea for a novel. This would make a *great* farce."

She wasn't truly serious, and it's just as well, for ideas like this are invariably *not* great. Packaged up, unmysterious, they begin and end life as a dinner anecdote, unable to grow into fiction because the work of comprehending the funny, queer, horrible, or touching moment has already been done by the teller.

Joyce Carol Oates's disturbing story "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" was inspired by an article about a serial murderer known as the Pied Piper of Tucson. When Oates's story became the movie *Smooth Talk*, Oates published a short essay in which she recalled purposely not reading the full account of the Pied Piper since she didn't want to be "distracted by too much detail."⁵

Now, obviously we need to have a decent grasp on the world to write well. At the same time, reality—at least at the moment of germination—*can* hamper the imagination. This realization is presumably behind Virginia Woolf's claim that for the writer, "There must be great freedom from reality."⁶

People sometimes say that the problem with writing from life, with using autobiographical material, is the instinct for veracity: we can't stop ourselves from being true to the experience, even when that sort of truth is no good for the story. The problem may actually be that a true story provides too much material; it doesn't leave enough out. Henry James held this to be so. "Such," he wrote, "is the interesting truth about the stray suggestion, the wandering word, the vague echo, at touch of which the novelist's imagination winces as at the prick of some sharp point: its virtue is all in its needle-like quality, the power to penetrate as finely as possible." Anything more than this, and the effect is ruined, and if the suggestion is offered "designedly," as James puts it, "one is sure to be given too much."⁷

IN "MAKING Up Stories," Joan Didion reveals that Joseph Heller's most famous novel began as a line so mysterious that it had, like an algebra equation, an "X" for which the author needed to solve:

Joseph Heller described the conception of *Catch-22* this way: "I was lying in bed when suddenly this line came to me: 'It was love at first sight. The first time he saw the chaplain X fell madly in love with him.'" The "X" turned out to be Yossarian, but Heller didn't have the name, didn't even know that this "X" was in the Army. "The chaplain wasn't necessarily an army chaplain," he said. "He could have been a prison chaplain. I don't understand the process of imagination though I know that I am very much at its mercy. The ideas come to me in the course of a controlled daydream, a directed reverie."⁸

In her journal, George Eliot—just starting to write fiction and concerned about her ability to move beyond “mere” description to dramatic narrative—recalled, “One morning as I was thinking what should be the subject of my first story, my thoughts merged themselves into a dreamy doze, and I imagined myself writing a story, of which the title was ‘The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton.’”⁹

This notion of controlled daydream, directed reverie, or waking doze lies behind the “guided imagery” exercises that I sometimes use in my fiction-writing classes. Novelist Janet Beeler Shaw first introduced me to this technique. She learned it, in turn, from instructors at Illinois’s Columbia College, who apparently rely heavily on this method. In one variation, a teacher asks students to close their eyes and imagine they’re standing on the top stair leading to a basement they know well. Slowly, she guides them down the staircase, asking them at length to open their eyes and say what they “see” in the basement. After everyone has answered, the teacher instructs the students to close their eyes and imagine descending the stairs again. This time, she tells them to picture a person in the room, a person doing something, and when they next open their eyes, she has them write, as fast as they can, about what they see.

The exercise has endless permutations: a teacher asks students to imagine a long drive to an unfamiliar place, then to describe the first thing they see when they step out of the car; a teacher asks students to imagine themselves in a place of great darkness, then to describe the first light thing that strikes them; and so on.

What surprises me each time I do these exercises is the strength of the written responses and how favorably they compare to the pieces on which students spend time, the “at home” assignments.

The pedagogic notion of guided imagery is linked to what Joan Didion describes as the essential act of writing: “the process of thinking, of plugging into that electrical field of image and making an object out of the flash and the clatter.”¹⁰

And how do you plug in? How do you open yourself up to worthwhile material and then select from it?

First, the clatter. It’s not always easy to see, to be, as Henry James says, “one of the people on whom nothing is lost!”¹¹ In fact, it may be harder for us than it was for our predecessors. There’s more clatter around. Or so it seems: an MTV world, ready to assault us, even as we devise ways to retreat.

And for young people, media garbage may be the biggest obstacle to writing truly. At the small Maine college where I teach, I have a student whose life has been nothing short of astounding. He is cheerful, energetic, gay, born-again Christian, and black. His mother was an addict. I believe she beat him. A few years ago, in the midwestern city he still calls home, his twin brother was murdered on his way home from a card game. At first, whenever this student wrote for me, he wrote soap operas—Danielle Steele fantasies of treachery and big business, luxurious cars, and perfectly attractive women.

“What do you do,” people sometimes ask me, “with a student like that?” But it is only too obvious. I say: Tell your own story. This young man did, but only once, when he wrote about his brother, and then the story turned on the author’s singing voice, a tenor that people tell me is achingly lovely.

I had this student in three consecutive classes. He wasn’t shy about his life, and eventually his stories played themselves out in clubs or shared apartments or at drag pageants, but they retained that sense of a story borrowed from the media, of a tale as yet unmediated by life.

And why? Because the “public” or prevailing notion of story overwhelmed the private notion. Notions of entertainment got in the way of felt truth. When guided imagery exercises work, it’s because students are thinking about life instead of art, what they’ve experienced instead of what they’ve read or “viewed.” For some, this means abandoning the idea of Rambo as fiction, but even sophisticated students let their notions of story overwhelm them.

I had lunch recently with two women whom I’d met at a writing retreat. They’re both quite accomplished and intelligent: one is a literature professor, the other a public relations specialist. Over the course of the weekend, both had written wonderful short exercises for me. In talking about why they’d written so little in the months since then, the literature professor said, “Oh, I have plenty of ideas. I just don’t know how to make them into stories.” The public relations specialist nodded her head: That was exactly *her* problem: she had characters and situations but nothing else. There was a silence, and then she said to the professor, “I always remember that exercise *you* wrote, about the woman walking across the street.” I smiled. I remembered it, too. It had been a striking piece, about a young woman hurrying across a Paris boulevard to go . . . somewhere; the piece

never got that far. “But what am I to do with it?” the professor said. We’d all become friends, so I felt strange playing teacher, still I felt I should offer something. What I came up with sounded insufficient, obnoxiously breezy even, but it was my honest answer: “Just have her go somewhere the next street over, and when she gets there, have something happen.”

I think in this regard of Jane Smiley, who said that her short story “Lily” came about when she imagined what would happen if some friends of hers—a couple and a woman who didn’t know each other—were to meet.¹² Though I don’t know how Smiley composed “Lily,” I can guess at her process. She already had her characters, so she didn’t need to start with that. Instead, she had to imagine an occasion for bringing the couple and the woman together. The three could have met at a restaurant or on a ship or in an adult ed class, but as Smiley set it up, the couple ended up being guests in the house of a woman named Lily. And, then, of course, there needed to be a reason why the couple was visiting Lily, a reason they knew her, a reason they were coming to say hello; there needed to be a past history and a current situation.

To think of all this isn’t to think about story as much as character and situation, the very thing that the professor and public relations specialist already knew how to do. To develop their stories, my former students had only to do what Turgenev did with his hovering visions; they had only, in Henry James’s words, “to imagine, to invent and select and piece together the situations most useful and favorable to the sense of the creatures themselves, the complications they would be most likely to produce and feel.”¹³ They had only to do what they were already doing . . . and forget about story.

BUT I’M making it sound easier than it is. I know that. Still, there are ways to help oneself out. Patricia Henley asks her students to take long walks before they write. The idea, she says, is to get them in a contemplative mood, to let motion induce thought, to get “junk stories” out of their heads so their own stories can emerge.

Others have less healthy methods of making this happen. There’s a reason alcohol is an occupational hazard for writers. It’s a way—among ways—to access material. (Think of Coleridge, who dreamed the better part of “Kubla Khan” after taking opium.) But it’s probably less true that drugs “give” one material than that they release

inhibitions, allowing (some) writers to ignore the part of themselves that dismisses a trigger before it has a chance to develop. Back to my professor friend: if she had allowed her character to finish crossing the street, and if she had abandoned the question of whether her piece did or did not have a strong narrative, her imagination might have taken care of the rest. The painter Philip Guston once said, “If the artist starts evaluating himself, it’s an enormous block, isn’t it?”¹⁴ And of course it is. At the very least, to “plug into the electrical field of image,” one needs to shut one’s censor down, to give the creative self a chance.

Of course, “plugging in” is only the first problem. Plugging in may open us to something like Turgenev’s hovering visions, but it leaves us where my professor friend was left: with the problem of selection. Once we’ve plugged in, what will we pick to address? What will we make happen? In “The Death of Justina,” John Cheever writes, “Fiction is art and art is the triumph over chaos (no less) and we can accomplish this only by the most vigilant exercise of choice, but in a world that changes more swiftly than we can perceive there is always the danger that our powers of selection will be mistaken and that the vision we serve will come to nothing.”¹⁵ This notion of choice has its parallels in the other arts. You choose to paint the peaches and not the landscape. You sculpt the bust and not the torso. You can’t do the whole world; you can’t do all your perceptions; you have to pick. But what should your criteria for selection be? Cheever complains, directly or obliquely, in almost all the stories in his *Some People, Places, and Things That Will Not Appear in My Next Novel* about the mutability of values that makes it so hard to decide what we *should* write about. How, he wants to know, would Gogol or Thackeray write about a suburban bomb shelter decorated with composition gnomes?

There’s a famous story about Chekhov telling a visitor that one could write a story about anything. “Do you know how I write my stories? Here!” He picked up an ashtray lying nearby—presumably it was the first object he saw—and then said, “If you like, it will be a story tomorrow. . . . ‘The Ashtray.’”¹⁶

And what, I wonder, would Chekhov do if he were sitting in my chair? The first object he’d see would be a “trophy treat,” a plastic Michael Jordan head filled with gumballs. What with that? The problem here isn’t junk stories borrowed from the media, but junk,

the junk of life. In contemporary society, so much that is worthless claims our attention. And then we don't always know how to evaluate what we do see. Perhaps our confusion is the best we can do. Perhaps our confusion will have to be our subject.

IN HIS essay "Getting Started," John Irving writes, "Here is a useful rule for beginning: Know the story—as much of the story as you can possibly know, if not the whole story—before you commit yourself to the first paragraph."¹⁷ Irving has written far more novels than I will ever write. Clearly he knows what works for himself in a way that I don't for myself, but this seems like terrible advice. I'm more inclined to E. L. Doctorow's wisdom. He said that writing a novel is like driving at night. You don't need to see the whole road, just the bit of illuminated blacktop before you.¹⁸

It's true that you wouldn't tell a story at a party unless you knew the whole story start to finish. Presumably, only children and hopeless bores say, "Oh, listen to this," and then ramble until something comes to them. But that doesn't mean Irving's advice is good. There are more parallels between party anecdotes and publishing, the final stage of writing, than with the beginning stages of writing. That's why we don't publish our first drafts, why we wait a long time before we say, "Oh, listen to this."

William Faulkner didn't know his whole story before he put pen to paper. "The stories with me," he once said in an interview, "begin with an anecdote or a sentence or an expression, and I'll start from there, and sometimes I write the thing backwards—I myself don't know exactly where any story is going."¹⁹

Even if you decide, with Irving, that you must know the road before you travel, you may not end up where you intended. That's why writers say that writing is discovery. And mean it. And that's why a trigger can be buried in a story or so transformed that no one, save the author, could ever guess at a story's source.

Joan Didion writes that the woman in the white halter dress, the one who inspired *Play It as It Lays*, "appears in the novel, only obliquely, in a chapter which begins: 'Maria made a list of things she would never do. She would never: walk through the Sands or Caesar's alone after midnight. She would never: ball at a party, do S-M unless she wanted to, borrow furs from Ben Lipsey, deal.'"²⁰

Another example: When the father of a friend of writer Amy

Godine came out of the closet, his community vilified him. But the daughter, Godine's friend, decided to return home from college to say that *she* accepted who he was. But when she returned home, she found two young men smoking pot in front of the living room TV. Instead of embracing her father, Godine's friend sat down and got high with the visitors. Godine says, "I never got over the image of coming home to say, 'Dad, I love you,' and there were these street toughs—it was so heartbreaking and funny."²¹

Heartbreaking and funny. Fiction fodder. Godine decided to tell the story as she knew it: from her friend's point of view. But that didn't work. In the end, the story Godine *did* write—"The Gardener," which appeared in the *North American Review*—was told from the point of view of one of the father's lovers, a man who, in fictional garb, became the house gardener.

For both Godine and Didion, the trigger anecdotes (about the friend returning home or the woman walking across the casino) have a point, a certain emotional resonance about disappointed expectations or dissipated glamour. Godine and Didion's stories, though, ended up lying elsewhere: in the unknown aspects of the anecdote, in the questions that party guests might ask (if they dared) after the telling. "OK, OK, but what I still don't *get* . . ."

IF MOST fiction is a mixture of experience and invention, then one way to trigger a story may be to self-consciously lead yourself to invention through experience. "I never travel without my diary," says a character in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. "One should always have something sensational to read in the train."²² Of course, not everyone's so smitten with his or her own life. For those who are not, there's Rainer Maria Rilke's reprimand in *Letters to a Young Poet*: "If your everyday life seems poor, don't blame *it*; blame yourself; admit to yourself that you are not enough of a poet to call forth its riches."²³

To get her students writing, author Elizabeth Searle asks them to start a page with the words "I remember." She instructs them to write for as long as possible, and when they can think of nothing else to say, they write, "I remember" again. Short story writer Lisa Ruffolo has her students do "memory maps." They draw the floor plans of the houses or apartments they grew up in, then put a memory in each room—not a description but a specific memory of some-

thing that took place there. A more sophisticated variant of this appears in Pamela Painter and Anne Bernays's helpful book, *What If? Writing Exercises for Fiction Writers*. In "Family Stories, Family Myths," an exercise from Katherine Haake, student writers start by selecting an oft-told family story. Assuming the persona of one of the participants in the story, the student writer composes a letter to another family member, explaining the "truth" of what happened. Then the students trade letters and respond by taking the persona of the addressee of the original letter. (I can almost imagine Eudora Welty's famous story "Why I Live at the P.O." as a response to this assignment.)

The purpose of all these exercises is to help identify what matters to you and, in the process, to stumble across a story idea. Good exercises don't ask you to be clever or go hunting for the meaningful. After all, if you *begin* thinking in terms of what is and isn't important to write about, the "emotionally and intellectually significant" (which, John Gardner held, you *must* address), you'll undoubtedly veer off track. It's probably best to look for triggers in what genuinely interests you . . . and trust the universality of your particular concerns.

In advising a young writer, F. Scott Fitzgerald once said, "You've got to sell your heart, your strongest reactions, not the little minor things that only touch you lightly, the little experiences that you might tell at dinner. This is especially true when you *begin* to write, when you have not developed the tricks of interesting people on paper, when you have none of the technique which it takes time to learn. When, in short, you have *only* your emotions to sell."²⁴ Note: His emphasis isn't on what's important but on what's important to *you*, what attracts or compels *you*. Your problems with food? Your father's death? You could be Jenefer Shute and write *Life-Size* or James Agee and write *A Death in the Family*. You could exploit your anxiety about environmental disaster or your general feelings of failure. (Think of Don DeLillo's *White Noise* or Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*.)

It needn't be personal history, though. Your "strongest reaction" could come from song lyrics. (One of my favorite student stories was inspired by a Tom Waits line.) It could come from an overheard bit of conversation (eavesdropping, a time-honored literary tool). It could come from a peculiar experience. (Jill McCorkle was just starting a new novel when she happened to dig up a high-top sneaker in

her garden. The find unnerved her. “What if,” she thought, “there’s a foot attached?”²⁵ And so, in the novel *Carolina Moon*, a woman gets a delivery of topsoil, and there *is* a body in it.) It could come from a story you heard years ago. (Paging through a worn volume from a secondhand shop, Joseph Conrad stumbled across an anecdote about a silver thief. He’d originally heard the story, decades earlier, when he was sailing in the Gulf of Mexico. The anecdote itself didn’t spark his imagination—there was nothing much to it—but the recollection did, for it made him reminisce about his seafaring youth when, as he writes in “Preface to *Nostramo*,” “Everything was so fresh, so surprising, so venturesome, so interesting; bits of strange coasts under the stars, shadows of hills in the sunshine, men’s passions in the dusk, gossip half forgotten, faces grown dim.” And all this made him feel that “Perhaps, perhaps, there still was in the world something to write about.”)²⁶

And finally, though I’ve hardly exhausted the alternatives, your strongest reaction could come from a dispiriting outing. What’s bad for life, after all, is often good for fiction.

I went once with Lorrie Moore and a group of other fiction writers to the Cave of the Mounds, a rather tacky tourist spot in Wisconsin. We were a group of women that day, all of us either single and unhappily so or toting boyfriends whom we would abandon within the year. There were exceptions. Lorrie may have been an exception. There may have even been a happily married couple along, but my sense of that day—and it may have been a projection of my own situation at the time—was of a shameful female irritation that there weren’t any good guys around. I don’t remember much about the cave, save that the walls were creepily veined and that the tour guide turned off the lights so we could experience the complete darkness of the cave. When the lights were flicked on, there was Lorrie, taking notes. *Notes!* I thought. *What could she find here?*

I do remember some other things about the day: some rock-shaped candies that I bought in the gift shop, but mostly the ride home. A doe ran out of the woods and darted up a highway embankment. Two others followed. This seemed strange, seeing so many deer up close. Then I realized: they were terrified. We passed by a suburban house with a deer up in a tree, blood draining onto the front lawn, and everything snapped into place. Orange vests started appearing. It was the first day of hunting season.

Two years later I opened up the *New Yorker* and read Lorrie Moore's funny, sorrowful story "The Jewish Hunter," which takes place partially at the fictitious Cave of the Many Mounds in Minneapolis. I felt excited, the way one does when one is party to another's romance or sees a setup working at a dinner. Why, I had been there! Had seen the initial sparks! And I felt something else, too: jealousy. Sure, we'd all met the guy, but only one of us had the skill to fall in love.