




Lee Martin  Telling Stories

*The Craft of Narrative and the Writing Life*




## My Mother Gives Me a Writing Lesson

\* Today I'm reading through some old letters from my mother, written in her widowhood, and I'm struck by the sound of my own voice in hers and the lesson she offers the writer I'll one day be about how to let the details evoke a life: "The little garden I have planted just stands there. No potatoes ever came up. I don't know if it will grow when it warms up or not. If it does we might have some spinach or lettuce when you come home. But I can't promise any. I've been using onions from those I set out last fall. I want to get some cabbage and cauliflower as soon as the stores get their plants." Flannery O'Connor in Mysteries and Manners, talks about how the meaning of a story has to be made concrete through the details. "Detail has to be controlled by some overall purpose," she says, "and every detail has to work for you." She goes on to suggest that these details be gathered from "the texture of the existence" that forms the world of the story. "You can't cut characters off from their society and say much about them as individuals," she says. "You can't say anything meaningful about the mystery of a personality unless you put that personality in a believable and significant social context."

My mother wrote this letter to me while I was in the MFA program at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. A ten-hour drive separated me from her home, a home I'd had to leave her in alone because, two weeks before the move to Fayetteville, my father died. My mother was seventy-two at the time, and she hadn't had a driver's license for some time. To leave her was, at that time of my life, the hardest thing I'd ever done.

Now, as I read this passage from her letter, I find the essence of her life in those days rising from the details that she includes: [the garden where the potatoes have refused to come up, the hope





for spinach or lettuce when I return, the acknowledgment that she shouldn't hope for too much, but still the dream of cabbage and cauliflower plants to come. Each detail expressing some aspect of what it was to be her at that time in her life, each detail holding the person she was in that place. If I encountered this passage in a story, I'd love the writer's trust in the details, and I'd love how they so simply and yet elegantly create the meaning of this character's life.

We fiction writers have to pay attention to the worlds of our characters and to the way the objects of those worlds become expressive. So, with that in mind, here's a writing exercise:

1. Gather the details of the setting of a story that you're working on, or one that you've completed, to which you want to add more cultural texture. Pay attention to sensory details, not limiting yourself to the visual. What are the sounds of this place? The smells? The textures? The tastes? What are the customs?
2. Zero in on the details that are intimately connected to your main character. What do they show you about him or her that you didn't know? What do they confirm about your character that you already thought you knew? Are the details, for example, expressive of certain cultural attitudes? Is your main character acting in accordance with the cultural influences of the setting, or is he or she acting in resistance to those attitudes?
3. Have your main character engage in an activity that is common in this culture—playing music for tips in the subway, for example, or planting flowers in the garden or attending the symphony or bingo night at the American Legion. Or have your character do something that would be considered out of place in this culture. The key is to have your character act from his or her relationship with the culture in which he or she lives.
4. Find a place within the scene to rely solely on details, à la

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the passage from my mother's lesson, to express something essential, but something impossible to say directly, about your character's life.

[Our characters come from specific worlds. Whether by birth-right or adoption, fiction writers cozy up to particular landscapes and use them to give their writing authority, contribute to characterization, suggest plots, and influence tone and atmosphere. The details of a place can create the characters and their actions.]