

**PLOT
VARIATIONS I, II AND III
(CHAPTERS ONE THROUGH TEN)**

One

I.

I bought my family's burial plot in early April 2001.

II.

The students in my Advanced Fiction Writing course have continuing difficulty distinguishing between what—if anything—happens in a story and what—if anything—it means.

III.

I've been trying for more than five years to write something about the days right after my father died.

Two

I.

The plot is large enough for me, my husband, my two brothers, my sister-in-law and my parents. When I bought it, I stopped at that number, recoiling at the thought of the next generation—my own children, niece, and nephew—ever buried there. Or anywhere. And anyway, I decided, by the time they're all old enough to die, death will almost certainly have been cured.

It's just about a mile from my house. My mother lives in Manhattan and my brothers north of Princeton, but we settled on a place here in Philadelphia for two reasons. First of all, it's beautiful—a Civil War-era cemetery filled with mature trees and marble monuments landscaped into hills. Some of the mausoleums are true works of art. The other reason we chose it is that when the decision came up, when it became pressing, I told my mother and my brothers that I would like to have Dad nearby—that I'm a cemetery visitor by nature and would find comfort in his proximity. That was about a month before he died.

II.

“On a sentence by sentence level,” I write on one student story, “your work is really very fine. I found myself making very few line edits. And I have a vivid sense of the characters and the setting. You might want to check for areas where the descriptions could be tightened—you’ll see I’ve marked a couple of those, but basically you should be very proud of the prose itself.

“I do have some questions, though, about the larger meaning of the piece. A lot happens, but it isn’t clear to me what you want me to take away from having read this. I’m not insisting that Harvey go through any kind of earth-shattering epiphany here; that doesn’t feel like what you’re going for and trust me, I don’t think every story needs that kind of ending. But still, all these events you’re recounting don’t seem to add up to much—I don’t have the feeling by the end that I understand something more or better than I did when I started reading—even just something about the story itself. That sounds a little harsh, I know, and I don’t mean to be harsh—because, really, there’s a lot here to be admired. One of my own teachers used to talk to me about the difference between a story and an anecdote. We can speak about this more when we meet, but I wonder if pondering that distinction a bit might be useful for you?”

III.

This week, I tell my mother it’s useless trying to write about the whole *what the hell went on with me around Dad’s death* thing. After more than five years, I’m done trying.

“Not everything that happens is a story,” I say. “I should know that by now.”

Three

I.

The first time I see my father’s grave all sealed up, there isn’t any stone, just a laminated piece a paper with his name, stuck on a small metal post. Otherwise, it’s pretty much a patch of dirt. I’d thought I’d find it comforting to visit him; but I don’t. I find it upsetting to think of him lying there, encased in his casket; and I don’t stay very long.

II.

“One of the problems I think some of you may be having is that though you’re presenting your work as fiction, you’re possibly writing about things that have actually happened to you. . . ?”

I wait to see what percentage of them nod, who looks caught—as though I have just leveled a terrible accusation. Nobody so much as even blinks.

“Well, OK, let me just ask you all outright. How many of you would say that the stories you turned in this week were based pretty closely on true-life events?” It takes a few seconds, but most hands do go up.

“And that’s fine,” I say. The hands go down. “There’s absolutely nothing wrong with using events from your own life. There’s nothing *wrong* with writing anything at all. Some people would even argue that that’s ideal—the whole ‘write what you know’ advice? You’ve all been told that at some point, I assume?” They nod, look relieved.

“The thing is, though, that there are some pretty common pitfalls to taking real-life events, especially ones in which you yourself played a role, and trying to, well, more or less regurgitate them undigested, as fiction.”

III.

The problem with the whole project, I tell my mother, is that I did something terribly, terribly wrong.

“I fucked up. Even if I hurt mostly myself in the process, I still did something wrong. Or at least something most people consider to be wrong. It’s impossible to write about Dad’s death without seeming to be making excuses for myself. Forget even writing it, just when I tell people what happened, just in conversation, I can see them looking nervous. And then I start trying to explain myself. But it’s useless. One possibility is that I’ll cast it as fiction,” I say. “I think I might be a more sympathetic character in third person.”

Four

I.

Against all expectations, the plot remains unchanged. A full year after my father’s death, there’s still no grass. “He’s refusing to be dead,” I say. “He is literally refusing to push up the

daisies. That's so like him. Why does he always have to be so difficult?"

I send my husband over. He inspects the dirt and comes home saying that Dad isn't being adequately watered; so I put a call into the cemetery and they assure me they'll get on it right away.

II.

I compile a checklist for my students.

*Warning Signs That You May Not Have Adequate
Narrative Distance from Your Story:*

The central character is based on you.

The central character is pretty much a victim, best described as "put upon."

There are other characters in the story who have no redeeming traits whatsoever.

The You character never does anything wrong . . .

III.

I take a stab at it in the form of a letter:

Dear Dad, dead four years now,

I think I may owe you an apology. I did something inexplicable on the night that you died . . .

But that's as far as I get.

Five

I.

The day before Thanksgiving 2003, my brother turns up at the kitchen door holding a pumpkin pie and two bottles of wine. He's been to the bakery, to the liquor store, and then to the cemetery on his way to my house.

"It's horrible," he says. "Absolutely barren. I honestly don't think I can go back. There are tire marks, frozen solid in the dirt. Otherwise, nothing has changed."

"No grass?" I ask. "Because I thought there might be a tiny bit in September. I don't understand about the tire marks. What kind of tire marks?"

“It looks like a lawn mower. Though of course, as we know, right there, there’s no lawn.” He shakes his head, finds the cork-screw in my drawer. “It’s positively ghoulish,” he says. “It’s been more than two years now.”

II.

I give my students the assignment of writing something in first person and then shifting it into third. “You can go full out omniscient,” I say. “Or you can choose one character through whom to filter your narration. But don’t just fiddle around with changing the pronouns. I want you to see what else might be revealed with a different point of view. Really think about the reasons an author might think a story is best told one way or another.”

III.

So, this woman gets on a plane in Philadelphia. She’s just downed two hefty Irish whiskeys in the British Airways Lounge. She looks like she’s been crying and she reeks of alcohol. It’s obvious to the flight attendants there’s the potential for trouble. Not hijacker trouble—that isn’t the alarm that this woman rings. More like pain-in-the-ass kind of trouble. Their best hope is that she’ll pass out before too long . . .

Six

I.

At Christmas in New York, 2003, my brother reports that he’s phoned the cemetery and received assurances that by spring there will be lush, emerald grass growing over Dad. “And I really do think they mean it this time. I had an e-mail and everything.”

“It’s just unbelievable,” an aunt of mine says. “They were so accommodating at the funeral. Remember? Who could have imagined that it would take them years to get grass growing? You would think a cemetery would be able to do *that*, if nothing else.”

My mother and brother look over at me. I say nothing. Just get up and walk away.

II.

“I think what I’ve really been trying to get across to you all, this semester, is emphatically *not* that there are rules that you need to follow. Believe me, I’m the last person in the world to try to get anyone to adhere to a bunch of rules. Really, what I’m suggesting is that there are conventions—and I’m not even suggesting that you follow them. God knows. Though obviously, in fiction, as in life, when you start messing with conventional expectations, you assume some risks.”

III.

There were days, even years later, when Penelope couldn’t imagine why she had gotten on that plane.

Seven

I.

On the third anniversary, I force myself to go. May 5, 2004.

The cemetery isn’t even a five-minute drive from my home, but I’ve ended up visiting far less frequently than I’d thought I would. Partly, I know, it’s because of the whole grass problem. I joke about it a lot, blame it on his personality, talk about how over-determined it feels that his *would* be the most problematic grave in the history of the world. Of course. After all, he was the world’s most problematic man. But the fact is, it creeps me out.

The dirt on my father looks like a scar that can’t be healed. Three years in, there are grass seeds sprinkled there, but no sign that they’re ever taking root.

II.

“The plot can get in your way sometimes,” I tell my class, “if you’re sticking with actual facts. One thing I made myself do for a while was put up a solid wall between what I’ll call autobiography—as opposed to fiction. The distinction is often a shaky one, I know, but I found that if I knew what had really happened, I was resistant to making changes in the story. It felt as though the *real* plot had to be the plot. And sometimes the real plot just wasn’t making it. Sometimes the plot has to be changed in order to achieve the effect you want the story to have. So, for quite a while, I had this rule for myself: if it

had really happened and I wanted to write about it, I would write an essay or write memoir and never try to fictionalize that stuff.”

“What about now?” a student asks.

“Now? Honestly? Well. Now I’m not nearly as strict with myself.”

III.

Lawrence reached the conclusion that it hadn’t hit her yet—not really. She was behaving so very much like, well, like normal. Maybe she was in shock. Maybe it was because her father had been dying for so long. Maybe it was because it had been months now since any of them had been able to have a real conversation with him. Death by inches, really. Or maybe this was just the result of how difficult yet intense a relationship theirs had been. She had loved him, of course she had, but then he’d also hurt her very badly over the years. But wasn’t that true of many fathers and daughters?

There was no getting around it. This was just bizarre. Being here, in France, on vacation. As though nothing unusual had taken place. As though she hadn’t known that her father was dying when she stepped on that plane. The whole thing seemed more than odd to Lawrence. Why wasn’t she showing some more emotion? And what exactly was his role in this journey supposed to be?

Eight

I.

The president of the cemetery sounds exactly as I imagined he would; like a mortician from a sit-com. Steady-voiced, quiet, even-toned, he calls me Miss Black; and though he offers me what he terms *apologies* for what has happened, his *apologies* are tinged with the message that this really isn’t anybody’s fault. What he’s actually offering are regrets. It’s a distinction I understand all too well.

They have tested the soil, he tells me, and have found nothing wrong. They have assigned a specific crew to water the “area.” They *are* very sorry that this is happening; but most of all they are confused. He sounds entirely sincere.

The problem is that I’ve lost all patience.

"It's very simple," I say. "Grass by May, or we come and dig him up. It will have been fully four years by then. I think that's long enough to stare at dirt, don't you?"

And when he laughs—emits a jovial, doubting sound—I assure him that this isn't any joke.

II.

"How many of you think a story has to have a plot to be a story?"

All hands go up.

"Why?"

Now nobody's talking.

III.

It was obvious, watching her, listening to her words, that this pain would be with them for a very long time. She held the phone in front of her face, yelling into it as though it were a microphone, as though there were no point to listening, as though she knew better than to think anyone could say anything to help.

"What the fuck am I doing here in here in France? Can you tell me that, Mom? My fucking father just died and I'm standing here in some fucking inn in fucking France? What the fuck is going on? I can't believe I'm won't be at the funeral. How did you let me do this? How did anybody let me do this? Why didn't somebody stop me? You had to have known that it was wrong."

Lawrence put his hand on her back; she shook him off.

"I want to come home," she said, quietly, the phone now at her ear. "I just want to come home, Mom."

But, of course, it was too late.

Nine

I.

Since it's November when the cemetery president and I speak, there isn't much he can do for many months—and, impatient as I am, I understand. "Could you at least put some kind of covering on him for the winter? So I can visit him at Christmas without having to see that frozen dirt?"

The poinsettias are plastic, as is the pine, but it's definitely

cheerier than what we're used to. I take a picture with my cell phone and send it as a message to the whole family, subject line: The Plot Thickens.

"Merry Christmas, Dad," I say. "I love you very much. I hope this helps."

II.

I've decided to take the fiction vs. autobiography problem head on. So I ask my students to write their autobiographies in no more than five hundred words. And suddenly, they're all gifted. I can't understand what's happened.

"I have to tell you guys, these little things were the strongest writing every single one of you has done all semester. Maybe we should try to figure out why."

They take a while before they speak.

"It helped that I knew what I was trying to get across."

"Trying to get across? What does that mean?"

"I was trying to convey more the point of my life than exactly what happened. There was just no way to fit in all the real events in five hundred words."

"Mine doesn't even really have a plot. I told my whole life story as a metaphor."

"It felt more natural. Like I already knew how to tell this story. After all, I didn't have to make anything up. I just had to tell the truth."

III.

Dear Dad, dead five years now,

I've never told you what happened to me on the day you were buried, but I've decided that I should.

Oddly enough, I was in France, with Richard. We were traveling through Normandy, on a trip that we had planned months earlier. And here's the thing. The thing is that I knew, when I got on that plane, that you were going to die while I was in flight. Mom had called me and told me while I was still in the airport that it was going to be that night, just a matter of hours. And I have no explanation to offer for why I boarded anyway. I just did. I have no idea why. There are excuses

I could make. I was completely worn out from months and months of caring for you, of watching you disintegrate. I may just have been too tired, too upset, to be thinking clearly. Or I could tell you that I did it because I wanted to pretend you weren't actually going to die. But the truth is, it's a mystery to me. And then, by the time the day of your funeral rolled around, it was as though I woke up from some kind of trance. I realized that I wanted to be in New York with Mom and everyone else—desperately. I'd made a horrible mistake. But by then it was too late.

That morning, we got in our rental car in Honfleur and we drove toward the big American cemetery at Colleville-sur-Mer. This had always been our plan, our original itinerary—I just hadn't ever guessed that I'd be spending the day of your funeral studying the graves of other people. A lot of the stones had the year of your birth on them: 1915. It made sense that they would. And standing there, I thought hard about those men, your generation, and about all the decades you'd had that they never had. You'd talked so often about your relief at never having been called to the front. It was a strange fancy of mine, and I admit I was trying to justify being where I was, but I had this idea that maybe you had sent me to convey your gratitude—your grieving daughter, an offering to your dead contemporaries on the day of- your own burial, my tears for you, watering their graves.

It sounds silly now. I suppose I was just trying to get some kind of deeper meaning out of what had taken place. I suppose I always will.

I wasn't the only person crying. There was an old woman in a wheelchair. Some men. There were also teenagers, on a class trip, whooping it up, shouting and flirting. We stayed about an hour.

Your funeral was at eleven, New York time, which was four p.m. for us. By sheer luck, it happened that we were booked that night in the only fancy hotel we had chosen for the whole trip. Just one night. The room had a mini-bar and a speaker phone. Back in New York,

there was a cell phone set up on the lectern at the funeral home—this was the plan that Mom and the boys had devised, for me. Richard and I drank our way from one end of the mini-bar to the other and then we dialed the cell phone number. And listened in.

Our own phone sat on a very low table, and the sound wasn't good, so for your entire funeral, we were both on our knees, as if in prayer.

Ten

I.

There's never been a good explanation given, nobody knows why it happened, but by the fourth anniversary, there was grass; my father's plot had finally blended in with the landscape. I had some unexpected reactions to the sight. I guess I'd attached so many meanings to that barren, unhealed ground. At the sight of all those healthy blades, a part of me felt guilty—as though we'd killed him. Finally, this time. We'd finally convinced him to give up the fight.

And then, too, I have to admit, I'd half hoped he would need to be moved. I'd missed his burial. I could be there this time. I could see the casket I never saw. Watch my father lowered into the ground. Start all over again, with a different plot.

But that isn't happening, I know.

And anyway, everyone agrees that the visits will feel more normal now—less as though we are battling a curse.

II.

In class these days, we're talking a lot about revision. I tell them to be brave when making changes to their work. "Remember," I say, "none of this is carved in stone. Don't be too married to your original storyline. Don't assume you already know how it will turn out. Just because you wrote it one way doesn't mean that's the right way to go. And don't forget: just because it really happened that way doesn't mean that's the story you want to tell. In fiction, truth is no defense. One of the great luxuries of writing fiction is how malleable and impermanent it is. It isn't like life. You're allowed to play God. You're supposed to play God."

They nod, sit up straighter, try to look like they're ready for the role.

III.

Without a doubt, it's all feeling much better for her now. Covered, the ground seems less reproachful; and so she goes fairly often. Just to be sure the lawn is still growing. And also to visit him as she'd always thought she would, before all the trouble about the plot began. And she talks to him a little when she's there. She tells him she loves him. Of course. Sometimes she even cries a bit. She looks at his name, at the dates carved in stone. She looks especially hard at that final date.

But she never stays more than a few minutes. Because even though the ground's scar has wholly healed, that familiar sensation of guilt still sweeps through her heart, every time. So she always ends up telling him she's sorry, once again. "I'm so sorry, Dad," she says, and goes back home.

The End

It's ridiculous though—and she knows it.

Because, in reality, none of it had been her fault. By the time the family reached her, it was already too late. In rural France, no phones working properly, the trains on strike, her rented Fiat broken, how could she have made it? It was unimaginable. The funeral was in a matter of only hours before she even learned the news.

Nobody could possibly blame her. And, deep inside, she knows she shouldn't blame herself. And maybe someday, she thinks, she'll be able to visit the cemetery without being caught by these inexplicable feelings of shame. She hopes she will. She doesn't deserve to feel this bad. She believes that with all her heart.

The End