

# What Is “Academic” Writing?

by L. Lennie Irvin

This essay is a chapter in *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing*, Volume 1, a peer-reviewed open textbook series for the writing classroom, and is published through Parlor Press.

The full volume and individual chapter downloads are available for free from the following sites:

- Writing Spaces: <http://writingspaces.org/essays>
- Parlor Press: <http://parlorpress.com/writingspaces>
- WAC Clearinghouse: <http://wac.colostate.edu/books/>

Print versions of the volume are available for purchase directly from Parlor Press and through other booksellers.

To learn about participating in the Writing Spaces project, visit the Writing Spaces website at <http://writingspaces.org/>.

---

This essay is available under a Creative Commons License subject to the Writing Spaces Terms of Use. More information, such as the specific license being used, is available at the bottom of the first page of the chapter.

© 2010 by the respective author(s). For reprint rights and other permissions, contact the original author(s).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Writing spaces : readings on writing. Volume 1 / edited by Charles Lowe and Pavel Zemliansky.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-60235-184-4 (pbk. : alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-1-60235-185-1 (adobe ebook)

1. College readers. 2. English language--Rhetoric. I. Lowe, Charles, 1965- II. Zemliansky, Pavel.

PE1417.W735 2010

808'.0427--dc22

2010019487

# What Is “Academic” Writing?

*L. Lennie Irvin*

## INTRODUCTION: THE ACADEMIC WRITING TASK

As a new college student, you may have a lot of anxiety and questions about the writing you’ll do in college.\* That word “academic,” especially, may turn your stomach or turn your nose. However, with this first year composition class, you begin one of the only classes in your entire college career where you will focus on learning to write. Given the importance of writing as a communication skill, I urge you to consider this class as a gift and make the most of it. But writing is hard, and writing in college may resemble playing a familiar game by completely new rules (that often are unstated). This chapter is designed to introduce you to what academic writing is like, and hopefully ease your transition as you face these daunting writing challenges.

So here’s the secret. Your success with academic writing depends upon how well you understand what you are doing as you write and then how you approach the writing task. Early research done on college writers discovered that whether students produced a successful piece of writing depended largely upon their **representation of the writing task**. The writers’ mental model for picturing their task made a huge differ-

---

\* This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 United States License and is subject to the Writing Spaces Terms of Use. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/us/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA. To view the Writing Spaces Terms of Use, visit <http://writingspaces.org/terms-of-use>.

ence. Most people as they start college have wildly strange ideas about what they are doing when they write an essay, or worse—they have no clear idea at all. I freely admit my own past as a clueless freshman writer, and it's out of this sympathy as well as twenty years of teaching college writing that I hope to provide you with something useful. So grab a cup of coffee or a diet coke, find a comfortable chair with good light, and let's explore together this activity of academic writing you'll be asked to do in college. We will start by clearing up some of those wild misconceptions people often arrive at college possessing. Then we will dig more deeply into the components of the academic writing situation and nature of the writing task.

### MYTHS ABOUT WRITING

Though I don't imagine an episode of *MythBusters* will be based on the misconceptions about writing we are about to look at, you'd still be surprised at some of the things people will believe about writing. You may find lurking within you viral elements of these myths—all of these lead to problems in writing.

Myth #1: The “Paint by Numbers” myth

Some writers believe they must perform certain steps in a particular order to write “correctly.” Rather than being a lock-step linear process, writing is “recursive.” That means we cycle through and repeat the various activities of the writing process many times as we write.

Myth #2: Writers only start writing when they have everything figured out

Writing is not like sending a fax! Writers figure out much of what they want to write as they write it. Rather than waiting, get some writing on the page—even with gaps or problems. You can come back to patch up rough spots.

Myth #3: Perfect first drafts

We put unrealistic expectations on early drafts, either by focusing too much on the impossible task of making them perfect (which can put a cap on the development of our ideas), or by making too little effort be-

cause we don't care or know about their inevitable problems. Nobody writes perfect first drafts; polished writing takes lots of revision.

#### Myth #4: Some got it; I don't—the genius fallacy

When you see your writing ability as something fixed or out of your control (as if it were in your genetic code), then you won't believe you can improve as a writer and are likely not to make any efforts in that direction. With effort and study, though, you can improve as a writer. I promise.

#### Myth #5: Good grammar is good writing

When people say “I can't write,” what they often mean is they have problems with grammatical correctness. Writing, however, is about more than just grammatical correctness. Good writing is a matter of achieving your desired effect upon an intended audience. Plus, as we saw in myth #3, no one writes perfect first drafts.

#### Myth #6: The Five Paragraph Essay

Some people say to avoid it at all costs, while others believe no other way to write exists. With an introduction, three supporting paragraphs, and a conclusion, the five paragraph essay is a format you should know, but one which you will outgrow. You'll have to gauge the particular writing assignment to see whether and how this format is useful for you.

#### Myth #7: Never use “I”

Adopting this formal stance of objectivity implies a distrust (almost fear) of informality and often leads to artificial, puffed-up prose. Although some writing situations will call on you to avoid using “I” (for example, a lab report), much college writing can be done in a middle, semi-formal style where it is ok to use “I.”

#### The Academic Writing Situation

Now that we've dispelled some of the common myths that many writers have as they enter a college classroom, let's take a moment to think about the academic writing situation. The biggest problem I see in freshman writers is a poor sense of the writing situation in general. To

illustrate this problem, let's look at the difference between speaking and writing.

When we speak, we inhabit the communication situation bodily in three dimensions, but in writing we are confined within the two-dimensional setting of the flat page (though writing for the web—or multimodal writing—is changing all that). Writing resembles having a blindfold over our eyes and our hands tied behind our backs: we can't see exactly whom we're talking to or where we are. Separated from our audience in place and time, we imaginatively have to create this context. Our words on the page are silent, so we must use punctuation and word choice to communicate our tone. We also can't see our audience to gauge how our communication is being received or if there will be some kind of response. It's the same space we share right now as you read this essay. Novice writers often write as if they were mumbling to themselves in the corner with no sense that their writing will be read by a reader or any sense of the context within which their communication will be received.

What's the moral here? Developing your “writer's sense” about communicating within the writing situation is the most important thing you should learn in freshman composition.

Figure 1, depicting the writing situation, presents the best image I know of describing all the complexities involved in the writing situation.



Figure 1. Source: “A Social Model of Writing.” Writing@CSU. 2010. Web. 10 March 2010. Used by permission from Mike Palmquist.

*Looking More Closely at the “Academic Writing” Situation*

Writing in college is a fairly specialized writing situation, and it has developed its own codes and conventions that you need to have a keen awareness of if you are going to write successfully in college. Let’s break down the writing situation in college:

Who’s your audience?	Primarily the professor and possibly your classmates (though you may be asked to include a secondary outside audience).
What’s the occasion or context?	An assignment given by the teacher within a learning context and designed to have you learn and demonstrate your learning.
What’s your message?	It will be your learning or the interpretation gained from your study of the subject matter.
What’s your purpose?	To show your learning and get a good grade (or to accomplish the goals of the writing assignment).
What documents/genres are used?	The essay is the most frequent type of document used.

So far, this list looks like nothing new. You’ve been writing in school toward teachers for years. What’s different in college? Lee Ann Carroll, a professor at Pepperdine University, performed a study of student writing in college and had this description of the kind of writing you will be doing in college:

What are usually called ‘writing assignments’ in college might more accurately be called ‘literacy tasks’ because they require much more than the ability to construct correct sentences or compose neatly organized paragraphs with topic sentences. . . . Projects calling for high levels of critical literacy in college typically require knowledge of research skills, ability to read complex texts, understanding of key disciplinary concepts, and strategies for synthesizing, analyzing, and responding critically to new information, usually within a limited time frame. (3–4)

Academic writing is always a form of evaluation that asks you to demonstrate knowledge and show proficiency with certain disciplinary skills of thinking, interpreting, and presenting. Writing the paper is never “just” the writing part. To be successful in this kind of writing, you must be completely aware of what the professor expects you to do and accomplish with that particular writing task. For a moment, let’s explore more deeply the elements of this college writing “literacy task.”

### Knowledge of Research Skills

Perhaps up to now research has meant going straight to Google and Wikipedia, but college will require you to search for and find more in-depth information. You’ll need to know how to find information in the library, especially what is available from online databases which contain scholarly articles. Researching is also a process, so you’ll need to learn how to focus and direct a research project and how to keep track of all your source information. Realize that researching represents a crucial component of most all college writing assignments, and you will need to devote lots of work to this researching.

### The Ability to Read Complex Texts

Whereas your previous writing in school might have come generally from your experience, college writing typically asks you to write on unfamiliar topics. Whether you’re reading your textbook, a short story, or scholarly articles from research, your ability to write well will be based upon the quality of your reading. In addition to the labor of close reading, you’ll need to think critically as you read. That means separating fact from opinion, recognizing biases and assumptions, and making inferences. Inferences are how we as readers connect the dots: an inference is a belief (or statement) about something unknown made on the basis of something known. You smell smoke; you infer fire. They are conclusions or interpretations that we arrive at based upon the known factors we discover from our reading. When we, then, write to argue for these interpretations, our job becomes to get our readers to make the same inferences we have made.

### The Understanding of Key Disciplinary Concepts

Each discipline whether it is English, Psychology, or History has its own key concepts and language for describing these important ways

of understanding the world. Don't fool yourself that your professors' writing assignments are asking for your opinion on the topic from just your experience. They want to see you apply and use these concepts in your writing. Though different from a multiple-choice exam, writing similarly requires you to demonstrate your learning. So whatever writing assignment you receive, inspect it closely for what concepts it asks you to bring into your writing.

### Strategies for Synthesizing, Analyzing, and Responding Critically to New Information

You need to develop the skill of a seasoned traveler who can be dropped in any city around the world and get by. Each writing assignment asks you to navigate through a new terrain of information, so you must develop ways for grasping new subject matter in order, then, to use it in your writing. We have already seen the importance of reading and research for these literacy tasks, but beyond laying the information out before you, you will need to learn ways of sorting and finding meaningful patterns in this information.

## IN COLLEGE, EVERYTHING'S AN ARGUMENT: A GUIDE FOR DECODING COLLEGE WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Let's restate this complex “literacy task” you'll be asked repeatedly to do in your writing assignments. Typically, you'll be required to write an “essay” based upon your analysis of some reading(s). In this essay you'll need to present an argument where you make a claim (i.e. present a “thesis”) and support that claim with good reasons that have adequate and appropriate evidence to back them up. The dynamic of this argumentative task often confuses first year writers, so let's examine it more closely.

### Academic Writing Is an Argument

To start, let's focus on argument. What does it mean to present an “argument” in college writing? Rather than a shouting match between two disagreeing sides, argument instead means a carefully arranged and supported presentation of a viewpoint. Its purpose is not so much to win the argument as to earn your audience's consideration (and even approval) of your perspective. It resembles a conversation between two



people who may not hold the same opinions, but they both desire a better understanding of the subject matter under discussion. My favorite analogy, however, to describe the nature of this argumentative stance in college writing is the courtroom. In this scenario, you are like a lawyer making a case at trial that the defendant is not guilty, and your readers are like the jury who will decide if the defendant is guilty or not guilty. This jury (your readers) won't just take your word that he's innocent; instead, you must convince them by presenting evidence that proves he is not guilty. Stating your opinion is not enough—you have to back it up too. I like this courtroom analogy for capturing two important things about academic argument: 1) the value of an organized presentation of your “case,” and 2) the crucial element of strong evidence.

### Academic Writing Is an Analysis

We now turn our attention to the actual writing assignment and that confusing word “analyze.” Your first job when you get a writing assignment is to figure out what the professor expects. This assignment may be explicit in its expectations, but often built into the wording of the most defined writing assignments are implicit expectations that you might not recognize. First, we can say that unless your professor specifically asks you to summarize, you won't write a summary. Let me say that again: don't write a summary unless directly asked to. But what, then, does the professor want? We have already picked out a few of these expectations: You can count on the instructor expecting you to read closely, research adequately, and write an argument where you will demonstrate your ability to apply and use important concepts you have been studying. But the writing task also implies that your essay will be the result of an analysis. At times, the writing assignment may even explicitly say to write an analysis, but often this element of the task remains unstated.

So what does it mean to analyze? One way to think of an analysis is that it asks you to seek How and Why questions much more than What questions. An analysis involves doing three things:

1. Engage in an open inquiry where the answer is not known at first (and where you leave yourself open to multiple suggestions)
2. Identify meaningful parts of the subject

3. Examine these separate parts and determine how they relate to each other

An analysis breaks a subject apart to study it closely, and from this inspection, ideas for writing emerge. When writing assignments call on you to analyze, they require you to identify the parts of the subject (parts of an ad, parts of a short story, parts of Hamlet’s character), and then show how these parts fit or don’t fit together to create some larger effect or meaning. Your interpretation of how these parts fit together constitutes your claim or thesis, and the task of your essay is then to present an argument defending your interpretation as a valid or plausible one to make. My biggest bit of advice about analysis is not to do it all in your head. Analysis works best when you put all the cards on the table, so to speak. Identify and isolate the parts of your analysis, and record important features and characteristics of each one. As patterns emerge, you sort and connect these parts in meaningful ways. For me, I have always had to do this recording and thinking on scratch pieces of paper. Just as critical reading forms a crucial element of the literacy task of a college writing assignment, so too does this analysis process. It’s built in.

### Three Common Types of College Writing Assignments

We have been decoding the expectations of the academic writing task so far, and I want to turn now to examine the types of assignments you might receive. From my experience, you are likely to get three kinds of writing assignments based upon the instructor’s degree of direction for the assignment. We’ll take a brief look at each kind of academic writing task.

#### The Closed Writing Assignment

- Is Creon a character to admire or condemn?
- Does your advertisement employ techniques of propaganda, and if so what kind?
- Was the South justified in seceding from the Union?
- In your opinion, do you believe Hamlet was truly mad?

These kinds of writing assignments present you with two counter claims and ask you to determine from your own analysis the more valid claim. They resemble yes-no questions. These topics define the

claim for you, so the major task of the writing assignment then is working out the support for the claim. They resemble a math problem in which the teacher has given you the answer and now wants you to “show your work” in arriving at that answer.

Be careful with these writing assignments, however, because often these topics don’t have a simple yes/no, either/or answer (despite the nature of the essay question). A close analysis of the subject matter often reveals nuances and ambiguities within the question that your eventual claim should reflect. Perhaps a claim such as, “In my opinion, Hamlet was mad” might work, but I urge you to avoid such a simplistic thesis. This thesis would be better: “I believe Hamlet’s unhinged mind borders on insanity but doesn’t quite reach it.”

### The Semi-Open Writing Assignment

- Discuss the role of law in *Antigone*.
- Explain the relationship between character and fate in *Hamlet*.
- Compare and contrast the use of setting in two short stories.
- Show how the Fugitive Slave Act influenced the Abolitionist Movement.

Although these topics chart out a subject matter for you to write upon, they don’t offer up claims you can easily use in your paper. It would be a misstep to offer up claims such as, “Law plays a role in *Antigone*” or “In *Hamlet* we can see a relationship between character and fate.” Such statements express the obvious and what the topic takes for granted. The question, for example, is not whether law plays a role in *Antigone*, but rather what sort of role law plays. What is the nature of this role? What influences does it have on the characters or actions or theme? This kind of writing assignment resembles a kind of archeological dig. The teacher cordons off an area, hands you a shovel, and says dig here and see what you find.

Be sure to avoid summary and mere explanation in this kind of assignment. Despite using key words in the assignment such as “explain,” “illustrate,” “analyze,” “discuss,” or “show how,” these topics still ask you to make an argument. Implicit in the topic is the expectation that you will analyze the reading and arrive at some insights into patterns and relationships about the subject. Your eventual paper, then, needs to present what you found from this analysis—the treasure you

found from your digging. Determining your own claim represents the biggest challenge for this type of writing assignment.

### The Open Writing Assignment

- Analyze the role of a character in Dante’s *The Inferno*.
- What does it mean to be an “American” in the 21st Century?
- Analyze the influence of slavery upon one cause of the Civil War.
- Compare and contrast two themes within *Pride and Prejudice*.

These kinds of writing assignments require you to decide both your writing topic and you claim (or thesis). Which character in the *Inferno* will I pick to analyze? What two themes in *Pride and Prejudice* will I choose to write about? Many students struggle with these types of assignments because they have to understand their subject matter well before they can intelligently choose a topic. For instance, you need a good familiarity with the characters in *The Inferno* before you can pick one. You have to have a solid understanding defining elements of American identity as well as 21<sup>st</sup> century culture before you can begin to connect them. This kind of writing assignment resembles riding a bike without the training wheels on. It says, “You decide what to write about.” The biggest decision, then, becomes selecting your topic and limiting it to a manageable size.

### Picking and Limiting a Writing Topic

Let’s talk about both of these challenges: picking a topic and limiting it. Remember how I said these kinds of essay topics expect you to choose what to write about from a solid understanding of your subject? As you read and review your subject matter, look for things that interest you. Look for gaps, puzzling items, things that confuse you, or connections you see. Something in this pile of rocks should stand out as a jewel: as being “do-able” and interesting. (You’ll write best when you write from both your head and your heart.) Whatever topic you choose, state it as a clear and interesting question. You may or may not state this essay question explicitly in the introduction of your paper (I actually recommend that you do), but it will provide direction for your paper and a focus for your claim since that claim will be your answer to this essay question. For example, if with the Dante topic you decid-

ed to write on Virgil, your essay question might be: “What is the role of Virgil toward the character of Dante in *The Inferno*?” The thesis statement, then, might be this: “Virgil’s predominant role as Dante’s guide through hell is as the voice of reason.” Crafting a solid essay question is well worth your time because it charts the territory of your essay and helps you declare a focused thesis statement.

Many students struggle with defining the right size for their writing project. They chart out an essay question that it would take a book to deal with adequately. You’ll know you have that kind of topic if you have already written over the required page length but only touched one quarter of the topics you planned to discuss. In this case, carve out one of those topics and make your whole paper about it. For instance, with our Dante example, perhaps you planned to discuss four places where Virgil’s role as the voice of reason is evident. Instead of discussing all four, focus your essay on just one place. So your revised thesis statement might be: “Close inspection of Cantos I and II reveal that Virgil serves predominantly as the voice of reason for Dante on his journey through hell.” A writing teacher I had in college said it this way: A well tended garden is better than a large one full of weeds. That means to limit your topic to a size you can handle and support well.

### Three Characteristics of Academic Writing

I want to wrap up this section by sharing in broad terms what the expectations are behind an academic writing assignment. Chris Thaiss and Terry Zawacki conducted research at George Mason University where they asked professors from their university what they thought academic writing was and its standards. They came up with three characteristics:

1. Clear evidence in writing that the writer(s) have been persistent, open-minded, and disciplined in study. (5)
2. The dominance of reason over emotions or sensual perception. (5)
3. An imagined reader who is coolly rational, reading for information, and intending to formulate a reasoned response. (7)

Your professor wants to see these three things in your writing when they give you a writing assignment. They want to see in your writing the results of your efforts at the various literacy tasks we have been discussing: critical reading, research, and analysis. Beyond merely stat-

ing opinions, they also want to see an argument toward an intelligent audience where you provide good reasons to support your interpretations.

### THE FORMAT OF THE ACADEMIC ESSAY

Your instructors will also expect you to deliver a paper that contains particular textual features. The following list contains the characteristics of what I have for years called the “critical essay.” Although I can’t claim they will be useful for all essays in college, I hope that these features will help you shape and accomplish successful college essays. Be aware that these characteristics are flexible and not a formula, and any particular assignment might ask for something different.

#### Characteristics of the Critical Essay

“Critical” here is not used in the sense of “to criticize” as in find fault with. Instead, “critical” is used in the same way “critical thinking” is used. A synonym might be “interpretive” or “analytical.”

1. It is an argument, persuasion essay that in its broadest sense **MAKES A POINT** and **SUPPORTS IT**. (We have already discussed this argumentative nature of academic writing at length.)
2. The point (“claim” or “thesis”) of a critical essay is interpretive in nature. That means the point is debatable and open to interpretation, not a statement of the obvious. The thesis statement is a clear, declarative sentence that often works best when it comes at the end of the introduction.
3. **Organization:** Like any essay, the critical essay should have a clear introduction, body, and conclusion. As you support your point in the body of the essay, you should “divide up the proof,” which means structuring the body around clear primary supports (developed in single paragraphs for short papers or multiple paragraphs for longer papers).
4. **Support:** (a) The primary source for support in the critical essay is from the text (or sources). The text is the authority, so using quotations is required. ( b) The continuous movement

of logic in a critical essay is “assert then support; assert then support.” No assertion (general statement that needs proving) should be left without specific support (often from the text(s)). (c) You need enough support to be convincing. In general, that means for each assertion you need at least three supports. This threshold can vary, but invariably one support is not enough.

5. A critical essay will always “document” its sources, distinguishing the use of outside information used inside your text and clarifying where that information came from (following the rules of MLA documentation style or whatever documentation style is required).
6. Whenever the author moves from one main point (primary support) to the next, the author needs to clearly signal to the reader that this movement is happening. This transition sentence works best when it links back to the thesis as it states the topic of that paragraph or section.
7. A critical essay is put into an academic essay format such as the MLA or APA document format.
8. Grammatical correctness: Your essay should have few if any grammatical problems. You’ll want to edit your final draft carefully before turning it in.

## CONCLUSION

As we leave this discussion, I want to return to what I said was the secret for your success in writing college essays: Your success with academic writing depends upon how well you understand what you are doing as you write and then how you approach the writing task. Hopefully, you now have a better idea about the nature of the academic writing task and the expectations behind it. Knowing what you need to do won’t guarantee you an “A” on your paper—that will take a lot of thinking, hard work, and practice—but having the right orientation toward your college writing assignments is a first and important step in your eventual success.

## DISCUSSION

1. How did what you wrote in high school compare to what you have/will do in your academic writing in college?
2. Think of two different writing situations you have found yourself in. What did you need to do the same in those two situations to place your writing appropriately? What did you need to do differently?
3. Think of a writing assignment that you will need to complete this semester. Who’s your audience? What’s the occasion or context? What’s your message? What’s your purpose? What documents/genres are used? How does all that compare to the writing you are doing in this class?

## WORKS CITED

- Carroll, Lee Ann. *Rehearsing New Roles: How College Students Develop as Writers*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2002. Print.
- Thaiss, Chris and Terry Zawacki. *Engaged Writers & Dynamic Disciplines: Research on the Academic Writing Life*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 2006. Print.



# “I need you to say ‘I’”: Why First Person Is Important in College Writing

by Kate McKinney Maddalena

This essay is a chapter in *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing*, Volume 1, a peer-reviewed open textbook series for the writing classroom, and is published through Parlor Press.

The full volume and individual chapter downloads are available for free from the following sites:

- Writing Spaces: <http://writingspaces.org/essays>
- Parlor Press: <http://parlorpress.com/writingspaces>
- WAC Clearinghouse: <http://wac.colostate.edu/books/>

Print versions of the volume are available for purchase directly from Parlor Press and through other booksellers.

To learn about participating in the Writing Spaces project, visit the Writing Spaces website at <http://writingspaces.org/>.

---

This essay is available under a Creative Commons License subject to the Writing Spaces Terms of Use. More information, such as the specific license being used, is available at the bottom of the first page of the chapter.

© 2010 by the respective author(s). For reprint rights and other permissions, contact the original author(s).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Writing spaces : readings on writing. Volume 1 / edited by Charles Lowe and Pavel Zemliansky.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-60235-184-4 (pbk. : alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-1-60235-185-1 (adobe ebook)

1. College readers. 2. English language--Rhetoric. I. Lowe, Charles, 1965- II. Zemliansky, Pavel.

PE1417.W735 2010

808'.0427--dc22

2010019487

# “I need you to say ‘I’”: Why First Person Is Important in College Writing

*Kate McKinney Maddalena*

At this point in your development as a writer, you may have learned to write “I-less” prose, without first person.\* I-less-ness is fine; writing habits, like all habits, are best simplified when first learned or re-learned. Jazz pianists learn strict scales before they are allowed to improvise. Someone might go on a strict diet and then return to a modified menu after the desired weight is lost, and the bad eating habits are broken. Constructing arguments without using “I” is good practice for formal “improvisation” at higher levels of thinking and writing. Avoiding personal pronouns forces you to be objective. It also “sounds” more formal; you’re more likely to maintain an appropriate tone if you stay away from the personal.

But writing in various academic and professional contexts needs to be more flexible, sophisticated, and subtle than writing for high school English classes. In college, you should start using first-person pronouns in your formal academic writing, where appropriate. First person has an important place—an irreplaceable place—in texts that report research and engage scholarship. Your choices about where you place yourself as subject are largely determined by context and the

---

\* This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 United States License and is subject to the Writing Spaces Terms of Use. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/us/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA. To view the Writing Spaces Terms of Use, visit <http://writingspaces.org/terms-of-use>.

conventions of the field in which you're writing. The key is making sure that your choices are appropriate for the context of your paper—whom you're writing it for, and the kind of information it's meant to communicate. Here I'll list some ways in which first person improves written argument and show you some examples of the ways scholars use first person, and then I'll propose places where it might be used appropriately in your own writing.

### WHY "I"?

First person can support the following characteristics of good written argument (and good writing in general).

#### 1. Objectivity and Integrity

The main reason most teachers give for the discipline of I-less-ness is that it keeps your writing "objective." They want to make sure that you don't rely on personal experiences or perspectives where you should be providing concrete, researched support for your arguments. Your best friend at summer camp doesn't "prove" a sociological theory. Your memory of a "fact"—the average rainfall in a town, the actions of a character in a film, the tendencies of groups of people to behave in certain ways, or the population of Kenya—is not a reliable source in academic contexts. You shouldn't write, "because I think so," or "I know that . . ." But if you consider some of the higher-level implications of perspective's effects on argument, there are some well-chosen places where "I" can give your argument more objectivity and intellectual integrity.

Take scientific writing, for example. Up until very recently, when writing observational and experimental reports, scientists, as a rule, avoided first person. Methodology was (and is still, in many cases) described in the passive voice. That is, instead of writing, "We took measurements of ice thickness on the first and 15<sup>th</sup> day of every month," scientists wrote, "Measurements of ice thickness were taken on the first and 15<sup>th</sup> day of every month." Taking out the "we" focuses the reader's attention on the phenomenon (object) being observed, not the observer taking the readings (subject). Or at least that was the reasoning behind passive voice in science writing.

But during the last half of the last century, mostly because of developments in physics, scientists have talked a lot about a thing called the “observer effect”: while observing or experimenting with a social or even physical system, the scientist watching can affect the system’s behavior. When particle physicists try to measure the motion of something as tiny as an electron, their very observation almost certainly changes that motion. Because of the observer effect, the passive voice convention I’ve described above has been called into question. Is it really honest to act like “measurements are taken” by some invisible hand? Is the picture minus the researcher the whole picture? Not really. The fact is, someone took the measurements, and those measurements might reflect that observer’s involvement. It’s more truthful, complete, and objective, then, to put the researchers in the picture. These days, it’s much more common to “see” the researchers as subjects—“We measured ice thickness . . .”—in methodology sections.

That same kind of “whole picture” honesty applies to you making written claims, too. When you first learned to write an essay, you were probably taught to make claims as though they were true; write “The sky is blue,” not “I think that the sky is blue.” That second claim isn’t arguable—who can disprove that you think something? But a much more sophisticated claim includes your perspective and implies the effect it may have on your stance: “From my position standing on the earth’s surface in the daytime, I see the sky as blue.” You can make that claim without using first person, of course, and in some contexts (i.e. for a scientific argument), you probably should. When you’re taking a stance on an issue, though, first person just makes sense. Defining your perspective gives your reader context for your stance: “As a volunteer at a bilingual preschool, I can see that both language immersion and individualized language instruction have benefits,” or “As a principal at an elementary school with a limited budget, I would argue that language immersion makes the most sense.” Consider those two positions; without the “whole picture” that the statement of perspective implies, you might assume that the two claims disagree. The subtlety of the subject—who the writer is—lets you see quite a bit about why the claim is being made. If you asked the second writer to take a stance on the immersion/bilingual instruction issue with only learning objectives in mind, she might agree with the first writer. The “truth” might not be different, but the position it’s observed from can certainly cast a different light on it.

## 2. Clarifying Who's Saying What

A clear description of your perspective becomes even more important when your stance has to incorporate or respond to someone else's. As you move into more advanced college writing, the claims you respond to will usually belong to scholars. Some papers may require you to spend almost as much time summarizing a scholarly conversation as they do presenting points of your own. By "signification," I mean little phrases that tell the reader, "This is my opinion," "This is my interpretation." You need them for two big reasons.

First of all, the more "voices" you add to the conversation, the more confusing it gets. You must separate your own interpretations of scholars' claims, the claims themselves, and your argument so as not to misrepresent any of them. If you've just paraphrased a scholar, making your own claim without quite literally claiming it might make the reader think that the scholar said it. Consider these two sentences: "Wagstaff et al. (2007) conclude that the demand for practical science writing that the layperson can understand is on the rise. But there is a need for laypeople people to increase their science literacy, as well." Is that second claim part of Wagstaff's conclusion, or is it your own reflection on the implications of Wagstaff's argument? By writing something like, "Wagstaff et al. (2007) conclude that the demand for practical science that the layperson can understand is on the rise. I maintain that there is a need for laypeople to increase their science literacy, as well," you avoid the ambiguity. First person can help you express, very simply, who "says" what.

Secondly, your perceptions, and therefore your interpretations, are not always perfect. Science writing can help me illustrate this idea, as well. In the imaginary observation report I refer to above, the researchers may or may not use first person in their methodology section out of respect for the observer effect, but they are very likely to use first person in the discussion/conclusion section. The discussion section involves interpretation of the data—that is, the researchers must say what they think the data means. The importance of perspective is compounded, here. They might not be right. And even if they are mostly right, the systems scientists study are usually incredibly complex; one observation report is not the whole picture. Scientists, therefore, often mark their own interpretations with first person pronouns. "We interpret these data to imply . . ." they might say, or, "We believe

these findings indicate . . . ,” and then they go on to list questions for further research. Even the experts know that their understanding is almost always incomplete.

### 3. Ownership, Intellectual Involvement, and Exigency

Citing scholarship contextualizes and strengthens your argument; you want to defer to “experts” for evidence of your claims when you can. As a student, you might feel like an outsider—unable to comment with authority on the concepts you’re reading and writing about. But outsider status doesn’t only mean a lack of expertise. Your own, well-defined viewpoint might shed new light on a topic that the experts haven’t considered (or that your classmates haven’t considered, or that your professor hasn’t mentioned in class, or even, quite simply, that you hadn’t thought of and so you’re excited about). In that case, you want to say, “This is mine, it’s a new way of looking at the issue, and I’m proud of it.”

Those kinds of claims are usually synthetic ones—you’ve put information and/or interpretations from several sources together, and you’ve actually got something to say. Whether your new spin has to do with a cure for cancer or an interpretation of Batman comics, pride in your own intellectual work is important on many levels. As a student, you should care; such investment can help you learn. Your school community should also care; good teachers are always looking for what we call “critical thinking,” and when students form new ideas from existing ones, we know it’s happening. On the larger scale, the scholarly community should care. Having something new to say increases the exigency of your argument in the larger, intellectual exchange of ideas. A scholarly reader should want to pay attention, because what you say may be a key to some puzzle (a cure for cancer) or way of thinking about the topic (interpreting Batman). That’s the way scholars work together to form large bodies of knowledge: we communicate about our research and ideas, and we try to combine them when we can.

An emphatic statement like “Much discussion has addressed the topic of carbon emissions’ relationship to climate change, but I would like to ask a question from a new perspective,” will make your reader sit up and take notice. In I-less form, that might look like: “Much discussion has addressed the topic of carbon emissions’ relationship to climate change, but some questions remain unconsidered.” In this

case, second sentence still sounds like summary—the writer is telling us that research is incomplete, but isn't giving us a strong clue that his or her (new! fresh!) argument is coming up next. Be careful, of course, not to sound arrogant. If the writer of the sentences above was worried about his or her lack of expertise in an assignment involving scholarly sources, he or she could write: "What scholarly discussion I have read so far has addressed the topic of carbon emissions' relationship to climate change, but I would like to ask a question from a new perspective." He or she can use first person to employ both deference and ownership/involvement in the same sentence.

#### 4. Rhetorical Sophistication

Some writing assignments focus on one simple task at a time: "Summarize the following . . ." "Compare the readings . . ." "analyze," or "argue." When you write a simple five-paragraph essay, your mode rarely changes—you can write an introduction, thesis, body, and conclusion without explaining too many shifts in what the paper is "doing." Writing at the college level and beyond often has to "do" a few things in the same text. Most involved writing assignments expect you to do at least two things. You may need to summarize/report and respond, or (more likely) you'll need to summarize/report, synthesize, and respond. A good introduction, as you've learned, needs to anticipate all of it so the reader knows what to expect. Anticipating the structure of a complex argument in I-less mode is tricky. Often, it comes out as a summary of the document that follows and is redundant. First person can clear that problem right up. Consider the introduction to this article; when I come to the part where I need to tell you what I'm going to do, I just . . . tell you what I'm going to do! My writing students usually find this rhetorical trick (or is it an un-trick?) refreshing and liberating. The same concept can be applied to transitions between sections and ideas: "Now that I've done this thing, I'd like to move into this other part of my argument . . ." I'll use this type of transition, myself, when I move into the section of this text called, "When, and When not?"

#### Academic Examples

The fact is, using first person for rhetorical clarity and to ease transitions isn't just easier—it's common in many academic contexts. It's

accepted, even expected, in some cases, for scholarly writing such as abstracts, position papers, theses, and dissertations in many fields to employ first person in the ways I've just described. In almost all genres, formats, and fields, the scholarly writer is expected to describe the research done thus far by her peers and then make her own claims—a structure that lends itself to first person.

Robert Terrill, a cultural studies scholar, begins his article, “Put on a Happy Face: Batman as Schizophrenic Savior,” with an evaluation of Tim Burton’s movie’s box office success, and then spends several paragraphs discussing other scholars’ applications of psychological frameworks to film studies. Throughout the literature review section, Terrill’s own voice stays remote; he uses third person. But look at what happens when he is ready to begin his own argument:

Because much of my analysis is grounded in the theories of Carl C. Jung, I will begin by outlining relevant aspects of that theory. Then I suggest that Gotham City is a dream world, a representative projection of image-centered dreams. Within the framework of Jung’s model, I show the principal characters to be archetypal manifestations that erupt from Gotham’s unconscious. Wayne/Batman is a splintered manifestation of a potential whole; his condition represents the schizophrenia required of a hero dedicated to preservation of the shattered psyche of Gotham. (321)

Terrill’s move to first person separates his own claims from the scholars he’s summarized in his introduction, and it allows him to take ownership of his main claim. The way he “maps out” his article is also typical of academic argument.

First person is used similarly in the sciences. Unlike Terrill, who argues for a certain interpretation of a text, psychologists Jennifer Kraemer and David Marquez report research findings in their article, “Psychosocial Correlates and Outcomes of Yoga or Walking Among Older Adults.” Much like Terrill, however, their introduction consists of a review of literature in the third person. For almost three pages, Kraemer and Marquez describe studies which have explored health and injury patterns in old age, as well as studies which have investigated various fitness programs for the elderly. When it comes time for



Kraemer and Marquez to describe their own study, they shift into first person:

We hypothesized that an acute bout of yoga would be more effective at improving mood and reducing state anxiety among older adults when compared with acute bouts of walking. We further hypothesized that older adults who practice yoga would have lower levels of depression and higher quality of life when compared with those who walk for exercise. We did not make direct hypotheses for exercise barriers and barriers self-efficacy because, to date, there is no research that has examined those variables in this population. (393)

Kraemer and Marquez continue in first person as they describe their methodology. “We recruited a total of 51 participants (8 men, 43 women)” they write, “through classes at local yoga studios and mall walking groups” (393). The researchers themselves, in first person, are the subjects who “do” every action in the methods: “We asked questions on . . . We measured state anxiety by . . . We measured mood using . . .” (393–4). By putting themselves in the picture, Kraemer and Marquez acknowledge themselves as variables in their own study—a key aspect of any scientific methodology, and especially those which involve human subjects and use interviews to collect data.

On the other hand, some academic communities and genres stay away from first person. Susan Clark, a professor at Yale who writes about the communication and implementation of sustainable forestry practices, describes her study without putting herself in the picture. Where Kraemer and Marquez describe themselves “doing” the methods of their study, Clark has her article as the agent in her description of analysis:

This article (a) describes the intelligence function in conceptual terms, including its sequential phases (as described by McDougal, Lasswell, & Reisman, 1981); (b) uses examples to illustrate the intelligence activity from Reading and Miller (2000), *Endangered Animals: A Reference Guide to Conflicting Issues*, which gives 70 cases by 34 authors in 55 countries

that focus on species, ecosystem, and sustainability challenges; and employs a “problem-oriented” look at intelligence activities across all these cases (Lasswell, 1971). It does so by asking and answering five questions . . . (637)

Clark’s methods are to analyze others’ processes—hers, then, is meta-analysis. It’s appropriate for her to remove herself rhetorically as she deals with many actions and many, diverse actors. She is more a describer than a “do-er.”

At the very end of her article, in a “call to action” that directly applies her findings, Clark does finally use first person. “We can increase the possibility of better biodiversity and ecosystem conservation, and better sustainability overall,” she writes, “if we choose to use an effective intelligence activity. Success is more likely if we increase the rationality of our own directed behavior” (659). Clark’s “we” is different from Kraemer and Marquez’s “we,” though. It refers to Clark’s audience—the community of sustainable forestry as a whole—and predicts future action in which she will be active.

#### WHEN (AND WHEN NOT) TO USE FIRST PERSON?

Now that I’ve convinced you to try first person in some of your academic writing, I should talk about how to use it appropriately. (See? I just used “I” for a clear transition to a new idea.) The key is: don’t go “I” crazy. Remember the self-discipline you practiced with I-less writing.

Probably the best way to approach first person in an academic context is this: use it to make yourself clear. You’ll need “I” for clarity when one of the ideals I described above is in question. Either 1) you’ll need to describe an aspect of your personal perspective that will help the reader see (your) whole picture; 2) you’ll need to make the divide between your voice and the scholars’ as clear as possible in order to avoid misrepresenting the scholars’ claims; 3) your own claim will need to stand apart from the other perspectives you’ve presented as something new; or 4) you’ll need to guide your reader through the organization of your text in some way.

Below, I’ve listed a few common writing situations/assignments that first person can potentially support.

Try “I” when . . .

. . . the assignment asks you to. Personal position papers, personal narratives, and assignments that say “tell what you did/read and provide your reaction,” all explicitly ask you to use first person.

. . . you’re asked to “Summarize and respond.” You might transition into the response part of the paper with “I.”

. . . you’re introducing a paper with a complicated structure: “I will summarize Wagstaff’s argument, and then respond to a few key points with my own interpretation.”

. . . you are proud of and intellectually invested in what you have to say, and you want to arrange it in reference to others’ voices: “Many scholars have used psychological frameworks to interpret the Batman movies, but I would argue that a historical perspective is more productive . . .”

. . . you are unsure of your interpretation of a source, or you feel that the claim you’re making may be bigger than your level of expertise: “If I read Wagstaff correctly, her conclusions imply . . .”

“I” Is a Bad Idea When . . .

. . . you use it only once. You don’t want to overuse the first person, but if you’re going to assert your position or make a transition with “I,” give the reader a hint of your voice in the introduction. An introduction that anticipates structure with “I will,” for instance, works well with transitions that use “I” as well. If you use first person only once, the tone shift will jar the reader.

. . . The assignment is a simple summary. In that case, you need only report; you are “eye,” not “I.”

. . . you’re writing a lab report for a science class, as a general rule. But you might ask your teacher about the issues of objectivity I’ve addressed above, especially in terms of objective methodology.

## DISCUSSION

1. Can you remember a writing task during which you struggled to avoid using the first person? What about the nature of the content made “I” hard to avoid? Can you link the difficulty to

one of the four values that first person “supports,” according to this essay?

2. McKinney Maddalena claims that scientists use “I” more often in research reports, nowadays. Find a scientific article in your school’s research databases that employs first person: “I” or “we.” In what section is first person used, and how? Does its usage reflect one of the values this essay points out?

### WORKS CITED

- Clark, Susan G. “An Informational Approach to Sustainability: “Intelligence” in Conservation and Natural Resource Management Policy.” *Journal of Sustainable Forestry* 28.6/7 (2009): 636–62. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 22 Mar. 2010.
- Kraemer, Jennifer M., and David X. Marquez. “Psychosocial Correlates and Outcomes of Yoga or Walking Among Older Adults.” *Journal of Psychology* 143.4 (2009): 390–404. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 22 Mar. 2010.
- Terrill, Robert E. “Put on a Happy Face: *Batman* as Schizophrenic Savior.” *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 79.3 (1993): 319–35. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 22 Mar. 2010.

## All Living Things Are Critics

Kenneth Burke

We may begin by noting the fact that all living organisms interpret many of the signs about them. A trout, having snatched at a hook but having had the good luck to escape with a rip in his jaw, may [11] even show by his wiliness thereafter that he can revise his critical appraisals. His experience has led him to form a new judgment, which we should verbalize as a nicer discrimination between food and bait. A different kind of bait may outwit him, if it lacks the appearances by which he happens to distinguish "jaw-ripping food." And perhaps he passes up many a morsel of genuine food simply because it happens to have the characters which he, as the result of his informing experience, has learned to take as the sign of bait. I do not mean to imply that the sullen fish has thought all this out. I mean simply that in his altered response, for a greater or lesser period following the hook-episode, he manifests the changed behavior that goes with a new meaning, he has a more educated way of reading the signs. It does not matter how conscious or unconscious one chooses to imagine this critical step—we need only note here the outward manifestation of a revised judgment.

Our great advantage over this sophisticated trout would seem to be that we can greatly extend the scope of the critical process. Man can be methodical in his attempts to decide what the difference between bait and food might be. Unfortunately, as Thorstein Veblen has pointed out, invention is the mother of necessity: the very power of criticism has enabled man to build up cultural structures so complex that still greater powers of criticism are needed before he can distinguish between the food-processes and bait-processes concealed beneath his cultural tangles. His greater critical capacity has increased not only the range of his solutions, but also the range of his problems. Orientation can go wrong. Consider, for instance, what conquest over the environment we have attained through our powers of abstraction, of generalization; and then consider the stupid national or racial wars which have been fought precisely because these abstractions were mistaken for realities. No slight critical ability is required for one to hate as his deepest enemy a people thousands of miles away. When criticism can do so much for us, it may have got us just to the point where we greatly require still better criticism. Though all organisms are critics in the sense that they interpret the signs about them, the experimental, speculative technique made available by speech would seem to single out the human species as the only one possessing an equipment for going beyond the criticism of experience to a criticism of criticism. We not only interpret the character of events (manifesting in our responses all the gradations of fear, apprehension, misgiving, expectation, assurance for which there are rough [12] behavioristic counterparts in animals)—we may also interpret our interpretations.

Pavlov's dog had acquired a meaning for bells when conditioned to salivate at the sound of one. Other experiments have shown that such meanings can be made still more accurate: chickens can be taught that only one specific pitch is a food-signal, and they will allow bells of other pitches to ring unheeded. But people never tremble enough at the thought of how flimsy such interpreting of characters is. If one rings the bell next time, not to feed the chickens, but to assemble them for chopping off their heads, they come faithfully running, on the strength of the character which a ringing bell possesses for them. Chickens not so well educated would have acted more wisely. Thus it will be seen that the devices by which we arrive at a correct orientation may be quite the same as those involved in an incorrect one. We can only say that a given objective event derives its character for us from past experiences having to do with like or related events. A ringing bell is in itself as meaningless as an undifferentiated portion of the air we are breathing. It takes on character, meaning, significance (dinner bell or doorbell) in accordance with the contexts in which we experience it. A great deal of such character can be imparted to events by purely verbal means, as when we label a bottle "Poison" or when Marxians explain a man's unemployment for him by attributing it to financial crises inherent in the nature of capitalism. The words themselves will likewise have derived their meanings out of past contexts [13].



# Storytelling, Narration, and the “Who I Am” Story

by Catherine Ramsdell

This essay is a chapter in *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing*, Volume 2, a peer-reviewed open textbook series for the writing classroom.

Download the full volume and individual chapters from:

- Writing Spaces: <http://writingspaces.org/essays>
- Parlor Press: <http://parlorpress.com/writingspaces>
- WAC Clearinghouse: <http://wac.colostate.edu/books/>

Print versions of the volume are available for purchase directly from Parlor Press and through other booksellers.

---

This essay is available under a Creative Commons License subject to the Writing Spaces' Terms of Use. More information, such as the specific license being used, is available at the bottom of the first page of the chapter.

© 2011 by the respective author(s). For reprint rights and other permissions, contact the original author(s).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Writing spaces : readings on writing. Volume 1 / edited by Charles Lowe and Pavel Zemliansky.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-60235-184-4 (pbk. : alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-1-60235-185-1 (adobe ebook)

1. College readers. 2. English language--Rhetoric. I. Lowe, Charles, 1965- II. Zemliansky, Pavel.

PE1417.W735 2010

808'.0427--dc22

2010019487

# Storytelling, Narration, and the “Who I Am” Story

*Catherine Ramsdell*

*Green Eggs and Ham was the story of my life. I wouldn't eat a thing when I was a kid, but Dr. Seuss inspired me to try cauliflower!*

—Jim Carrey

*It's all storytelling, you know. That's what journalism is all about.*

—Tom Brokaw

*People have forgotten how to tell a story. Stories don't have a middle or an end any more. They usually have a beginning that never stops beginning.*

—Steven Spielberg

## INTRODUCTION

Are stories just a form of entertainment—like movies, television shows, books, and video games?\* Or are they something more? This chapter takes the stance that **stories are a fundamental and primary form of communication**, and without them, we would lose an important way to teach our children, to train our employees, to sell our products, and to make information memorable to those of any age.

---

\* This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 United States License and is subject to the Writing Spaces' Terms of Use. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/us/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA. To view the Writing Spaces' Terms of Use, visit <http://writingspaces.org/terms-of-use>.

Consider a Jewish story Annette Simmons references in her book *The Story Factor: Inspiration, Influence, and Persuasion Through the Art of Storytelling*:

Truth, naked and cold, had been turned away from every door in the village. Her nakedness frightened the people. When Parable found her she was huddled in a corner, shivering and hungry. Taking pity on her, Parable gathered her up and took her home. There, she dressed Truth in story, warmed her and sent her out again. Clothed in story, Truth knocked again at the doors and was readily welcomed into the villagers’ houses. They invited her to eat at their tables and warm herself by their fires. (27)

Certainly stories can be a form of entertainment—a book to curl up with on a cold rainy afternoon, a movie to share with a best friend, a video game to conquer—but stories can also be much more and, as will be discussed at the end of the chapter, today stories can be found just about anywhere. Furthermore, because stories can be found anywhere from a movie theatre to a corporate boardroom, everyone should know how to tell a good story.

In her book, *The Story Factor: Inspiration, Influence, and Persuasion Through the Art of Storytelling*, Simmons talks about seven different kinds of stories everyone should learn how to tell. One of them is the “Who I Am” story. Simply put, a Who I Am story shows something about its author, and this type of story fits into the genre of memoir or creative nonfiction. Here is an example from Simmons’ book:

Skip looked into the sea of suspicious stockholders and wondered what might convince them to follow his leadership. He was 35, looked 13 and was third generation rich. He could tell they assumed he would be an unholy disaster as a leader. He decided to tell them a story. “My first job was drawing the electrical engineering plans for a boat building company. The drawings had to be perfect because if the wires were not accurately placed *before* the fiberglass form was poured, a mistake might cost a million dollars, easy. At 25, I already had two masters’ degrees. I had been on boats all my life and frankly, I found drawing these plans a bit . . . mindless. One morning I got a call *at home* from a \$6/hour worker asking me ‘are you sure this is right?’ I was incensed. Of course I was *sure*—‘just



pour the damn thing.’ When his supervisor called me an hour later and woke me up *again* and asked ‘are you sure this is right?’ I had even less patience. ‘I said I was sure an hour ago and I’m still sure.’

It was the phone call from the president of the company that finally got me out of bed and down to the site. If I had to hold these guys by the hand, so be it. I sought out the worker who had called me first. He sat looking at my plans with his head cocked to one side. With exaggerated patience I began to explain the drawing. But after a few words my voice got weaker and *my* head started to cock to the side as well. It seems that I had (being left-handed) transposed starboard and port so that the drawing was an exact mirror image of what it should have been. *Thank God* this \$6/hour worker had caught my mistake before it was too late. The next day I found this box on my desk. The crew bought me a remedial pair of tennis shoes for future reference. Just in case I got mixed up again—a red left shoe for port, and a green right one for starboard. These shoes don’t just help me remember port and starboard. They help me remember to listen even when I think I know what’s going on.” As he held up the shoebox with one red and one green shoe, there were smiles and smirks. The stockholders relaxed a bit. If this young upstart had already learned this lesson about arrogance, then he might have learned a few things about running companies, too. (1–2)

This example shows some of the reasons why people tell Who I Am stories. Chances are that if Skip had gone into this meeting and said “Look, I know I’m young, but I’ve got a lot of experience, I know what I’m doing, I’ve learned a lot from my mistakes. Just trust me,” he would not have won over his audience.

Please keep this example and the basic definition of the Who I Am story in mind while reading through the next section, which provides a little background and theory about the fine art of narration and storytelling.

## NARRATIVE THEORY

Roland Barthes was arguably one of the most important literary theorists of the twentieth century. To begin, we’ll look at his thoughts on narrative:

The narratives of the world are numberless. Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances—as though any material were fit to receive man’s stories. Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting (think Carpaccio’s *Saint Ursula*), stained-glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, conversation. Moreover, under this almost infinite discovery of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative. All classes, all human groups, have their narratives, enjoyment of which is very often shared by men with different even opposing, cultural backgrounds. Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself. (qtd. in Abbott 1–2)

In the forty-five years since Barthes penned this passage, nearly every book on storytelling or narrative theory has referenced this quote. Even if this quote is not referenced directly, often authors simply make a similar statement in their own words. For example, twenty-one years after Barthes voiced his thoughts on narrative, Luc Herman and Bart Vervaceck, authors of *The Handbook of Narrative Analysis*, stated:

No single period or society can do without narratives. And, a good number of contemporary thinkers hasten to add, whatever you say and think about a certain time or place becomes a narrative in its own right. From the oldest myths and legends to postmodern fabulation, narration has always been central. Postmodern philosophers . . . also contend that everything amounts to a narrative, including the world and the self. If that is correct, then the study of narrative . . . unveils fundamental culture-specific opinions about reality and human-kind, which are narrativized in stories and novels. (1)

Whether authors quote Barthes directly or voice the same sentiment in their own words, one of the few things almost all authors, scholars, and critics can agree on is that narrative is part of human-kind, it always has been, and it always will be.

Of course, what Barthes and Herman call narration, many, myself included, call story. H. Porter Abbott notes in *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, “Many speakers of English grow up using story to mean what we [Abbott and Barthes among others] are referring to here as a narrative” (16). Technically, however, there are some differences between the words “story” and “narrative.” In his book *The Classical Plot and Invention of Western Narrative*, N. J. Lowe talks about these differences using the terms *fabula* and *sjuzhet*:

This distinction is a cornerstone of modern narrative theory, even though there has been huge disagreement over the precise definition of the two terms and the boundary between them, and scarcely less over how to present them in English. *Fabula* (in English, usually ‘story’) is the series of events the work recounts, but imagined stripped of all the artifices of storytelling: a series of actual events in their natural order, in what merely happens to be a fictional world. In contrast, *sjuzhet* is the account of those same events that we actually get, reordered and reshaped in the process of telling to reach and affect the audience or reader in a particular and deliberate way. (5)

As Lowe mentions, scholars and writers have disagreed over the exact meaning of words like story and narrative. Abbot, for example, talks about “three distinctions: narrative is the representation of events consisting of story and narrative discourse; story is the event or sequence of events (the action), and narrative discourse is those events as represented” (16). In this chapter, we’ll use these definitions: a story (or *fabula*) encompasses the events or action in the story, and narrative discourse (or *sjuzhet*) is the way these events or actions are related. For example, all stylistic choices or organizational strategies, such as flashback, are part of the narrative discourse. Narrative discourse can encompass numerous things, but story almost always includes two primary parts: events and characters. After all, what story does not have these two characteristics? A story by its very nature includes events, and as Abbott contends, “what are events but the actions or reactions of [characters]?” (17).

Characters and events (or actions) may seem inextricably linked, but which is more important has been debated since Aristotle’s time. Aristotle took the stance that action was most important. In *Poetics*, he states: “Now character determines men’s qualities, but it is by their

actions that they are happy or reverse. Dramatic action, therefore, is not with a view to the representation of Character: character comes in as a subsidiary to the actions” (62–63). Still, character was important to Aristotle; he believed it was the second most important element in a drama and that character brought morality to a text (64). In the twentieth century, however, many authors started to think character was more important. For example, as author Andrew Horton notes, “Flannery O’Conner says ‘it is the character’s personality that creates the action of the story’ and not the other way around.” Horton goes on to state that usually the characters connect an audience emotionally to a story (2).

Because the purpose of a Who I Am story is to illustrate something about oneself, some might assume that character is the most important aspect of the Who I Am story, but in truth, as novelist Henry James asserts, both character and action are important in this type of story. James believes: “What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character? . . . It is an incident for a woman to stand up with her hand resting on the table and look out at you in a certain way; or if it be not an incident I think it will be hard to say what it is. At the same time it is the expression of character” (qtd. in Abbott 124).

Granted, thinking of the people in a Who I Am story as characters may seem odd because most likely they will be real people. However, consider Theodore A. Rees Cheney’s thoughts:

Traditional nonfiction, particularly journalistic nonfiction, never concerned itself with developing characters. Fiction writers worked at characterization; nonfiction writers concentrated on events. Creative nonfiction writers say that because so many events occur as the result of human interactions, the event cannot be fully understood without also understanding something of the people (characters) surrounding it. (134)

So while thinking of yourself, friends, or family as characters may not feel completely natural, remember some similarities do exist between characters and real people in that the people/characters in a Who I Am story need to be developed, interesting, and understandable, just like characters in a fiction work. Of course, some differences exist as well. Since the characters in a Who I Am story are real people,

you will not be creating characters, as a fiction writer does; instead, as Cheney notes, you will be revealing them:

When I write about character development, I'm talking about how the writer goes about revealing a person's character . . . The creative nonfiction writer does not 'create' characters; rather, he or she reveals them to the reader as honestly and accurately as possible. Like most contemporary fiction writers, creative nonfiction writers reveal character much as it happens in real life—bit by bit. (134)

Generally speaking, authors reveal their characters in two ways: direct and indirect characterization. With direct characterization, the author simply tells the audience something about a character. The line “He was 35, looked 13 and was third generation rich” from the Who I Am story at the beginning of this chapter is an example of direct characterization. With indirect characterization, the audience learns about characters by watching or listening to them. Indirect characterization can also include descriptions of characters. The Who I Am story at the start of this chapter primarily utilizes indirect characterization. The entire story Skip tells about his first job, the mindless drawing, being upset about an hourly worker calling him at home—all indirect characterization. Since indirect characterization shows what a character does, indirect characterization often directly relates to the sequence of actions, again showing how character and action can intertwine.

Another important piece of a story and narrative discourse is the difference between real time and narrative time. Consider the following passage:

Amy dropped a mug of coffee. It shattered on the kitchen floor. Coffee and shattered glass were everywhere. Amy got a towel and began cleaning up the mess.

This is real time, but if a few details are added, we get narrative time:

Amy dropped a mug of coffee. It shattered with a loud crash onto the kitchen floor. She felt the hot liquid burn through her socks into her feet. Coffee and shattered glass were everywhere. Amy sighed; there was no more coffee in the pot, and she had really needed a caffeine burst. Moving carefully through the mess, Amy grabbed an old towel out of the drawer and began cleaning up the remains of her breakfast.

Abbott explains the difference between real (or clock) time and narrative time:

Clock time . . . always relates back to itself, so that one speaks in terms of numbers or seconds or their multiples (minutes, hours) and fractions (nanoseconds). Narrative time, in contrast, relates to events or incidents. And while clock time is necessarily marked off by regular intervals of a certain length, narrative time is not necessarily any length at all. (4–5)

Abbott adds that writers can slow the “whole sequence down by simply adding details” and “conversely, we can make narrative time go like the wind” by using phrases like “in the following months” or “a few weeks later” (5).

The universality of narrative, *fabula* and *sjuzhet*, character and action, indirect and direct representation, real time and narrative time are just a few aspects of narrative theory, but these terms and this information will provide a solid foundation as we begin thinking more specifically about the Who I Am story.

### STARTING THE “WHO I AM” STORY

Your Who I Am story should start to answer the question “who are you?” However, this story should only focus on one characteristic or aspect of your personality. Think back to Skip and the Who I Am story from the beginning of this chapter. His story helped prove he was ready to be a leader and ready to run a corporation.

As with most other types of writing, brainstorming can be a useful tool. To begin, you might just think about all the ways to finish the sentence “I am . . .” The word you choose to finish this sentence then becomes the subject of your Who I Am story. If a subject is not jumping out at you, think about the way your mother, best friend, significant other, or pet might describe you. Think about a characteristic that only the people closest to you see—for example, has anyone ever told you “when I first met you, I never would have guessed that you were so funny (or competitive or happy)”?

Once you have a characteristic in mind, keep brainstorming and think of one specific example or event that illustrates this characteristic. This example will become your story. Again, much like a topic, sometimes an example, or story, will just jump to mind. However, if

you cannot think of an example right away, look through some old pictures, scrapbooks, or yearbooks. Reread journals or listen to favorite songs. All of these things can spark memories, and one of these memories can become the example or event on which your Who I Am story will focus. This event does not have to be exciting or flamboyant. Simple but heartfelt stories often are the most effective. Many things can be faked in life, but sincerity is generally not one of them.

### Writing the “Who I Am” Story

Once you have the topic, just start writing. Writing a story is not like baking a cake—there is no formula or recipe that guarantees a perfect story. But here are some steps to consider:

**1. Ask some questions about the event you are going to write about.** When did this event take place? What are the starting and ending points? Where did this event take place? Who was there? Was there a conflict? A resolution?

**2. Write down everything you remember.** Of course, there are numerous ways to write a first draft, but for a Who I Am story, simply writing down everything you remember about the event is a good place to start. Usually, it is better to have more writing than what you need. So start by writing everything down in chronological order. Do not worry about any rhetorical strategies or making it sound good. Think about the concept of *fabula* and just write down the entire series of events or actions.

**3. Go do something else.** Once you have the entire story written down, set it aside. Go take a nap or play with your dog, and come back to the story later. Then reread it and see if you left anything out. Time permitting, go through this process of putting the story aside and then rereading it several times.

**4. Summarize the main point of the story in one or two sentences.** Go through the story and eliminate everything that does not relate to this main point. Do not worry about length right now. Focus on quality and creating a unified story.

**5. Think about creating a dominant impression.** Is the story sad, thoughtful, sarcastic, or humorous? If you have trouble deciding on

a dominant impression, think about setting the story to music. What song would you pick—Mozart’s “Moonlight Sonata,” something by the Violent Femmes, a sultry jazz tune—and what emotion does this song conjure up?

**6. Keeping the main point and dominant impression in mind, add details and expand the most important parts of your story.** Real time should now become narrative time. Add concrete details and imagery. Imagine the different senses to which the story could appeal. We are a very visual culture, but go beyond describing what things look like—consider incorporating smells or sounds. Think about the way something feels when touched. Also think about how these details can help draw a reader in. Consider this an example from a student’s Who I Am story:

At the beginning of every school year, I am obligated to introduce myself to a new sea of adolescent hormones swimming with impulsiveness, curiosity, and unfiltered tourette-like verbal ejaculations. Sure, I could stand before the little urchins, and with trident in hand, I could dictate the rules of my class and cast off a long list of life experiences that made me the immortal that stands before them or I could let them place their expectations upon me creating an environment of perceived equality. Being a believer in a democratic classroom, I always opt for the latter.

Look at the way this student builds on the details: the words “sea,” “swimming” and “trident” work beautifully together. And look at the choices the student made: using the words “adolescent hormones” and “urchins” instead of students; “unfiltered tourette-like verbal ejaculations” could have simply been opinions or obnoxious comments. The story includes a lot of visual elements, but the phrase “verbal ejaculations” also appeals to the ears. These words, phrases, and ideas all work together to, as clichéd as it sounds, paint a picture of the author of this story.

The author of this story is a student, but she is also a middle-school teacher. The main point of the story is to show who she is as a teacher. Everything in this paragraph relates to that main point. We do not know the color of her hair, whether she is wearing a shirt or a sweater, or if she is tall or short. After all, none of these things relate to the



point of this story. Great detail and description and emotions are very important to the Who I Am story. But they need to be the right details, descriptions, and emotions, and they need to be used at the right time.

**8. Make certain the story shows and does not tell.** The ultimate success of the Who I Am story depends on how well you show, not tell, who you are (i.e. use more indirect characterization than direct characterization). Have faith in your words and in the story you are telling. Trust that the story works and do not end the story with a statement like “clearly this event shows that I am a trustworthy person.” Let the story do its job. Consider two more paragraphs from our middle-school teacher’s story:

On the first day of class last year, I allowed students to take seats at their leisure. I sat on my desk and when everyone was settled, I quietly commanded their attention by placing a large black top hat upon my head. Conversations abruptly stopped as my curious audience took notice. ‘If I were to say that hats are a metaphor for the different roles we play in our lives, what do you think that means?’ I was met with blank stares. ‘What if I said that I play many roles every day? I am a teacher, a mother, a daughter, a coworker, and a friend. Are the expectations for those different roles the same or different?’ A hand raises and a girl with pale skin, lively eyes and thick auburn hair answers, ‘Of course they’re different. I don’t act the same around my friends as I do in front of my parents!’ She has a smug ‘as if’ expression.

‘You’re absolutely right,’ I acknowledge. ‘Now what if I were to ask you to define the expectations of my role as your teacher?’ Eyebrows rise as the class considers this. ‘I’m going to pass out sticky notes and I want each of you to write down a word or phrase that describes what my job is as your teacher. When you are done, I want you to place your note on the strip of blue paper that runs up the wall in the back of the room. Each of you should place your note above the note of the person that went before you so that we create a column of sticky notes. Does everyone understand?’ A thin-faced, black boy with large eyes and bright teeth pipes up, “So we get to tell you how to do your job?’ I thoughtfully pause before answering, ‘Well . . . yah!’

What do we learn about the author from reading this passage? What kind of teacher is she? We could describe her as creative, brave, caring, and dedicated. We could decide that she is not afraid to take some risks. We know that she loves her job. Does she directly state any of these things? No. But her story shows that she is all of these things.

**9. Look at the introduction of your story.** Will it grab a reader’s attention? Think about sitting in a doctor’s office or waiting for your car to be repaired. You pick up a magazine and start to thumb through it. How long do you give an article to grab your attention before turning the page? Some people flip to the next page if the title of the article does not interest them; other more generous readers will read the first sentence or two before deciding to continue reading or to move on to the next page. Something in the opening paragraph, hopefully in the first sentence or two, should grab the reader and make him or her want to read on. Here is an example from another student’s Who I Am story:

I thought by the time I was thirty I would know what I wanted to be when I grew up. But here I am on the eve of my thirty-first birthday, and I am still searching, searching for where I fit into the world, amidst all the titles I have been given such as Sydney’s Mom, Tripp’s Wife, and Janice’s Daughter. Then there are all the roles I play: maid, chef, bookkeeper, personal shopper, and teacher. Of course that’s just what I do and who I do it for. The real question remains, when you take all of that away, who am I?

This is the first paragraph of the student’s Who I Am essay, and it does several things nicely. The conversational tone draws us in. We almost feel as if we are getting to peek inside the author’s head. “Tripp’s Wife,” “Janice’s Daughter,” “chef,” “personal shopper” are lovely specifics, and equally important, these are specifics to which most people can relate. Perhaps we are Bob’s son or Suzie’s boyfriend instead of a daughter or a wife, but we can still see the similarities between the author’s life and our own. And because of that, we want to know how she answers the question “who am I?”

**10. Treat this story like any other paper.** Have a solid organizational scheme (chronological often works well), keep one main idea per paragraph, use transitional phrasing, vary the sentence structure, and make sure the ideas flow into each other. Reflect on word choice and

particularly verb choices. Just think, for example, of all the different synonyms for the word walk. A character could strut, saunter, stroll, sashay, or skip. She could mosey, meander, or march. Powerful verbs are a great way to add panache and detail to a story without making it wordy or slowing the pace.

**11. Proofread, edit, and proofread again.** Give the story to a friend and ask them to read it. Do not tell them what the paper is about or what you are trying to accomplish. Instead just ask them what they learned or what three words they would use to describe your story.

**12. And the last bit of advice—have fun.** The best storytellers enjoy telling stories. When you are telling a story, pick a story that matters to you and a story that you really want to share. Let your love for that story come through, and let others see you through your story.

### LOOKING FORWARD: STORYTELLING IN THE PROFESSIONAL WORLD

As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, storytelling is not just for entertainment anymore. It's not just a mindless academic exercise either; storytelling is quickly becoming a cornerstone of the non-profit and corporate worlds. Storytelling can be a part of corporate training, public relations, politics, journalism, and of course, the two industries we are going to focus on: grantwriting and advertising.

Cheryl Clarke's book *Storytelling for Grantseekers: A Creative Guide to Nonprofit Fundraising* has been highly praised by both grantwriters and grant readers. For decades grants have been notoriously boring—both to write and to read. Clarke's book is starting to change all that.

Clarke begins by noting the similarities between grantwriting and storytelling:

Storytelling is a powerful art form. Stories entertain, educate, and enlighten. They have the ability to transport an audience to another location and teach them about issues and people they may know nothing about. The same is true of grantwriting. (xv)

Clarke continues by breaking down the different parts of the grantwriting process. She relates that often the grantwriting process starts with a letter of intent, a one to two page letter summarizing the request

that is sent to the funding organization. If the funding organization thinks your request has merit, they will ask you (or your organization) to submit a full grant proposal. Clarke likens the letter of intent to a short story and the full grant proposal to a novel.

Like short stories and novels, grants should also have heroes, villains (or antagonists) and a conflict. The hero is, of course, the non-profit agency. As Clarke notes,

Nonprofit agencies do heroic work, and they are the heroes of every proposal we write. Throughout the world today, nonprofits are working diligently to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, heal the sick, teach children, conserve the environment, save endangered species, and present music performances and art exhibitions, among other important activities. . . . As grantwriters, we have the opportunity to tell others these amazing stories. (52)

The antagonist is simply the need or problem. Hunger, global warming, abused animals, disease—any one of these could be the villain of the grant proposal. The nonprofit and the need become the characters in the story and supply the conflict and tension. Clarke suggests giving these characters a voice, stating “quotes are especially powerful because through them the proposal reviewer ‘hears’ directly from your agency’s clients in their own words” (81). These quotes become the dialogue in the story. Grant proposals often include other elements traditionally seen in novels, such as setting, back stories, and resolutions.

Clarke clearly shows the advantages of using storytelling techniques in grantwriting, and many believe storytelling is an equally important part of advertising as a close examination of the “1984” Macintosh commercial will indicate. In 1984, Apple was in trouble. As Richard Maxwell and Robert Dickman note in their book *The Elements of Persuasion: Use Storytelling to Pitch Better, Sell Faster and Win More Business*:

at that time the computer industry was in transition . . . Apple had been a major player when computers were seen as expensive toys for hobbyists or learning platforms for children. But when corporations began seriously going digital, they naturally turned to a name they had come to trust—IBM. IBM PC computers became ‘industry standard,’ with all the purchasing and advertising muscle that implied. (11)

In response, Apple's CEO Steve Jobs created the Macintosh computer, but he needed an advertisement that would bring attention to this computer. The "1984" commercial did just that. The "1984" commercial (available on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYecfV3ubP8>) shows a dystopia: a dismal gray world where Big Brother is seen (and heard) on every television screen. Row after row of people stare mindlessly at huge television screens, watching propaganda. A woman in red shorts runs through the crowd and hurls a hammer at the largest screen, destroying it and silencing Big Brother. The commercial closes with the tagline "On January 24, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you'll see why 1984 won't be like *1984*."

The commercial ran only once nationally (during the 1984 Super Bowl) and is generally credited with two things. The first is saving Apple. As Maxwell and Dickman note, "The result of this ad was explosive. Seven days later there wasn't a Macintosh left unsold on any store shelf in America, and back orders were beginning to stretch out for months" (12). Second, many advertising gurus believe that the "1984" commercial was one of the first advertisements to use a story.

Much like the stories Clarke talks about, the "1984" commercial has a hero: the Macintosh computer, which is personified by the attractive blonde in the short red shorts. The villain is the status quo and corporate America, both of which are supposed to symbolize IBM. The smashing of the television screen ends the conflict and provides resolution. This story also has something else: passion. As Maxwell and Dickman note: "But at its cohesive core, what made this ad white-hot was Steve Job's passionate belief that a computer was meant to be a tool to set people free" (12). And Maxwell and Dickman believe passion is another essential element of story.

This is, of course, only one example; today most commercials tell a story, and we can certainly see why. Maxwell and Dickman explain "A good story plays as well on TV as it does whispered to a guy in the back of a union meeting hall. It's as powerful in the powder room as it is in the boardroom. People love a good story. We can't get enough of them. And a good story is infectious. It spreads like wildfire" (46).

Again, storytelling now appears in many forms of professional and workplace communication; grantwriting and advertising are only two examples. So have fun telling your stories, enjoy them, learn to make them come alive. At the same time, you'll be developing a marketable

skill because, appropriately enough, storytelling has become a valuable commodity in corporate America.

### DISCUSSION

1. Maxwell and Dickman believe that “a story is a fact, wrapped in an emotion that compels us to take an action that transforms our world.” How would you define the term story? What do you think are the most important elements of a good story? What examples help support your thoughts?
2. How could stories and storytelling fit into your major field of study? What types of stories do you think professionals in your field might find useful?

### WORKS CITED

- “1984 Apple’s Macintosh Commercial.” Online Posting. YouTube. 2005. Web. 20 December 2010.
- Abbott, H. Porter. *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*. Cambridge UP: Cambridge, 2002. Print.
- Aristotle. *Poetics*. Ed. Francis Fergusson. Hill and Wang: New York, 1997. Print.
- Brokaw, Tom. “Tom Brokaw Quotes.” *BrainyQuote*. BrainyQuote. 2010. Web. 30 Sept. 2010.
- Carrey, Jim. “Jim Carrey Quotes.” *BrainyQuote*. BrainyQuote. 2010. Web. 30 Sept. 2010.
- Cheney, Theodore A. Rees. *Writing Creative Nonfiction: Fiction Techniques for Crafting Great Nonfiction*. Ten Speed Press: Berkeley, 2001. Print.
- Clarke, Cheryl. *Storytelling for Grantseekers*. John Wiley and Sons: San Francisco, 2009. Print.
- Horton, Andrew. *Writing the Character-Centered Screen Play*. U of California P: Los Angeles, 1999. Print.
- Lowe, N.J. *The Classical Plot and the Invention of Western Narrative*. Cambridge UP: New York, 2000. Print.
- Luc, Herman and Bart Vervaeck. *The Handbook of Narrative Analysis*. U of Nebraska P: Lincoln, 2005. Print.
- Maxwell, Richard and Robert Dickman. *The Elements of Persuasion: Using Storytelling to Pitch Better, Sell Faster, and Win More Business*. Collins: New York, 2007. Print.
- Simmons, Annette. *The Story Factor: Inspiration, Influence, and Persuasion Through the Art of Storytelling*. Basic Books: Cambridge, 2006. Print.
- Spielberg, Steven. “Steven Spielberg Quotes.” *BrainyQuote*. BrainyQuote. 2010. Web. 30 Sept. 2010.

## get your ya-ya's out!

had been born to smoke, and until I realized it, my limbs were left to search for some alternative. Everything's fine as long as I know there's a cigarette in my immediate future. The people who ask me not to smoke in their cars have no idea what they're in for.

"Remember when you used to roll your eyes?" my sisters ask. "Remember the time you shook your head so hard, your glasses fell into the barbeque pit?"

At their mention I sometimes attempt to revisit my former tics and habits. Returning to my apartment late at night, I'll dare myself to press my nose against the doorknob or roll my eyes to achieve that once-satisfying ache. Maybe I'll start counting the napkins sandwiched in their plastic holder, but the exercise lacks its old urgency and I soon lose interest. I would no sooner rock in bed than play "Up, Up, and Away" sixty times straight on my record player. I could easily listen to something else an equal number of times while seated in a rocking chair, but the earlier, bedridden method fails to comfort me, as I've forgotten the code, the twitching trick needed to decipher the lyrics to that particular song. I remember only that at one time the story involved the citizens of Raleigh, North Carolina, being herded into a test balloon of my own design and making. It was rigged to explode once it reached the city limits, but the passengers were unaware of that fact. The sun shone on their faces as they lifted their heads toward the bright blue sky, giddy with excitement.

"Beautiful balloon!" they all said, gripping the handrails and climbing the staircase to their fiery destiny. "Wouldn't you like to ride?"

"Sorry, folks," I'd say, pressing my nose against the surface of my ticket booth. "But I've got other duties."

It was for many years my family's habit to drive from North Carolina to western New York State to visit the relatives we had left behind. After spending ten days with my mother's family in Binghamton, we would drive the half hour to Cortland and spend an afternoon with my father's mother, the woman we addressed as Ya Ya.

Ya Ya owned a newsstand/candy store, a long narrow room fitted with magazine racks and the high, wall-mounted chairs the townspeople occupied while receiving their shoe-shines. She lived above the store in the apartment my father had grown up in.

"A shithole," my mother said, and even at the age of seven, I thought, *Yes, she's right. This is a shithole.*

My mother's parents also lived in an apartment, but theirs had been arranged with an eye toward comfort, complete with a bathroom door and two television sets. I spent my time at Ya Ya's wondering what this place might have been before someone got the cruel idea to rent it out as an apartment. The dark, stifling hallway had been miscast in the role

of a kitchen, and the bathroom looked suspiciously like a closet. Clothespinned bedspreads separated the bedroom from the living room, where the dining table was tightly wedged between the sofa and refrigerator. Surely, there were other places to live, perhaps a tent or maybe an abandoned muffler shop, someplace, *anyplace*, cheerier than this.

I recall one visit when she carried on about her recently deceased pet, a common goldfish she kept in a murky jar up on the apartment's only window ledge. Ya Ya had returned from work and, finding the jar empty, decided that the fish had consciously thrown itself out the window.

"He no happy no more and think to have a suicide," she said.

"Commit," my mother said. "He *committed* suicide." She threw her cigarette butt out the window and stared down into the littered alley below. "You don't *have* a suicide, it has you."

"Okay," Ya Ya said. "But why he have the suicide? Is pretty, the fish. Why he want to take he life away?"

"You're asking *why*?" My mother lowered her sunglasses. "Open your eyes and take a lucky guess." She emptied the jar into the sink. "This place is a dump."

"What Sharon means," my father said, "is that a fish is incapable of thinking in those terms. They have tiny little *kaphalis* and don't get depressed."

When speaking to his mother, my father used his loudest voice, drifting in and out of pidgin Greek. "The *psari* didn't know any better. It wasn't your fault, *Matera*, it was a *lathos*."

"He have the suicide and now I sad sometime." Ya Ya stared into the distance and sighed. I imagine she had spoken to the fish, had loved it the best she knew how, but her affection, like her cooking, was devoid of anything one might think of as normal. She regarded her grandchildren as if we were savings bonds, something certain to multiply in value

naked

through the majesty of arithmetic. Ya Ya and her husband had produced one child, who in turn had yielded five, a wealth of hearty field hands destined to return to the village, where we might crush olives or stucco windmills or whatever it was they did in her hometown. She was always pushing up our sleeves to examine our muscles, frowning at the sight of our girlish, uncallused hands. Whereas our other grandparents asked what grade we were in or which was our favorite ashtray, Ya Ya never expressed any interest in that sort of thing. Childhood was something you endured until you were old enough to work, and money was the only thing that mattered. She would sooner iron a stack of dollar bills than open any of the magazines or newspapers that lined the walls of her store. She didn't know who the president was, much less the central characters in any of her bestselling comic books.

"I no know the jug head," she'd say, spit-shining the keys on her cash register.

"Maybe he come here one day, but I no know it."

It was difficult to imagine her raising a child of her own, and chilling to realize that she had. As a baby my father had been confined to a grim corner of the newsstand, where he crawled on a carpet of newspapers, teething on nickels. He never had a bed, much less his own room, and considered himself lucky when the visitors left and he had the couch to himself. Our dog had it better than that.

"Louie," she would say, patting the hair on my father's knuckles, "Louie and the girl."

"The girl" was what she called my mother. My parents had been married twelve years, and Ya Ya still couldn't bring herself to call her daughter-in-law by name. My father had made the mistake of marrying an outsider, and it was my mother's lot to suffer the consequences. She had somehow tricked him, sunk in her claws, and dragged him away from his people. It would have been all right for him to remain at

get your ya-ya's out!



home for the rest of his life, massaging worry beads and drinking bitter coffee, but to marry a woman with two distinct eyebrows was unpardonable.

“Tell the girl she can sit down now,” Ya Ya would say to my father, pointing to a stool on the far side of the room.

“Tell the gnome I won’t be staying that long,” my mother would respond. “Her cave’s a little on the dingy side, and I think I might have an allergy to her mustache.”

We would pass the afternoon at Ya Ya’s table, eating stringy boiled meat served with spinach pie. The food tasted as though it had been cooked weeks beforehand and left to age in a musty trunk. Her meals had been marinated in something dank and foreign and were cooked not in pots and pans, but in the same blackened kettles used by witches. Once we’d been served, she performed an epic version of grace. Delivered in both Greek and broken English, it involved tears and excessive hand-wringing and came off sounding less like a prayer than a spell.

“Enough of the chanting,” my mother would say, pushing away her plate. “Tell her I’ll disappear as soon as my kids are fed.” More often than not, my mother left the table and waited outside in the car until we had finished our meal.

“The girl go away now,” Ya Ya would say, raising her glass of ginger ale. “Okay then, we eat.”

Our visits concluded with an all-you-could-grab assault on the store. “You can each take *one* thing,” my father said. My sisters and I carried bags and pillowcases, clearing the shelves of comic books. We stuffed our socks and pockets with candy and popcorn for the twelve-hour ride back home, overpowering the car with the scent of newsprint and Ya Ya’s spooky love.

My mother was pregnant with her sixth child when we received the news that Ya Ya had been hit by a truck. She’d

naked

stood wide-eyed in the center of the street, staring down an advancing eighteen-wheeler driven by someone bearing a remarkable resemblance to my mother. That was the way I pictured it. The truth was considerably less dramatic. It seems she had been bumped by a pickup as it backed into a parking space. The impact was next to nothing, but she’d broken her hip in the fall.

“That’s a shame,” my mother said, admiring her newly frosted hair in the bathroom mirror. “I guess now they’ll have to shoot her.”

My father flew to Cortland and returned announcing that once she recovered, Ya Ya would be moving in with us. “We’ll move a few of the girls downstairs to the basement, and Ya Ya can take the bedroom across the hall from your mother and me, won’t that be fun!” He tried his best to make it sound madcap and adventurous, but the poor man wasn’t fooling anybody, least of all my mother.

“What’s wrong with a nursing home?” she asked. “That’s what normal people do. Better yet, you could lease her out to a petting zoo. Smuggle her aboard a tanker and ship her back to the old country, why don’t you. Hire her a full-time babysitter, enlist her in the goddamned Peace Corps, buy her a camper and teach her to drive — all I know is that she’s not moving in here, do you understand me? There’s no way I’ll have her moping around *my* house, buddy, no way in hell.”

We had lived in our house for two years and it still smelled new until Ya Ya moved in with her blankets and trunks and mildewed, overstuffed chairs that carried the unmistakable scent of her old apartment. Overnight our home smelled like the cloakroom at the Greek Orthodox church.

“It’s the incense,” my mother said. “Tell her she’s not allowed to burn any more of that stinking myrrh in her bedroom.”

“Tell the girl to give me back the matches,” Ya Ya said.

get your ya-ya’s out!

For a town its size, Raleigh was home to a surprising number of Greeks whose social life revolved around the Holy Trinity Orthodox Church. Our father dropped us off each Sunday on his way to the putting green and picked us up an hour or two after the service had ended. "She'll make friends there," he predicted. "They'll love her down at the church."

There were quite a few oldsters at the Holy Trinity, widows like Ya Ya who dressed in black and supported themselves on canes and walkers. Still, it was difficult to imagine Ya Ya's having friends. She didn't drive, didn't write letters or use the telephone, and never mentioned anyone back in Cortland, where she'd had umpteen years to make friends. What made my father think she might change all of a sudden?

"She could, I don't know, go to the movies with Mrs. Dombalis," he said.

"Right," my mother agreed. "Then they can wolf down a few steaks at the Peddler before heading over to the discotheque. Face it, baby, it's just not going to happen."

Her first Sunday in our church, Ya Ya stopped the service when she tossed aside her cane and crawled up the aisle on her hands and knees. The priest saw her coming, and we watched as he nervously shifted his eyes, taking one step back, then another and another. The man was pinned against the altar when Ya Ya finally caught up with him, caressing and ultimately kissing his shoes.

Someone needed to step forward and take charge of the situation, but my mother was at home asleep and my father was at the golf course. That left my sisters and me, and we wanted no part of it. Members of the congregation turned their heads, searching for the next of kin, and we followed suit.

"Beats me," we said. "I've never seen her before in my life. Maybe she's with the Stravides."

naked

Over time we learned to anticipate this kind of behavior. My mother would take Ya Ya to the department store for new underwear, and we'd watch from behind the racks as she wandered out of the dressing room in her bra and knee-length bloomers. Once in the parking lot she would stoop to collect empty cans and Styrofoam cups, stray bits of cardboard, and scraps of paper, happily tossing it all out the window once the car reached a manicured residential street. She wasn't senile or vindictive, she just had her own way of doing things and couldn't understand what all the fuss was about. What was wrong with kneading bread dough on the kitchen floor? Who says a newborn baby shouldn't sleep with a colossal wooden cross wedged inside the crib? Why not treat your waist-length hair with olive oil? What stains on the sofa? I don't know what you're talking about.

"That might play back on Mount Olympus," my mother would say. "But in *my* house we don't wash our stockings in the toilet."

Ya Ya accepted the women in my family as another of life's little disappointments. Girls were to be tolerated, but every boy was a king, meant to be pampered and stuffed full of sour balls. She was overcome with joy when my mother gave birth to her final child, a boy Ya Ya wanted to name Hercules.

"*Poulaki mu*," she would say, pressing a fifty-cent piece in my hand. "*Poulaki mu krisom*." This was her standard pet name, which roughly translates to "my dearest little golden bird in a nest." "You go get the baby now and we feed him some candy."

My brother and I came to view our Ya Ya as a primitive version of an ATM machine. She was always good for a dollar or two, and because we were boys, all we had to do was open her car door or inform her the incense had just set fire to one of her embroidered cushions. I'd learned never to ac-

get your ya-ya's out!

company her in public, but aside from that, Ya Ya and I had no problem. I saw her as a benign ghost, silent and invisible until you needed a little spending money. One could always change the channel while Ya Ya was watching TV; there was no need to even ask. She could go from the State of the Union Address to a Bullwinkle cartoon without ever noticing the difference. You might sit with her in the living room, but never were you forced to fetch her snacks or acknowledge her in any way. That was our mother's job, not ours. Every now and then she'd leave the yard and the neighbors would call saying, "Did you know your grandmother is over here picking things out of our front lawn?"

We'd hand the phone to our mother. "They're probably just dandelions," she'd sigh, drying her hands on her skirt. "Don't worry, we won't charge you for the labor."

"You'd think we never fed her," my mother would complain once my father returned from work. "She's out there gathering nuts and eating sunflower seeds out of the Shirks' bird feeder. It's embarrassing."

Ya Ya would wander off and return with an apronful of greens, which she would boil to a paste. "That's all right," we'd say, covering our plates at the sight of her advancing kettle. "I'm sure they're delicious but I'm saving room for those toadstools you found beneath the Steigerwalds' doghouse."

The longer she lived with us, the more distant my mother became. As children we had worshiped her as a great beauty, but the strain of six children and a mother-in-law had begun to take its toll. The glass of wine with dinner was now preceded and followed by a series of cocktails that tended to fortify her rage. Rather than joining us at the table, she took to eating perched on a stool in the breakfast nook, wearing dark glasses and grinding out her cigarettes on the edge of her plate. Ya Ya had been diagnosed with diabetes, and it was my

naked

mother's thankless job to prepare a special diet and cart her around town for her numerous doctor's appointments. It was my mother who practiced injecting insulin into oranges and doled out the pills. She was the one forced to hide the peanut butter and confiscate the candy hidden in Ya Ya's dresser drawers — all this for a woman who still refused to call her by name. My father would return home at the end of the day and listen to bitter complaints delivered in two harsh languages. My mother offered to sell the baby, to take a part-time job picking tobacco — anything to raise enough money for a nursing home — but even the cat understood that my father could not place his mother in an institution.

It was against his religion. Greeks just didn't *do* things like that. They were too cheap — that's what has always kept their families together. The whole notion of the nursing home was something dreamed up by people like my mother; American women with sunglasses, always searching for their tanning lotion or cigarette lighters. He couldn't evict his mother, but neither could he care for her. The conflict divided our family into two distinct camps. My mother and sisters scraped bread dough off their heels in one corner, while my brother, father, and I jangled our change in the other. The children formed a committee, meeting in the driveway to discuss our parents' certain divorce. It was reported by scouts positioned outside the bedroom that my mother had thrown what sounded like an ashtray. A reconnaissance unit was sent and returned carrying a battered clock radio and the real estate section of the newspaper, the margins penciled with our mother's trademark series of stars and checks. How many bedrooms did the apartment have? Who would she take with her when she left? If we went with our father and Ya Ya, we could be assured of our privacy — but what did it matter, when our mother's attention was what we lived for?

"Tell that cow of yours to tone it down a little," my

get your ya-ya's out!

mother would shout from her stool in the breakfast nook. "They can hear her chewing her goddamned cud all the way to the state line."

"Oh, Sharon," my father would sigh.

"Oh, Sharon, my fat ass," my mother would shout, dashing her plate across the counter and onto the floor. Moments later she would rethink her exact wording, adding, "It's fat, my ass, but not as big as the can on that prize heifer you've got shoveling down three sacks of clover she harvested from the Kazmerzacks' front yard, mama's boy."

My mother had a wealthy aunt, a calculating and ambitious woman who had married the founders of two Cleveland department stores. The woman died paranoid and childless, leaving the bulk of her estate to my mother, her sister, and a handful of nieces. Having money of her own provided my mother with a newfound leverage. She took to wandering the house in a white mink cape, reading aloud from the various real estate brochures provided by a man who arrived late one afternoon introducing himself as her broker.

"This one's got a full-sized redwood sauna, separate bedrooms for each of my children, *and* a view of the distant volcanoes. It reads 'Divorcées welcome, no Greeks allowed.' Oh, it sounds *perfect!* Don't you think?"

The money made her formidable, and within a month, it was decided that Ya Ya would be sent to a nursing home. My father packed her belongings into the station wagon, and we followed behind in my great aunt's Cadillac, fighting over who would use the fake-fur throw.

She went first to a private facility, where she shared a room with a sprightly, white-haired lunatic named Mrs. Denardo, who crept out of bed late at night to shit in the hamper and hide Ya Ya's dentures in the chilly tank of the toilet.

"I'm the stepsister of Jesus Christ sent back to earth to

naked

round up all the lazy, goddamned niggers and teach them to cook ribs the way they was meant to be cooked, goddamnit."

We were enchanted and took to giving her the gifts meant for Ya Ya.

"What's this? A sack of almonds, you say? You can take these and shove them right up your puckered pooholes for all I care. I don't want nuts, motherfucker, I want drapes and shoes to match."

Ya Ya complained strenuously, but lost in the energetic saga of her roommate, my siblings and I never paid any attention. We organized a variety show tailored to Mrs. Denardo's exotic tastes and practiced for weeks, moving from the song "Getting to Know You" to a dramatic re-enactment of the Saint Valentine's Day massacre.

"Your show was a piece of stinking shit," she yelled, surrounded by an audience of beaming senior citizens. "You don't know fuck about shit, niggers."

The private hospital had seven circles of hell, and when Mrs. Denardo was sent upstairs to its steaming core, my brother, my sisters, and I lost interest in visiting.

Once the construction was completed, Ya Ya moved into a spanking new building reserved exclusively for senior citizens, a high-rise development called Capitol Towers. The apartments featured metallic wallpaper and modish asymmetrical rooms, the wall-to-wall windows offering a view of the local mall. No one in Raleigh lived in a high-rise, and we found ourselves briefly captivated by the glamour. My sisters and I fought for the opportunity to spend the night in Ya Ya's swinging clubhouse, and one by one, we took our turns standing at the darkened window swirling a mocktail and pretending to be mesmerized by the glittering lights of North Hills.

I enjoyed pretending that this was my apartment and that Ya Ya was just visiting.

get your ya-ya's out!

"This is where I'll be putting the wet bar," I'd say, pointing to her shabby dinette set. "The movie projector will go in the corner beside the shrine, and we'll knock down this dividing wall to build a conversation pit."

"Okay," Ya Ya would say, staring at her folded hands. "You make a pit."

Again my father hoped Ya Ya might make some friends, but the women of Capitol Towers tended to be short-haired modern grandmothers with compact cars and stylish denim pantsuits. They kept themselves busy with volunteer work and organized bus trips to Ocracoke and Colonial Williamsburg.

"That is so cute!" they'd say, fawning over the tissue-paper Santa decorating the lobby. "Isn't it cute? I told Hassie Singleton just the other day, I said, 'That Saint Nicholas is just about the cutest thing I've ever seen in my life!' And speaking of cute, where did you buy that sweatsuit? My goodness, it's cute!"

The word *cute* perfectly illustrated the gap between Ya Ya and her new neighbors. Stretched to its most ridiculous limit, their community password had no practical application to her life. She owned no makeup or jewelry, wore no breezy spangled sweatshirts or smart, tailored slacks. Her door was free of seasonal cutouts, and she would no sooner square-dance than join the Baptist ladies for a tour of the historic pantyhose factories of Winston-Salem. She left her apartment only to ransack the community garden or sit quietly sobbing in the lobby, drying her tears with the tissues used to sculpt the latest holiday display. This was not the picture Capitol Towers wished to present. These were robust seniors hoping to make the most of their retirement, and the sight of our grieving, black-clad Ya Ya deflated their spirits. It was suggested by the management that perhaps she might be more comfortable somewhere else. Legally she met their res-

naked

idency requirements, but spiritually she was just too dark. They began keeping tabs on her, looking for some technicality, and were overjoyed when she fell asleep late one afternoon and set a small fire with her neglected iron. Forced to leave Capitol Towers, Ya Ya took up residence at Mayview, a low brick nursing home located next door to the old county poorhouse. This was an older, considerably less mobile crowd than she'd known at Capitol Towers. Many of the residents were confined to wheelchairs, their spotted scalps visible through tufts of unkempt hair. They peed themselves and sat farting in the lobby, chuckling at the trumpeting sounds that issued from their nightgowns. Unlike her former home, Mayview made no attempt to disguise the inevitable. There was no talk of one's well-deserved golden years, no rented buses or craft carnivals. This was it, the end of the line, all passengers please double-check the overhead storage bin before disembarking.

It was a sad place to spend the afternoon, so rather than endure the death rattle of her roommate, my father often brought Ya Ya to the house, where she sat in the carport, staring off into space until it got dark enough to catch a few moths.

She was joining us for dinner one night in the backyard when my father, trying to engage her in conversation, said, "Talk about your shockers, did I ever tell you that Ya Ya found her own brother dead in the middle of the road? The guy was slit from his chin to the crotch, murdered by rebels just for the hell of it. Her own brother! Can you imagine a thing like that?"

"I imagine it every day of my life," my sister Lisa said, tossing an olive pit onto my plate. "How come *she* has all the luck?"

"Was there a lot of blood?" I asked. "Did he crap in his pants? I hear that's what happens when you die. Were his or-

get your ya-ya's out!

gans soft to the touch, or had they been hardened by the sun? How old was he? What was his name? Was he cute?"

Ya Ya cast her eyes toward the neighbors' basketball court. "In Jesus' blessy name," she said, crossing herself with a barbecued chicken leg.

It was maddening, trying to get information out of her. Here she had a captive audience *and* a truly gruesome story but was unwilling to share it. My father had told us on several occasions that Ya Ya's marriage had been arranged. She had been sent as a young woman from her village in Greece to New York City, where she was forced to marry a complete stranger, sight unseen.

"Did you have a plan B in case he was deformed?" we asked. "When you finally met, did you kiss him or just shake his hand? How did you know he wasn't related to you? Did you ever date other guys?"

Each time we asked, our questions went unanswered. What we considered newsworthy was just another mundane detail of her life. Her husband, the man we addressed as Papou, had been just as morose as she was. We had to turn their photographs upside down in order to catch them smiling. The fact that they had only one child told us everything we needed to know about their erotic life. He worked, she worked, their child worked; they never expected anything more out of life. Papou had died when I was six years old. He had been in the newsstand late one night when intruders hit him over the head with a lead pipe, rupturing a vein in his head. He was carried to the hospital and died on Christmas Day.

"Did you still open presents?" we asked. "After he died, did he crap in his pants? Did the thieves concentrate only on money or did they take magazines and candy bars while they were at it? Did they catch them? Did they go to the electric

chair? After they were electrocuted, did they crap in their pants?"

"He go to Jesus now," Ya Ya would say. End of story. We asked our dad, who said only, "He was my father and I loved him."

That was not the information we were looking for, but to this day it is the only response he provides. Is it loyalty that keeps him from telling secrets about the dead, or is there simply nothing to report? How could you spend that many years sleeping at someone's feet and not remember a single detail?

"Of course you love Ya Ya," he would say. "She's your grandmother." He stated it as a natural consequence, when to our mind, that was hardly the case. Someone might be your blood relative, but it didn't mean you had to love her. Our magazine articles and afternoon talk shows were teaching us that people had to earn their love from one day to the next. My father's family relied on a set of rules that no longer applied. It wasn't enough to provide your children with a home and hand over all your loose change, a person had to be *fun* while doing it. For Ya Ya it was too late, but there was still time for my father, who over the next few years grew increasingly nervous. He observed my mother holding court in the bedroom, wondering how she did it. She might occasionally snap, but once the smoke cleared we were back at her feet, fighting for her attention.

I was in my second year of college when I received the news that Ya Ya had died. My mother called to tell me. I cradled the phone beneath my chin, a joint in one hand and a beer in the other, and noticed the time, 11:22 A.M. My roommate was listening in, and because I wanted to impress him as a sensitive and complex individual, I threw myself onto the bed and

made the most of my grief. "It can't be true," I cried. "It can't be true-hu-hu-hu-hu." My sobs sounded as if I were reading them off a page. "A-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha. A-hu-hu-haw-haw-haw-haw-haw-haw." I had just finished reading Truman Capote's *A Christmas Memory* and tried to pass it off as my own. "I feel like a piece of my soul has been ripped away and now I'm just a kite," I said rubbing my eyes in an effort to provoke tears.

"I'll walk across the campus later this afternoon and search the sky, expecting to find two clouds shaped like hearts."

"I've got just the thing for you, bud," my roommate said. "Just the thing for you and me both because, I don't know if I told you this, my own grandmother died just a few months ago. My brother dropped by to do his laundry and there she was, stretched out dead in front of her trophy case. That shit is harsh, my friend. You and me have got some grieving to do, and I've got just the thing to set free the spirit."

His remedy involved two hits of acid, a bag of ice cubes, and a needle. We split a pair of gold posts and sat hallucinating in the dormitory kitchen as a criminal-justice major pierced our ears.

I flew home to Raleigh the next day, where my father said, "There's no way you're coming into my house with an earring. No sir, no way."

I spent the next several hours in the carport, threatening to sleep in the station wagon, unwilling to compromise myself for the likes of him. "Asshole!" I yelled. "Nazi!"

"Listen," my mother said, stepping out the door with a tray of marble-sized meatballs. "You take the earring out, we go to the funeral, you stick it back in before you catch your plane. The hole won't close up that quickly, take my word for it. This is something I want you to do for your father, all right?" She set the tray upon the hood of the car and picked

naked

up a meatball, studying it for a moment. "Besides that, an earring looks really stupid combined with glasses. It sends a mixed message, and the effect is, well, it's troubling. Give me the earring and I'll put it away for you. Then I want you to come inside and help me straighten up the house. The Greeks will be here tomorrow afternoon, and we need to hide the booze."

I removed the earring and never put it back in. Looking back, it shames me that I chose that particular moment to make a stand. My father had just lost his only mother, and I assumed that, like the rest of us, he felt nothing but relief. He'd been cut loose from his Greek anchor and could now drift freely through our invigorating American waters. Ya Ya left behind no money or real estate, no priceless recipes or valuable keepsakes, nothing but a sense of release; and what sort of legacy is that? I can't help but imagine she had started off with loftier goals. As a young girl in Greece, she must have laughed at private jokes and entertained crushes on young stonemasons named Xerxes or Prometheus. When told she would be sent to a new world, I hope she took a few hours to imagine a life of cakes and servants, where someone else would shine her shoes and iron the money. Life had sentenced her to die among strangers. Set out to pasture, she spent her final years brooding and stamping her feet within the narrow confines of her fragrant stall.

"When I get like that, I want you to shoot me, no questions asked," my mother whispered. "Disconnect the feeding tubes and shut off the monitors, but under no circumstances do I want you to move me into your basement."

We nodded at the casket — my brother, my sisters, and I — knowing that with her, it would never come to that. Our father, on the other hand, the man weeping in the front row, he would prove to be more difficult.

get your ya-ya's out!

★ 25 ★

## The Montreal Just for Laughs Comedy Festival Keynote Address

*I was asked to give the keynote speech at the 2011 Just for Laughs Comedy Festival in Montreal. I was nervous and horrified as I approached the podium at 1 P.M. on July 28, 2011, in front of about four hundred peers and showbiz types. These were people who I felt judged me my entire career. People who I thought had kept me down and made my life difficult. But once I stopped at the podium a peace came over me. I knew that what I was about to say was from my heart. I knew there were some laughs and some pain. I knew that I had arrived . . . in my body. I fought back some tears a few minutes in but I got through it. It was one of the most intense and elating experiences of my life. I showed up for myself and my craft.*

Welcome to the Montreal Just for Laughs Comedy Festival and fuck you, some of you; you know who you are. Wait. Sorry. That was the old me. I would like to apologize for being a dick just



then. Goddamnit. See, that's progress. The amount of time between action and apology was seconds.

I am excited to be here. So I will now proceed to make this speech all about me and see where that takes us.

Things are going pretty well for me right now and that is a problem. I don't know what kind of person you are but I am the kind of person who when things are going well there is a voice in my head saying, "You're going to fuck it up. You're going to fuck it up, Marc." Over and over and over again. I just wish that voice were louder than the voice screaming, "Let's fuck it up! Come on, pussy! What happened to you? Fuck it up. Burn some bridges, fuck up your career, fuck up this speech, break up with your girlfriend, start drinking again, pussy! You used to have balls and edge! Have you forgotten what it's like being alone on a couch drunk and crying with no future and nothing left to lose? Have you forgotten what freedom feels like, pussy? Fuck it up!"

So, that is going on right now.

When they asked me to give this speech months ago the first thing I said to my manager was "What? They can't get anyone else? With this much time? Really?" Then my manager said, "They want you." So I asked, "Why me?"

*Why ask why me?* is the better question. This was obviously a good thing—I got the gig—but I'm the kind of person that needs to deconstruct even a good thing so I can understand what is expected of me and who is expecting it. You would think, "Well, Marc, they want you to be funny." Not good enough. In my mind I needed to know what the angle was. Did no one else want to do this? Did someone drop out? Be honest, who said no already? Chelsea Handler? Did Chelsea Handler say no already? I don't want Chelsea Handler's sloppy seconds. Am I cheap? I mean, shit,

I've been doing comedy for twenty-five years and I've been invited to this festival maybe twice before this. Which is ridiculous considering how many "new faces" I've tried out along the way. To their credit the festival did have me on the "remember these old faces" show a few years ago, but I get it. Let's be honest. I haven't made anyone in this room any real money. I'm currently working out of my garage. I am in a constant battle with resentment against many people in this room. So, again, why me?

You see what happened there? Within minutes the opportunity to give this speech became "This is a setup. They're fucking me. What kind of bullshit is this?"

That is the kind of thinking that has kept me out of the big time for my entire career.

Okay, I'm going to try to address both sides here—the industry and the comics. It's not really an *us against them* situation but sometimes it feels like it is.

As I said, I have been doing stand-up for twenty-five years. I've put more than half my life into building my clown. That's how I see it. Comics keep getting up onstage and in time the part of them that lives and thrives up there is their clown. My clown was fueled by jealousy and spite for most of my career. I'm the clown who recently read *The War for Late Night* and thought it was basically about me not being in show business. I'm the clown who thought most of Jon Stewart's success was based on his commitment to a haircut. I'm the clown that thought Louis C.K.'s show *Louie* should be called *Fuck You, Marc Maron*.

Three years ago my clown was broke, on many levels, and according to my manager at the time, unbookable and without options. That was a good talk:

My manager: Nobody wants to work with you. I can't get you an agent. I can't get you any road work. I can't get you anything.

Me: Uh, okay, so, uh, what do we do . . .

My manager: Are you looking at my hair? Why are you looking at my hair? Does it look bad?

Me: No, it's fine. What should I do?

My manager: I don't know what we're going to do. Stop looking at my hair. Am I fat? Seriously, am I?

My first thought after that meeting was: "I'm going to kill myself." My second thought was: "I could get a regular job." My third thought was: "I need a new manager." I think I had the order wrong. I drove home defeated. Twenty-five years in and I had nothing. I was sitting alone in my garage in a house I was about to lose because of that bitch—let's not get into that now—and I realized, "Fuck, *you can build a clown, and they might not come.*" I was thinking, "It's over. It's fucking over." Then I thought: "You have no kids, no wife, no career, certainly no plan B. Why not kill yourself?" I thought about suicide a lot—not because I really wanted to kill myself. I just found it relaxing to know that I could if I had to.

Then I thought maybe I could get a regular job. Even though the last regular job I had was in a restaurant like twenty-five years ago. I said to myself, *I still got it! It's like riding a bike. Just get me a spatula and watch me flip some eggs or some burgers.* Then I thought, "What, are you fucking crazy? You think they're going to hire a forty-seven-year-old man whose last restaurant job was part-time short order cook in 1987? How are you going to explain those lost years? Are you going to show the bar manager your *Conan* reel? You're an idiot."

Broke, defeated, and careerless, I started doing a podcast in that very garage where I was planning my own demise. I started talking about myself on the mic with no one telling me what I

could or couldn't say. I started to reach out to comics. I needed help. Personal help. Professional help. Help. I needed to talk. So I reached out to my peers and talked to them. I started to feel better about life, comedy, creativity, community. I started to understand who I was by talking to other comics and sharing it with you. I started to laugh at things again. I was excited to be alive. Doing the podcast and listening to comics was saving my life. I realized *that* is what comedy can do for people.

You know what the industry had to do with that?

Absolutely nothing.

When I played an early episode for my now former manager in his office, thinking that I was turning a career corner and we finally had something, he listened for three minutes and said, "I don't get it."

I don't blame him. Why would he? It wasn't on his radar or in his wheelhouse. There's no package deal, no episode commitment, no theaters to sell out. He had no idea what it was or how to extract money from it *and* I did it from my garage. Perfect. It took me twenty-five years to do the best thing I had ever done and there was no clear way to monetize it.

I'm ahead of the game.

So, back to the offer for this speech. I thought *wait*, that's the reason they want me—I do this podcast out of my garage that has had over twenty million downloads in less than two years. It is critically acclaimed. I have interviewed over two hundred comics, created live shows, I am writing a book, I have a loyal borderline-obsessive fan base who bring me baked goods and artwork, I have evolved as a person and a performer, I am at the top of my game and no one can tell me what to do—I built it myself, I work for myself, I have full creative freedom.

I am the future of show business. Not your show business, my show business. They want me to do this speech because I am the future of our industry.

Then my *new* manager got back to me and said, “They liked the jokes you did when you introduced Kindler a couple of years ago. That’s why they asked you.”

So, it was the jokes about them, you, the industry, that got them interested. Hmm. Fuck. That was like two jokes. I’m not good at insult comedy. Any time I do roast types of jokes they go too far, cut too deep, too true, get me in trouble.

I think the president of Comedy Central, Doug Herzog, is still mad at me. I would like to take this opportunity to apologize again to Doug. Years ago, when Doug Herzog and Eileen Katz first moved to Comedy Central from MTV and began retooling it, I performed at a Comedy Central party at Catch A Rising Star. I remember the joke I did. I said, “I am glad that Doug and Eileen moved from MTV to Comedy Central because I think that all television should look like a twenty-four-hour, round-the-clock pie-eating contest.” I don’t know if it was the venom I said it with or what, but two days later I was in Eileen Katz’s office with my old manager, who was having a great hair day, apologizing to Eileen for that joke. So, I am not the guy to make you industry people laugh at yourselves. Kindler will do that in a couple of days. And if I could, in the spirit of making an amends, I would like to apologize to Doug Herzog, again, and say I am sorry, Doug. Since you have been there, Comedy Central has become the best pie-eating contest on television.

Yes, I have been bitter in my life. I have felt slighted by the industry and misunderstood. I have made mistakes and fucked things up. That’s the kind of comic I am. It isn’t unusual. I will admit and accept my faults and mistakes but it bothers me that the industry takes comics for granted and makes us jump through stupid hoops and lies to us—constantly. I get it. You think it’s part

of your job but how about a little respect for us—the commodity. The clowns.

When I was a kid watching comedians on TV and listening to their records they were the only ones that could make it all seem okay. They seemed to cut through the bullshit and disarm fears and horror by being clever and funny. I don’t think I could have survived my childhood without watching stand-up comics. When I started doing comedy I didn’t understand show business. I just wanted to be a comedian. Now, after twenty-five years of doing stand-up and the last two years of having long conversations with over two hundred comics I can honestly say they are some of the most thoughtful, philosophical, open-minded, sensitive, insightful, talented, self-centered, neurotic, compulsive, angry, fucked-up, sweet, creative people in the world.

I love comedians. I respect anyone who goes all in to do what I consider a noble profession and art form. Despite whatever drives us toward this profession—insecurity, need for attention, megalomania, poor parenting, anger, a mixture of all the above—whatever it is, we comics are out there on the front lines of our sanity.

We risk all sense of security and the possibility of living stable lives to do comedy. We are out there in B rooms, dive bars, coffee shops, bookstores, and comedy clubs trying to find the funny, trying to connect, trying to interpret our problems and the world around us and make them into jokes. We are out there dragging our friends and coworkers to comedy clubs at odd hours so we can get onstage. We are out there desperately tweeting, updating statuses, and shooting silly videos. We are out there driving ten hours straight to feature in fill-in-the-blank-city-here. We are out there acting excited on local morning radio programs with hosts whose malignant egos are as big as their regional popularity. We are out there pretending we like club owners and listening to their “input.” We are out there fighting the good fight against our own

weaknesses: battling courageously with Internet porn, booze, pills, weed, blow, hookers, hangers-on, sad, angry girls we can't get out of our room, Twitter trolls, and broken relationships. We are out there on treadmills at Holiday Inn Expresses and Marriott suite hotels trying to balance out our self-destructive compulsions, sadness, and fat. We are up making our own waffles at 9:58 A.M., two minutes before the free buffet closes, and thrilled about it. Do not underestimate the power of a lobby waffle to change your outlook.

All this for what? For the opportunity to be funny in front of as many people as possible and share our point of view, entertain, tell some jokes, crunch some truths, release some of the tension that builds up in people, in the culture and ourselves.

So, if I could I would like to help out some of the younger comics here with some things that I learned from experience in show business. Most of these only refer to those of us that have remained heatless for most of our careers. I can't speak to heat. I do know that symbiosis with the industry is necessary after a certain point and there are great agents, managers, and executives who want to make great product but for the most part it's about money. To quote a promoter who was quoting an older promoter in relation to his involvement with the Charlie Sheen tour: "Don't smell it, sell it." True story.

The list.

1. Show business is not your parents. When you get to Hollywood you should have something more than "Hey! I'm here! When do we go on the rides?"
2. Try to tap into your authentic voice, your genuine funny, and build from there.
3. Try to find a manager that gets you.

4. Nurturing and developing talent is no longer relevant. Don't expect it. If you want to hear about that, talk to an agent, manager, or comic from back in the day . . . but don't get sucked in. They'll pay for the meal but they'll feed on your naiveté to fuel their diminishing relevance and that can be a soul suck.
5. If you have a manager there is a language spoken by them and their assistants that you should begin to understand. For example, when an assistant says "He's on a call" or "I'll try to get her in the car" or "He just stepped out" or "I don't have her right now" or "They're in a meeting" or "He's at lunch" or "She's on set" or . . . all of those mean: They've got no time for you. You have nothing going on. Go make something happen so they can take credit for it.
6. Sometimes a "general meeting" just means that executives had an open day, needed to fill out their schedule, and want to be entertained. Don't get your hopes up.
7. If your manager says any of these: "We're trading calls" or "I have a call in to them" or "They said you killed it" or "They love you" or "They're having a meeting about you" or "We're waiting to hear back" or "They're big fans" . . . these usually mean: You didn't get it and someone will tell you secondhand.
8. There is really no business like show business. Except maybe prostitution. There's a bit of overlap there.
9. This is not a meritocracy. Get over yourself.
10. Dave Rath will be your manager.

The amazing thing about being a comedian is that no one can tell us to stop even if we should. Delusion is necessary to do this. Some of you aren't that great. Some of you may get better. Some of you are great . . . now. Some of you may get opportunities even

when you stink. Some of you will get them and they will go nowhere and then you have to figure out how to buffer that disappointment and because of that get funnier or fade away. Some of you may be perfectly happy with mediocrity. Some of you will get nothing but heartbreak. Some of you will be heralded as geniuses and become huge. Of course, all of you think that one describes you . . . hence the delusion necessary to push on. Occasionally everything will sync up and you will find your place in this racket. There is a good chance it will be completely surprising and not anything like you expected.

I'm not a household name, I'm not a huge comic, I have not made millions of dollars, but I am okay and I make a living. I'm good with that. Finally. Comedy saved my life but also destroyed it in many ways. That is the precarious balance of our craft and some of us don't survive it. We lost a few truly great comics this year.

Greg Giraldo isn't here, which is weird. He was always here. Greg was a friend of mine and of many of yours. He wasn't a close friend but we were connected by the unspoken bond between comics. After talking to hundreds of comics I know that bond runs deeper than just friendship and is more honest than most relationships. He certainly was a kindred spirit. I battle demons every day and as of today, I am winning, or at least have a *détente*. Greg lost that fight. He was a brilliant comedian but in a way that is rare. He was not a dark, angry cloud. He was smart, current, honest, courageous, and did it with humility and light. He was a comedic force of nature that is profoundly missed. He was just a guy that always seemed so alive that accepting that he isn't is hard and sad. He is survived by his ex-wife, his kids, and his YouTube videos. We miss him.

In an interesting twist this year, Robert Schimmel did not die of cancer but he did pass. Bob was a class act. A legacy to true-blue lounge comedy and an impeccable craftsman of the story

and the joke. He battled a horrible disease for over a decade and brought a lot of laughs and hope to people affected by cancer. He made me laugh—a lot. I listen to his CDs if I need a real laugh. That is as honest a tribute as I can give. I miss him and I am sad I didn't get to talk to him more.

Mike DeStefano as a person went through more shit than I can even imagine. Some of it self-generated, all of it tragic and mind-blowing, and he overcame it. How? With comedy. I recently talked to his brother, Joe, who said, "Mike had a tough time living until he found comedy, and then it was the opposite. Doing comedy is what saved him. His comedy helped a lot of people and it helped him." I'd never met a guy more at peace with his past and present and more excited about a future that sadly isn't going to happen now, but he knew in his heart he was living on borrowed time and every day was a gift.

All of these guys should have had many more years of life between them but they didn't. These guys were unique in that they were real comics, hilarious, deep, hard-core, risk-taking, envelope-pushing artists that made a profound impact on people and changed minds and lives with their funny. I know that to be true.

I'm not sure if there is one point to this speech or any, really. If you are a comic, hang in there if you can, because you never know what's going to happen or how it is going to happen and there are a lot more ways and places for it to happen. I know my place in show business now. It's in my garage. Who knows where yours is but there is truly nothing more important than comedy. . . . Well, that may be an overstatement. There are a few things more important than comedy but they aren't funny . . . until we make them funny.

Godspeed. Have a good festival. We're good, right?



# The Ballad of Drunky McCreepster

*Blayr Nias*

*Response "Making Do": Reflections on Blayr Nias' "The Ballad of  
Drunky McCreepster"*  
By Deborah M. Thomson

## THE BALLAD OF DRUNKY MCCREEPSTER

Blayr Nias

This fun tale from the road occurred on my third or fourth gig as a touring feature comic. I had no idea what I was doing or where I was going. I just wanted to be funny in front of people and get paid to do it. At this point, I was living the dream and had no idea how lonely, scary, boring, and just plain disgusting the road can be—especially if you are a woman. I don't consider myself a knockout beauty, but it's way worse if you are not an obvious lesbian or a senior citizen ... and even then, it can be brutal.

I was the opening act at a piano bar in Florida. This was a military base town, and it was the weekend they got paid, so I was assured everyone would be drinking, spending money, and ready to laugh. They were right

---

B. Nias (✉)  
Charlotte, NC, USA

© The Author(s) 2020  
P. A. Oppliger, E. Shouse (eds.), *The Dark Side of Stand-Up Comedy*,  
Palgrave Studies in Comedy,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-37214-9\\_13](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-37214-9_13)

269

about the first part. The bar had a happy hour for two hours before the show where you could get a fishbowl filled with alcohol. Four different kinds of rum went into the concoction, so I assume you were supposed to share it. But the star of this story was flying solo that night and had no concept of moderation.

The host was not able to even remotely get the attention of the room before I went up so it was a shit show from the get-go. I do have a knack for entrancing even the rowdiest crowds. I think it is because I am so high energy and animated. It's like distracting a crying toddler. They don't know what to think, so they usually shut up, listen, and laugh.

I was about three-fourths of the way through my set and beginning to promote my merchandise, some racially insensitive but hilarious T-shirts that say, "I'm not racist. I have black friends." This is when the shit hit the fan.

I should go back a moment and mention that during my set, the drunk man by himself with several empty fishbowls in front of him had been a nuisance for a solid twenty minutes. Apparently, the wait staff had cut him off, but not informed him. So, first he began waving them down, then yelling for service, and finally getting up to find them and place his order stumbling all the way and incoherently chiming in with my jokes when he could. He wasn't so much a heckler as a train wreck dumpster fire.

Most professional rooms would have escorted him out or handled the situation, but it just escalated. The audience began to simultaneously watch the man and my set like a volatile tennis match. All of them wondering when this disaster would reach a boiling point. So, I am on stage holding up my shirts, getting laughs, and then it happens. He starts half stumbling, half barreling toward the stage screaming that he wants to buy one RIGHT NOW. He was holding cash up in the air like a drunk trying to get the bartender's attention. He mustered all his inebriated energy, swung one leg and then the other on the stage to my horror and dismay. I began to look around for someone to help or stop this, but no one did anything but stare with mouths agape.

Once he hoisted himself up on all fours then somehow managed to stand, he started forcing the money in my face and grabbing at the T-shirt I was holding. I could see his face more clearly now. He was not a young man serving his country, just out for a few drinks and laughs. He was a very old, very creepy, extremely dirty man.

My "stranger danger" alarm went off like an air-raid siren. I tried to laugh it off and suggested he take his seat and he could see me after the

show to buy a shirt if he wanted one that badly. He took the twenty-dollar bill in his hand and forced it in mine while he swiped the shirt out of my other hand and started teetering toward the edge of the stage.

I finished my set making fun of him just enough to ease the tension, but not enough to encourage him to participate any further. Once I finished my set, I thought, “Ok, so this is what a hell gig is. I got through it, and I’m ok.”

I was wrong. Mr. Drunky McCreepster found me again and began to tell me how beautiful I was through glazed eyes and a sway that indicated he was on a boat the rest of us couldn’t see. He then proceeded to reach his hand down my pants and grab my ass. Not from the outside of my jeans like a normal pervert. Not a pat on the back side like friendly office sexual harassment. No. His entire hand and forearm up to his elbow was inside my pants.

I jerked away horrified. But always trying to bring humor to the darkest of times, I said, “That will cost you more than twenty bucks.” He pulled out his wallet, half joking, half serious, and began to fish through the bills. I grabbed the entire thing, as I had seen Jane Jetson do to her husband in the opening credits of one of my favorite childhood cartoons. I took all the cash out and handed him back an empty wallet. I netted about \$80 total which was not nearly enough for his offense, but I felt slightly vindicated and amused. Needless to say, I rarely interact with drunk men on the road anymore. Or, at the very least, I make sure I have someone there to “watch my back.”

### *Blayr Nias Bio*

Blayr Nias has appeared on Fox’s *Laughs*, Comedy Central’s *Up Next* and was a regular contributor on WCCB News Rising. She was selected Best Comedian by *Charlotte Magazine*, “Hostess with the Mostess” by *Creative Loafing*, and Top 30 Under 30 by *Elevate Lifestyle Magazine*. For almost six years, she has been producing the Almost Famous Comedy Show at the flagship Comedy Zone in Charlotte, NC. Along with touring clubs around the country, she has performed everywhere from colleges to churches. She has worked with Marc Maron, Katt Williams, and the late great Ralphia May. Hailing from Massachusetts but living in the Carolinas for over a decade has given her the sophisticated blend of Northern aggression and Southern hospitality.



“MAKING DO”: REFLECTIONS ON BLAYR NIAS’ “THE  
BALLAD OF DRUNKY MCCREEPSTER”

Deborah M. Thomson

“The Jetsons” imagined a future where men flew private space jets to work, machines and robots cooked and cleaned, and women had all the time in the world to spend their husbands’ money. In the opening credits, George Jetson flew to work, dropping his children off at school in mini space pods before dropping his wife Jane off at the mall. Before Jane left the jet, George opened his wallet and offered her a bill. Jane left her husband the single bill and instead took his cash-filled wallet. The show was both futuristic and firmly grounded in the sexism of its era. Its producers imagined that among the space jets and floating houses that women would continue to play the role of consumers. Of course, not all viewers read televisual messages in the way they are intended (Hall, 1980). In her story, Blayr Nias turns the sexist script of “The Jetsons” on its head in an imaginative performance.

In fact, there are two performances taking place in Nias’ story. One performance takes place on the night that Nias recounts. The second is Nias’ performance of her story for you the reader. In both performances, Nias finds a way to respond to the power exerted against her. To fully understand Blayr Nias’ story, we need to pay close attention to both the “what” (the events of the story) and the “how” (the telling of the story).

*The Events of the Story*

At its core, Nias’ story is about how power and gender were transacted within the context of a stand-up show at a small piano bar in Florida. Michel de Certeau (1984) writes in *The Practice of Everyday Life* that our daily encounters are infused with power, based on historical and institutional privileges, like those that come with being a male in a patriarchal society. Those with privilege can exert what de Certeau calls “strategies,” the kinds of practices that allow a person or an institution to assert power over other people. Sometimes strategies come from a place of legitimate authority, such as a bar owner throwing out a disruptive customer because they own the bar and control that space. (Unfortunately, this was not the case for Blayr Nias on the night she describes.) De Certeau (1984) also tells us about the “tactics” used by those not in power, who call upon a

practice of “making do” in situations where power is being used against them. He describes the tactic as “a calculated action” that takes place in “the space of the other” (p. 37). Individuals without institutional power do not have the option of advanced planning; they must rely upon “isolated actions, blow by blow” (p. 37).

By definition, a traveling comic is always, to some extent, in “the space of the other.” Nias tells us about that space: a military town, payday weekend, with an audience who would be “drinking, spending money, and ready to laugh.” These all seem to be in her favor. She is there to make people laugh and to make money in a place where people have money and want to laugh. But it doesn’t exactly go down that way. During her set, she is interrupted by an extremely intoxicated man as she is trying to sell her T-shirts onstage in the middle of her set. There is no bouncer, no staff to remove the man, who continues to harass her. In the words of Nias, this man “starts half stumbling, half barreling toward the stage screaming that he wants to buy one RIGHT NOW.” At this point, the drunken man has stolen the show, as he hoists himself onto the stage, holding his twenty-dollar bill in the air.

Comedy clubs are spaces that allow for some audience misbehavior. Audience members know that comedy is participatory, and that they can talk back to the performer during a show as part of a long tradition of heckling comedians. However, there is another unwritten rule of performance that says the stage space is for the performer, unless the performer invites an audience member onstage. This second rule went unenforced by everyone in the room. As Nias recounts, “Most professional rooms would have escorted him out or handled the situation, but it just escalated. The audience began to simultaneously watch the man and my set like a volatile tennis match.” Realizing that no one would be coming to her aid, Nias committed her first act of “making do” as a performer by taking the twenty dollars for the T-shirt while making jokes to get the drunken man off *her stage* and regaining control of *her space*.

Her second act of “making do” happens after her set has ended. The man has found her offstage, outside of the safe(r) space of the spotlight. Nias tells us that he proceeded to, in her words, “reach his hand down my pants and grab my ass.” After jerking away, horrified, she then told her assailant “that will cost you more than twenty bucks.” She writes that “He pulled out his wallet half joking, half serious, and began to fish through the bills. I grabbed the entire thing, as I had seen Jane Jetson do to her husband in the opening credits of one of my favorite childhood cartoons.

I took all the cash out and handed him back an empty wallet.” Although this was, in Nias’ words, “not nearly enough for his offense,” her subversive act of taking the money out of a sexual predator’s wallet was her way of “making do” in the situation. As de Certeau (1984) tells us, “Sly as a fox and twice as quick: there are countless ways of ‘making do’” (p. 29).

Nias’ story is one of a sexual assault in her workplace, but it is unusual in many ways. Her place of work has different rules. It is a performance space, not an office space. She is in a club performing comedy. And the redress for her assault does not happen through a legal proceeding. It does not happen through a public online YouTube or Twitter shaming in the court of public opinion. It is a payment exacted directly and immediately. It happens through a small but significant tactical performance of “Jane Jetson.” Her acts of “making do” in the situation become even more layered when we look at the choices Nias makes as she tells her story.

### *The Telling of the Story*

Blayr Nias’ sharing of her story is another way she claims power over her predator. Our personal narratives, built out of the stuff of our lived experience, do not exist in a vacuum. Rather, they live within specific times and places, with their accompanying hierarchies and rules and norms that govern social interaction. According to Langellier (1999), “[A]ll narratives have a political function” because they exist within these very same hierarchies and power structures (p. 128). This is particularly true for stories of gendered violence (Fixmer-Oraiz & Wood, 2019). Ken Plummer (1995) writes, “[S]torytelling flows in the stream of power” and stories of sexual assault are told within that flow as “the power to tell a story, or indeed to not tell a story, under the conditions of one’s own choosing, [as] part of the political process” (p. 26). By sharing her story, Nias has opened up a space for us to talk about what happened to her. As Langellier (1999) proposed, storytelling makes “the power relations producing personal narrative” into something “discussable” (p. 130). So, let’s discuss.

Nias’ sharing of her assault story is a political act, as she brings to light the dark side of being a female comic constantly navigating a minefield of misogyny. Cohen-Cruz (2006) writes “the political potential of personal story is grounded not in particular subject matter but rather in storytelling’s capacity to position even the least powerful individual in the proactive, subject position” (p. 103). As a female comic in the male-dominated, oftentimes hypermasculine, field of stand-up, Nias must negotiate not just

her minority status as female, but also the social norms that have given men a sense of entitlement to, and control over, women's bodies. Nias makes this clear when she states, "[I]t's way worse if you are not an obvious lesbian or a senior citizen ... and even then, it can be brutal." In other words, if the men in her audience view her as a potential object of sexual pleasure (female, but not old or lesbian), then it is game-on, comic beware. By telling her story, Nias switches places with her assailant. She is no longer the "least powerful individual." As narrator, she takes on the "proactive, subject position." She has the power to name her assailant "Mr. Drunky McCreepster" and to describe the actions through which he continues to undermine her, as a comic, both onstage and off.

One of the first ways that Nias claims power as subject is in describing the situation she faced that night. She sarcastically prefaces her story as "this fun tale from the road," underscoring the not-fun that is about to befall her younger self. She vividly, and almost nostalgically, remembers the person she was at that earlier time as someone with a wide-eyed amazement that she could "be funny in front of people and get paid to do it." This was before she knew "how lonely, scary, boring, and just plain disgusting the road can be—especially if you are a woman." Nias frames her telling of what happened that night as a "shit show from the get-go." She tells us that after she finished her set, she thought to herself, "Ok, so this is what a hell gig is. I got through it and I'm ok." At this point in her story, we understand that she is new to "living the dream," and that she knew that this day would come—the "hell gig."

As storyteller, Nias has the power of describing her assailant. She introduces him as "the star" of the story, pointing to how much he undermined *her* place as the star of the show. She offers other descriptions. He was not so much "heckler as a train wreck dumpster fire." He was someone "flying solo that night" who "had no concept of moderation" as he drank fish-bowls full of alcohol. Because of the venue, she had initially assumed him to be a "young man serving his country," but once he climbs onstage with her she sees him as "a very old, very creepy, extremely dirty man." When he approaches her offstage, she describes him as having "glazed eyes and a sway that indicated he was on a boat the rest of us couldn't see." And, of course, she, in her storytelling, has the power to give him what seems like an apt name: "Mr. Drunky McCreepster."

Perhaps most interesting, Nias tells us her assailant was not like a "normal pervert." She tells of her predator grabbing her "not from the outside of my jeans like a normal pervert. Not a pat on the back side like friendly

office sexual harassment. No. His entire hand and forearm up to his elbow was inside my pants.” This was not the oxymoronic “friendly office sexual harassment.” No, this was something different. Nias’ description of exactly what this was, and what it was not, is very telling. For one, the invocation of “friendly office sexual harassment” and the notion that “normal perverts” assault people outside of their jeans alerts us to the experiences of women across professions and cultures; gendered harassment and assault are normative and sometimes even expected by women (Fixmer-Oraiz & Wood, 2019). The “normal” here is underscored by its dark side, the “abnormal” hand-to-forearm groping of a fully clothed woman in a public space. At the same time, the “abnormal” full-on assault makes us wonder why the lesser behaviors have become so normalized.

In her story, Blayr Nias speaks the truth of sexual harassment and assault and of “making do.” In “making do,” we subvert and repurpose the stuff of everyday life, like a female comic repurposing a Jane Jetson move as recompense for an assault, and then repurposing that assault as a story for our consideration. She turns her lived experience into something “discussable.” Nias concludes her story by sharing the following: “Needless to say, I rarely interact with drunk men on the road anymore. Or, at the very least, I make sure I have someone there to ‘watch my back.’” While it is disheartening to know that Nias still feels the need to have someone “watch her back,” her story invites us to discuss why this is so.

## REFERENCES

- Cohen-Cruz, J. (2006). Redefining the private: From personal storytelling to political act. In J. Cohen-Cruz & M. Schutzman (Eds.), *A Boal companion: Dialogues on theatre and cultural politics* (pp. 103–113). New York, NY: Routledge.
- de Certeau, M. (1984). *The practice of everyday life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Fixmer-Oraiz, N., & Wood, J. (2019). *Gendered lives: Communication, gender, and culture* (13th ed.). Boston, MA: Cengage.
- Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/decoding. In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (Eds.), *Culture, media, language* (pp. 128–138). London, UK: Hutchison.
- Langellier, K. (1999). Personal narrative, performance, performativity: Two or three things I know for sure. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 19, 125–144.
- Plummer, K. (1995). *Telling sexual stories: Power, change and social worlds*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Prejean, Helen. *The Death of Innocents: An Eyewitness Account of Wrongful Executions*. Vintage Books, 2006.

---

ONE • DOBIE GILLIS WILLIAMS

---

When I first met him I was struck by his name, Dobie Gillis, and then when I heard he had a brother named John Boy, another TV character, I knew for sure his mama must like to watch a lot of TV. Betty Williams, Dobie Williams's mama, is here now in the death house of the Louisiana State Penitentiary, a terrible place for a mama to be. It's January 8, 1999, at 1:00 p.m., and she's here with family members, two of Dobie's lawyers, and me, his spiritual adviser, and we're all waiting it out with Dobie to see if the state is really going to kill him this time.

Dobie's had eleven execution dates since 1985 and close calls in June and November when the state came within a couple of hours of killing him but had to call it off because of last-minute stays of execution. I feel this is it, they're going to get Dobie this time, and I'm praying for courage for him and for his mama and for me, too. I've done this four other times, accompanying men to execution, first with Patrick Sonnier in 1984,<sup>1</sup> walking through this very room on his way to the electric chair, and here we are sitting with Dobie,

hoping against hope he won't have to make that walk through this room tonight. His execution by lethal injection is scheduled for 6:30. About five hours to go.

Dobie's death is set to conclude a story that began more than fourteen years before, in the early morning hours of July 8, 1984. It was then that forty-three-year-old Sonja Merritt Knippers was stabbed to death as she sat on the toilet in her bathroom in Many, Louisiana, a small town in north central Louisiana. Mrs. Knippers's husband, Herb, who said he was in the bedroom during the slaying, told investigators that he heard his wife yelling, "A black man is killing me," which led police to round up three black men, Dobie Gillis Williams among them. He was home on a weekend furlough from Camp Beauregard, a minimum-security detention facility, where he was serving a term for burglary. He had been allowed the visit because he was a model prisoner, not prone to violence.

At 2:30 a.m., police officers seized Dobie, asleep on the couch at his grandfather's house, brought him to the police station, and began interrogating him. They told him that they would be there for the rest of the night and all morning and all the next day if need be, until they "got to the bottom of this." Three police officers later testified that Dobie confessed, and at the crime scene investigators found a bloodstain on a bathroom curtain, which the state crime lab declared was consistent in seven categories with Dobie's, and statistically, that combination would occur in only two in one hundred thousand black people. Investigators also found a "dark-pigmented piece of skin" on the brick ledge of the bathroom window, through which the killer supposedly entered and escaped.

Dobie's trial didn't last long. Within one week, the jury was selected, evidence presented, a guilty verdict rendered, and a death sentence imposed.

Now, waiting here in the death house, I pray. *No, God, not Dobie.* I've been visiting him for eight years. He's thirty-eight years old, indigent, has an IQ of 65, well below the score of 70 that indicates mental retardation. He has rheumatoid arthritis. His fingers are gnarled. His left knee is especially bad, and he walks slowly, with labored steps. He has a slight build, keeps his hair cropped close, and wears big glasses, which he says gives him an intellectual look. His low IQ forces him to play catch-up during most conversations, especially if he is in a group.

Earlier today, Warden Burl Cain asked Dobie if he wanted to be rolled to the death chamber in a wheelchair. "Dobie, we'll do it your way, any way you want, so if you want the wheelchair, we'll do that. It might make it easier on you, but if you want to walk, I mean that's okay, too, no matter how long it takes. We'll just go at your pace. If it takes a half hour, whatever it takes, it's up to you, you can have it your way, like at Burger King, have it your way, and we'll do anything you want to do."

Dobie narrowed his eyes. "No way. I'll walk."

Later he says, "Man! Is he crazy? Let them people use a wheelchair on me? Man! No way. No way."

The wheelchair is a sensitive issue. When Dobie got rheumatoid arthritis five years ago, his proud, fit body left him. Some of the guys on the Row started calling him "stiff," and when they'd see a crippled person on TV, there'd be snickers as somebody yelled out, "Who does that remind you of?" Dobie would be silent in his cell.

"I just ignore them," he'd tell me.

I notice how fast and soft and friendly the warden talks to Dobie. Of course he wants Dobie to use the wheelchair. I can tell he wants the process to go quickly so he and the Tactical Unit—the team responsible for the physical details of killing Dobie—can get it over with as soon as possible. Dobie, it is turning out, is proving difficult in several ways. There had been the last-minute stays of execution in June and November, which meant that the Tac team, Mrs. Knippers's family members, the executioner, the support staff, the medical staff, and the ambulance crew that removes the body—all these people had to come back and go through it again, which is hard on everybody. Plus, Dobie rejected the offer to eat his final meal with Warden Cain as two other executed prisoners had done. That must have felt like a slap in the face, because the warden felt he was doing his best to show Christian fellowship to these men before they died.

The meal with the other condemned men—Antonio James and John Brown—had gone well, with clean white tablecloths and the menu and guests selected by the prisoner—lawyer friends and spiritual advisers—along with the guests the warden himself invited—a couple of friendly guards and Chaney Joseph, the governor's attorney (who formulated the state's current death penalty statute and stands ready to block any legal attempt to halt an execution). At these final meals they had all held hands and prayed and sung hymns and

eaten and even laughed, and one of these scenes was captured on ABC's *Primetime Live* when a story was done about Antonio James. In the *Primetime* piece, there at the head of the table was Warden Cain, like a father figure, providing the abundance of the last meal—boiled crawfish—making everything as nice and friendly as he could, even though when the meal was done the inevitable protocol would have to be followed and, as warden, he would be obliged to do his job. In the chamber, he'd nod to the executioner to begin injecting the lethal fluids into the arm of the man whose hand he was holding and with whom he was praying.

The warden is fond of quoting the Bible, and the verse he quotes to justify state executions is Paul's Epistle to the Romans, chapter 13, which states that civil authority is "the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer." Yes, this distasteful task laid on his shoulders is backed up by God's word, which he tries hard to follow because he takes very seriously the eternal salvation of every man in this prison entrusted to his care. Warden Cain would do anything to avoid carrying out the death penalty, but it goes with the territory of being warden, and he likes being warden and is only a few years from retirement. So he goes along reluctantly and tries to be as nice to the condemned and their families as he can.

He could do what Donald Cabana, the former warden of Parchman Penitentiary in Mississippi, did. Warden Cabana quit his job because his conscience wouldn't allow him to participate in executions. In his book, *Death at Midnight: The Confession of an Executioner*, he tells of presiding over the execution of two men in the gas chamber at Parchman. The second one, that of Connie Ray Evans, really got to Cabana because he liked the man, and they talked often and long. He tried truthfully to answer Connie Ray's questions about how best to deal with the gas when it came, telling him to breathe deep, that it would be over faster that way.<sup>2</sup> Then, after watching the dying man gasp for breath and twitch and strain against the straps in the chair, Warden Cabana quit the job, and today he gives lectures against the death penalty to anyone who will listen.

Warden Cain could choose to do that. He has confided to one of Dobie's defense attorneys that he draws the line when it comes to women. Louisiana has one woman on death row, Antoinette Frank, and the warden says, no, he just couldn't execute a woman, that he'll quit before he does that. I wonder if he realizes that he's the first trig-

ger of the machinery of death—he nods and a man dies. The death certificate states the true nature of the deed: "Cause of death: homicide." Maybe there's a qualifying word, "legal," but it's homicide all the same.

When Dobie turned down the warden's invitation to share his last meal, he said, "I ain't going to eat with those people. It's not like, you know, *real* fellowship. When they finish eating they're going to help kill me." He is the first one up for execution who's turned down the warden's invitation, and I've heard through the prison grapevine that the men on the Row respect him for it.

We're all sitting around a table with Dobie in the death house visiting room: Jean Walker, Dobie's childhood sweetheart; his mama; his aunt Royce; his brother Patrick; his four-year-old nephew, Antonio; two lawyer friends, Carol Kolinchak and Paula Montonye; and me. Dobie's mama has her Bible open and puts her hand on it, saying, "No, not this time, either, they're not going to kill you, Dobie, because in Jesus's name I've claimed the victory, oh yes, in faith I claim the victory because God's in charge, not man, God is the lord of life and death, and in Him is the victory, and you must believe, Dobie, you must trust, as the psalm says, Oh, God, you are my rock. Do you believe, Dobie, are you trusting God to bring you through this? Do you have faith?"

Her words are strong and urgent, and they shore her up against this dark and dreadful process. She is trying to infuse the spiritual strength she feels into her son, who says softly, "Yeah, Mama, I believe."

"Say it like you mean it, Dobie, say it with conviction."

"Yeah, Mama, I believe, I do."

Dobie sits close to Jean, now back in his life after twenty or so years. She's declared herself "strong in the Lord" and has her husband's approval for these visits. She wants Dobie to be "strong in the Lord," too. She heard about Dobie's pending execution and reappeared in his life a few weeks before his June death date some eight months ago, and he can't stop touching her. During earlier visits in the death row visiting room—not now—he was like a playful teenage boy, sitting close to her, pinching her arms, thumping her head, teasing her, coaxing, telling her how cute her smile and her eyes were. When his mama had enough of it and told him to leave her alone, he smiled and said, "I just like to pick at her." His mama would open



the Bible, read a passage, and press him for the meaning. Sometimes she would read lengthy passages and Dobie would say, "Not so long, Mama. Pick a short one. I just want to visit."

My faith doesn't give me the same assurance Dobie's mama feels that he won't be killed tonight. I'm praying that God will give him the strength and the courage he needs to overcome fear. Dobie's been telling me how the fear eats at him. He was glad when Jean brought him a black baseball cap with the words of Isaiah, "Fear Not," embroidered in white letters on the front. Prison rules forbid prisoners to wear hats with any sort of logo, but the guards let the "Fear Not" hat slide. Dobie's worn it for three solid weeks except in the shower, and he wanted badly to wear the hat here in the death house, but the guards took it away when he was brought in at 9:30 this morning. "Man," he says, stretching out the last part of the word, "mannnn, they won't even let me have my hat." It's one more disappointment, but he tucks it somewhere inside, because after fourteen years of living in the "waiting to die" place, he's used to holding himself in check and not wishing too hard for anything.

Dobie is sitting at the end of the table with his back to the window, through which you can see one of the two guards with automatic weapons guarding the front door. With the lagoon outside and the flowers in pots near the front entrance, you'd never know this is a building where people are put to death. And when you're inside, all you see is a room with tables and chairs, two vending machines, and at the far end a white metal door. Behind this door, always kept locked, is the black cushioned gurney and the witness room with two rows of plastic chairs. Everything is neat and painted fresh and clean, the gray floor tiles polished and gleaming. The warden has had two large murals painted on the walls of this room, one of Elijah being taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot and the other of Daniel in the lion's den, the lions with yellow, glinting eyes and Daniel looking upward toward an opening from which heavenly light pours. In the scripture stories, both men escaped death. Elijah was taken up to heaven alive in the chariot, and Daniel, through God's power, persuaded the lions not to eat him. I sense in the murals an effort to make this a holy place, a place that's not really so bad, because here you get to go to God.

This is a place where everything is run by protocol. Each step of the execution process has been carefully chiseled out. "Here's what

we do if he goes peacefully. Here's what we do if he fights us. Okay, now, when we get in the room, I strap the legs, and you, the chest, and you, the right arm." Everybody knows his part in the ritual. The Tac team has practiced over and over, so when it comes to the real thing, they can do what they have to do. Plus, they're bolstered by the law, by general popular support for the death penalty, and by the knowledge that all the courts in the land and the U.S. Congress say it's constitutional to do the deed they'll be doing tonight. Sometimes even the prison chaplains give their blessing to the act, backing it up, of course, with a quote from the Bible.

Dobie's family will have to leave him at 3:00 p.m. It's 1:45, and I want to give them some privacy, so I stand away from the visiting table over by the lion's den mural. A guard is standing near me. We're close to the wall, looking straight into the yellow eyes of one of the lions, our backs to Dobie and his family. The guard tells me he's been here for every one of the twenty or so executions since 1983. He jabs his thumb toward the visiting table and whispers, "We got to get rid of the death penalty once and for all, because look who's in here. It's always families like this."

There's a tight, cold band in my stomach, the feeling of "Oh no, not again, they're doing it again." My stomach always knows about executions ahead of my brain. Having accompanied four other men through this ordeal doesn't make it easier. More predictable, but not easier. And harder to take, because now I know so much about the death penalty, and one of the things I know is that innocent people get thrown onto death row along with the guilty.

When I first started visiting the condemned in 1982, I presumed the guilt of everyone on death row. I thought that an innocent person on death row would be a pure anomaly, a fluke. Not with all the extensive court reviews and appeals. Now, after working intimately with so many of the condemned and their attorneys, I know a lot better how the criminal justice system operates and how innocent people can end up on death row. Now I know that 95 percent of the justice an accused person can expect to get in the criminal justice system must happen at trial. Because once the "raw stuff" of forensic evidence, eyewitness accounts, police reports, expert witnesses, and alibis is presented and decided upon by a jury, chances are no court will ever allow it to be looked at again. With so much in the balance as you go to trial, you better have a skilled, energetic lawyer who

thoroughly knows the law and how to conduct an exhaustive investigation and is aggressive enough to get hold of the *original* police report with its fresh, uncensored reporting of facts and eyewitness accounts.

Honorable people have disagreed about the justice of executing the guilty, but can anyone argue about the justice of executing the innocent? And can anyone doubt, after the revelations of the past five years, that we do it all the time?

*No, God, not Dobie.*

Inside my soul, I'm trying to find a rock to stand on.

*Jesus, be here now. You went through the agony of execution. Please help Dobie.*

The prayer is like breathing, and my soul steadies. At least for now Dobie is alive and visiting with his mama, and they are together and okay. Just for now. Just for the moment. In the death house I've learned to dwell in the present because the strength comes that way. I know not to take on the horror ahead of time. *My grace is sufficient for you.* When the family leaves at 3:00, I'll be close by to help Dobie take on the rest of this day as it comes. My soul is poised. I'll talk to him, affirm his life, thank him for the gift he is, pray with him, face the fear head-on, face it, deal with it. And I'll call him forth, summon him: "Dobie, how are you doing? What are you feeling now?" The enormity of the death that is about to happen is so great that it is easy to feel engulfed and muted and paralyzed. In words there is life, there is communion, there is shared courage.

Meanwhile, silently around us in this room, others are poised for what is about to take place. The media and witnesses will soon be gathering in a building near here. The executioner, the technician who will administer the lethal dose, is surely already nearby, organizing the vials of pancuronium bromide, which will stop Dobie's breathing; the potassium chloride, which will put him into cardiac arrest; and the vial of sodium pentothal, given first, which will put Dobie to sleep.

In the room where the witnesses are gathering, there are refreshments and the buzz of people talking and some official or other going around getting people to sign the witness agreements. I'm amazed at how banal the steps are to kill a human being, and I'm amazed at how polite and considerate the warden and guards are. Southern hospitality is a real thing in Louisiana. Even the big deal made about the

last meal is genuine in a state where food is given priority. This is the death house, where killing is done by quiet-spoken, polite people, who first serve you a fine meal and pray with you before they kill you.

I notice that Shirley Coody is sitting over at the food-serving table near the Elijah mural. She was here in June and November, too, when Dobie came within an hour of being killed. Her face shows her distress over what is going on in this room today. It was her ex-husband, Major Kendall Coody, supervisor of death row, who, after participating in five executions, called me into his office and said he couldn't do it anymore, that he had to quit. And over these sixteen years he's the only person I've ever met, other than Warden Cabana, who quit his death-dealing job because of his conscience. I notice that even though Shirley Coody has "Major" in front of her name, she won't be participating in the execution of Dobie tonight. No woman is ever part of the Tac team, a job that may require physical force to subdue a noncooperative prisoner. Her obvious role here is to show kindness to this little family, offer them food and drink, talk to them gently.

It's a shame that someone like her, who has such compassion for people, is made to play her part in this death process, even in a peripheral way. The reason she's even here at all is that the death house happens to be part of the camp she supervises, Camp F. Normally this room is used for prisoners' visits with family and friends. That's why the vending machines are here. What goes through Shirley Coody's heart as she watches mothers hold their sons close for the last time? In November, when Dobie came so close to dying, I noticed that her eyes welled with tears when Betty and the family said good-bye. And earlier, in June, when the stay came just as Dobie's last meal was being served, Shirley Coody was one of the guards he invited to come and eat what had to be the most celebratory meal of fried shrimp and catfish of all time. I'll never forget the sight of Dobie walking out of this place of death—alive man walking—right through the front door under the EXIT sign, and behind him, Sergeant Lee Henry, carrying three boxes of leftovers from Dobie's "last" meal, to be shared with the guys on the Row, who were about to be drop-jawed with surprise at the sight of Dobie walking onto the tier.

Sonja Knippers was stabbed eight times in her back, neck, and chest, her blood splattering over the wall, floor, and window curtain. I can scarcely imagine what terror and pain she must have felt in the last moments of her life and what agony her three children must go through when they imagine and reimagine how their mother died. Who can blame them for wanting to see Dobie die? I met some of them at a court hearing for Dobie in 1991. I approached them, seated there in the courtroom, told them I was Dobie's spiritual adviser, and offered to help them any way I could. One of the daughters, a young woman in her twenties, asked me, "Has he told you why he killed our mother?" I had to be honest. I said I was just learning about the case, but what I knew made me question whether Dobie had killed her mother. She stiffened. "We won't be needing your help," she said, and turned away.

I'm not surprised she turned away. When I first began visiting death row inmates I avoided the victims' families, a terrible mistake I promised never to repeat. Nine times out of ten these families don't want to have anything to do with me, but you never know. There's that one in ten, such as Lloyd LeBlanc, whose son was murdered by Patrick Sonnier and his brother, two of the men I visited in prison; and he wanted very much to see me. He had said to me, "Sister, where have you been? I've had no one to talk to." But most of the victims' families I have been able to help are not those affected by the crimes of the men I counsel on death row. Almost always, those families see me as the enemy.

The *Sabine Index*, the Many, Louisiana, weekly newspaper, in its front-page articles about the Knippers murder and the ensuing fourteen-year legal struggle to bring Dobie to execution, was guided by the prosecution's version of events and gave ample coverage to any statement or commentary the district attorney wished to make about the case. This week's edition, in the final countdown to Dobie's execution, gives a summary of the case, a version of events that essentially recapitulates the prosecution's presentation to the jury. It is a story that has already been presented numerous times to the people of Many:

How Dobie, home on leave for the Fourth of July weekend, entered Sonya and Herbert Knippers's Esso Drive home on July 8, 1984. How he hid,

apparently nude, behind a bathroom door, and confronted Mrs. Knippers when she left the living-room couch (she had been reading and dozing there) to use the bathroom at 12:48 a.m. How he slammed the door behind Mrs. Knippers, stabbed her repeatedly as she screamed, and then escaped through the bathroom window. Mr. Knippers, sleeping in the bedroom, is reported to have been awakened by his wife's cries and to have helped her from the bathroom to the living-room couch, where she died. Evidence gathered at the scene and elsewhere helped lead to Dobie's conviction, the *Index* reports: "a black pigmented piece of skin and a pubic hair, found on the brick window ledge . . . a blood-soaked curtain. . . [S]crapes on [Dobie's] legs and a puncture wound" as well as a bloody T-shirt found stashed near the house where Dobie was staying. "By 5:30 a.m.," the paper says, "Williams had allegedly confessed to the crime on a tape recording. Soon after, though, it was discovered that the recorder had not been properly used . . . and there was no recording."

Actually, there was no blood on the T-shirt. What appeared to be the most damning evidence against Dobie was the bloodstain on the curtain. The last-minute stay of execution Dobie received in November 1998 was to allow for DNA testing of that bloodstain. DNA testing had not been available at the time of Dobie's original trial, but I'm not convinced that fact alone motivated District Attorney Don Burkett to stop Dobie's execution so that DNA testing could be done. I think Burkett was upset by the report he saw of a top-notch bloodstain expert, Stuart James, whose analysis of the evidence seriously questioned Burkett's outrageously contrived scenario of how Dobie supposedly killed Sonja Knippers. (James's critique is presented in detail later in this chapter.) At trial, Dobie's defense attorney had failed to get independent forensic testing done, and this allowed Burkett's version of the crime to go uncontested for thirteen years. That is, until Dobie's appellate defense team—their backs against a wall in the courts, their client about to die—hired Stuart James to study the forensic evidence to see if it might point to

Dobie's innocence, or at least raise substantive questions about his guilt. Faced with James's critical analysis of bloodstains, which showed that Dobie could not possibly have entered and exited through the tiny bathroom window, as he had argued (the window fully opened measured eleven inches high and one foot eight inches wide), Burkett agreed to the DNA testing. Although James's report had been shown only to him and not to the public, Burkett must have known that Dobie's defense could easily make it public. The all-white jury had readily believed his scenario, but what would the general public think?

Whatever his motivation, Burkett's last-minute call for DNA testing was a decent and fair-minded act. He could have let the execution proceed, declared the case closed, and then ordered the destruction of evidence—including DNA—rendered extraneous by the execution. My own hunch is that Burkett must have been shaken by Stuart James's analysis, which so strongly contradicted his own. I wonder if he allowed the DNA testing because he knew that if a scientifically accurate test such as DNA proved to be a "match" with Dobie's blood on the curtain, that fact alone would seal Dobie's guilt in the minds of most people (maybe in his own mind as well). But as a prosecutor, Burkett must have known that even DNA confirmation that Dobie's blood had been found at the scene of the murder was still only circumstantial evidence. He well knew that to successfully argue proof of guilt beyond reasonable doubt, the prosecution must present a scenario of the crime that is *consistent with* the "story" the evidence tells.<sup>3</sup>

The power to choose the laboratory to conduct the DNA testing was in Burkett's hands, and he selected GeneScreen Laboratory in Dallas. He also chose to bar Dobie's defense from conducting simultaneous testing by experts of their choice or to have a representative present to observe the testing at GeneScreen. Defense attorney Nick Trenticosta had to go along with the prosecutor's decision. "What else could I do?" Nick later told me. "In just a few hours they were going to kill Dobie unless the prosecution called for a stay, so I wasn't in any kind of position to demand fair terms for the testing. I figured that if Burkett would stay the execution, then maybe later he and I could work out a more equitable arrangement for testing." Nick wasn't particularly happy about the choice of GeneScreen, but given the imminence of Dobie's death, he didn't have time to

research the lab's reputation among experts in the field. A seasoned capital litigator, Nick knew not to push Burkett too hard. Lawyers—like doctors, out to save lives—have their own kind of Hippocratic oath. Doctors vow: "First, do no harm." Capital defense lawyers vow: "First, don't let them kill your client."

On December 1, 1998, GeneScreen Laboratory sent its much awaited report to Burkett's office. Their DNA analysis of the blood sample had led them to conclude that the sample on the curtain and Dobie's blood matched. Burkett immediately released the results of the GeneScreen report to the media and declared that the most advanced scientific technology of the day had now confirmed beyond doubt what the state had contended all along—that Dobie Gillis Williams was guilty of the murder of Sonja Knippers. A day or two later, Burkett requested a new execution date for Dobie, and a Louisiana judge readily obliged, setting the date five weeks away on January 8, 1999. It was the eleventh date of execution set for Dobie during his fourteen years on death row.

As soon as Nick and his team heard of the GeneScreen report, they scrambled desperately to find DNA experts to critique it—free of charge. Like so many other Louisiana criminal defense lawyers whose clients are poor, Nick always struggles for funds to defend his clients. Louisiana judges are notorious for denying defense requests for expert witnesses and forensic testing. But Nick found Susana Herrero, a criminal investigator in Seattle, who worked with some of the leading DNA experts in the country, among them lawyer Barry Scheck, founder of the Innocence Project, Edward Blake of Forensic Science Associates in Richmond, California, and Randell Libby, a molecular geneticist at the University of Washington School of Medicine. For Nick, recruiting DNA experts was a minor challenge compared with the other huge problem he faced. Burkett allowed him access only to the conclusions of GeneScreen's analysis, not its case file, which contained photographs of the actual tests and the technicians' bench notes. Without that raw data, even the best DNA experts he might recruit would have nothing to analyze. Not only had Burkett refused to allow Dobie's defense to conduct independent DNA analysis of the blood evidence or to at least have a representative present during GeneScreen's testing (when only one sample of evidence exists, Nick believes, fairness dictates that both prosecution

and defense be present during the testing), but he continued to block Nick from the GeneScreen raw data until January 5, three days before Dobie's scheduled execution. As soon as Nick got his hands on the data, he sent it immediately to Blake and Libby and several other experts. All of them found serious problems with GeneScreen's work: sloppy technique, poor quality controls, subjective interpretation. On one particular set of tests called STR gels, which line up two ladders of chromosomes to compare them, the gels had been applied to the ladders so unevenly that it was impossible to measure and compare them. In the same STR test, despite the fact that one in four of the controls failed, the lab relied on the results and drew conclusions. Messy technique means inconclusive results, the experts said. Consequently, none of the experts agreed with the lab's conclusion that the blood sample on the curtain "matched" Dobie's blood. They said the tests should be conducted again, which Burkett refused to have done.

Interestingly, one of the tests that uses polymarkers to line up genetic components or alleles produced a "rogue" allele that could not be accounted for as coming from Dobie or the victim; yet GeneScreen simply glided over this without comment.

But it all came too late. There simply wasn't time to digest the problems and file a motion for retesting of the evidence. Despite the fact that Barry Scheck phoned him and implored him to allow retesting, Burkett simply said that experts always tend to disagree. He was going along with the opinion of the experts at GeneScreen.

And now here we are on January 8 with Dobie in the death house for the third time. I can't shake the feeling that Dobie is going to be killed tonight. Nick and the defense team have nowhere else to go with his case. No court will grant a hearing, and the Louisiana Board of Pardons and Paroles, appointed by pro-death penalty governor Mike Foster, has never yet granted clemency to anyone condemned to death.

Dobie has said all along that he's innocent, and I have a lot of questions about his trial. I've talked with Paula Montonye, a member of the defense team, and learned a few details about the startling contradictions between the state's case and the forensic evidence recently uncovered by Stuart James's forensic analysis. I learn that there is no audio or visual recording of Dobie's (unsigned) confession and that jurors heard conflicting versions of this alleged confes-

sion by police officers who claimed they heard him confess. I also learn that Dobie's original lawyer permitted, without objection, an all-white jury to be seated and did not order an independent analysis of the forensic evidence. I oppose the execution of all human beings, even those guilty of horrendous crimes. But Dobie?

Betty Williams doesn't bite her tongue. "They got Dobie because he's a black man and Mrs. Knippers was a white woman. From the git-go they just all presumed a black man did it, and so that's all they ever went after."

Of course, this is Dobie's mama talking. Isn't this what any mother whose child is in danger does? Protest her child's innocence no matter what the evidence?

But more and more now, I am coming to believe the mothers.

Recently, we have been witness to astounding admissions of error by state and federal courts forced to free 117 wrongly convicted people from death row since 1973, and the number keeps growing.<sup>4</sup> Seven Louisiana death row inmates have been found to be innocent over the past six years (as of September 2004). Illinois alone has had to free 13 such people, some under sentence of death for eight, ten, fifteen years, which in the year 2000 led the governor to enact a moratorium on executions. Some innocent persons were freed because of DNA evidence, others because committed citizens and lawyers were finally able to expose suppressed exculpatory evidence, outrageous testimonies of jailhouse snitches, falsified police reports, or evidence of "coached" eyewitnesses. In Illinois, Anthony Porter, two days away from execution, was freed because journalism students from Northwestern University dismantled the case against him and exposed the real murderer.

In 1997, the American Bar Association, many of whose members support the death penalty in principle, found such rank unfairness in the application of the death penalty that they called for a moratorium. It was concern about "due process" and "equal justice under the law," so palpably absent in the case of many indigent and minority defendants, that persuaded the ABA to pass its resolution. Nobody knows better than lawyers what kind of justice gets meted out in the courts. They know the difference in treatment given the O.J.'s of the world in contrast with the NoJ.'s, forced to accept overworked, underfunded, or inept attorneys to defend them.

*Brady v. Maryland* in 1963 requires prosecutors to turn over evi-

dence that could be favorable to the accused, but the requirement has no teeth.<sup>5</sup> Who knows how much evidence unfavorable to the prosecutor's case simply disappears or is conveniently not brought up? Working closely with police, prosecutors are privy to such information, but turning it over to the defense seems a more or less voluntary action that requires a huge degree of integrity on the prosecution's part. Defense attorneys have no way of knowing what is being withheld from them, nor do they have an assured way of getting such information from prosecutors, who suffer virtually no penalty for withholding it. Sometimes a fluke or stroke of luck turns up the concealed information, but such findings seem to be hit-or-miss, mostly miss, and require a scrappy, energetic, leave-no-stone-untouched defense attorney. Of the more than 500 documented cases in which innocent people have been convicted of homicide in the past century, including 175 or so where the defendant was sentenced to death, "prosecutorial misconduct" is one of the most frequent causes of miscarriage of justice.<sup>6</sup>

But what about Dobie Gillis Williams? Is he an innocent man about to be executed?

It took the jury a little over two hours to find Dobie Williams guilty of the murder of Sonja M. Knippers. None questioned the scenario of the crime that Burkett presented to them, a scenario that seemed to match the forensic evidence—bloodstains, knife, skin, hair—found at the scene. This scenario had Dobie crawling through the Knipperses' bathroom window, waiting behind the door, and stabbing his victim as she sat on the toilet; then, in his hasty exit out of the window, he left a drop of his blood on the curtain and skin and hair on the windowsill. And if anyone on the jury had a trace of doubt about Dobie's guilt, there was his confession. Police officers testified that he admitted he had killed Sonja Knippers in the early morning of July 8, 1984. What more did a jury need? They voted unanimously for guilt and unanimously for death.

Dobie's defense counsel, Michael Bonnette, couldn't stop the tide unleashed against his client. To retain Bonnette's services, Dobie's family had cobbled together \$10,000, which took some doing, with uncles and aunts and Dobie's mama putting in what they could. Betty said the family wanted an African American to defend Dobie. They knew he'd appreciate how treacherous Dobie's situation

was—a young black man accused of killing a white woman—and use all his lawyerly skills to fight hard for Dobie.

Unfortunately, they made the wrong choice. Bonnette not only lost this case but has since been disbarred for unethical practices in other cases.

The Williamses lived in the black section of Many for years. Their small house, which sat on cinder blocks, was literally on the wrong side of the tracks, in a section without paved roads or sidewalks.

They knew all too well how things worked in the town. Their kids knew the "nigger" taunts and the fights in school. And they all knew the stores, eating places, lounges, and churches where, as black people, they felt welcome and where they didn't. And in the courts and district attorney offices, the black people of Many, like those in most small towns in Louisiana, knew that should they ever run afoul of the law, they would face white judges and white district attorneys and predominantly white jurors. Plus, they knew that all or almost all of the people in the local media were white, including editors and reporters for the town's weekly newspaper, the *Sabine Index*. When the Williams family opened the *Index* and read about social happenings in the town, they were not surprised that most of the stories were about white people. When black people were in the news, it usually meant they were in some sort of trouble. And Dobie, accused of the murder of a white woman as reported on the front page of the *Index*, was in *big* trouble.

Betty Williams said about the *Index's* account: "They always give the DA's side. They never interviewed me or any of our family to get our side of the story." The family's side of the story was that Dobie was at his grandfather's house when the murder happened and the evidence against him was circumstantial or "outright lies."

"They just zeroed in on Dobie and never checked out any other suspects, and all those law enforcement folks just took whatever Mr. Knippers said as Gospel truth and went with that, including his version that his wife in her dying words told him a black man was killing her and that he escaped out of the bathroom window." Betty thinks that's the most preposterous thing she ever heard. "You tell me how on God's green earth could any dying person, about to face the judgment throne of God, waste their last breaths saying stuff like that

about what race a person was or what window he crawled out of. That sounds like somebody in a murder mystery book, giving those last little clues about the murderer, not somebody ready to meet God and step into eternity. Going after Dobie, an innocent man, that don't honor that poor woman."

Dobie's trial began May 13, 1985. An all-white jury, composed of nine women and three men, was selected in a day and a half. During the jury selection, the small pool of black people called for duty was easily dismissed by District Attorney Burkett by the "strikes" allowed him, which meant that he could dismiss possible jurors without giving a reason. Dobie's lawyer, Bonnette, had twelve such strikes, but with the overwhelming number of white jury candidates, he couldn't dismiss them all; and he raised no formal objection as the all-white jury was seated for the trial. Later, in appeals to higher courts filed on Dobie's behalf, Bonnette's failure to raise a formal objection to the racial composition of the jury and the grand jury that indicted him would be a pivotal factor in deciding Dobie's fate.

Evidence and arguments by prosecution and defense took place in three and a half days, and by day five the jury unanimously found Dobie guilty. The *Index* ran the story of the verdict on its front page, featuring a large photo of the Grant Parish Courthouse in Colfax Parish, where because of a change of venue the trial was held. A caption stated that "the Many black" had been found guilty.

The Knipperses lived in a half duplex owned by the Sabine Housing Authority. They had been married for almost twenty-six years and spent most of them in Many, where Herb Knippers worked for his cousin as an auto parts salesman and Sonja Knippers did the best she could at keeping house, despite the fact that she suffered from a bad back and had to lie down frequently, according to her husband. Their two daughters were married and lived nearby, and their son, Monty, was fifteen and lived at home.

Herb was the only other person home the night she was stabbed to death in her bathroom. At the trial, "tears rolling down his cheeks" and "phrases rolling from his mouth," as the *Index* reported, Herbert Knippers gave his account of the murder. He was sleeping, he said, in the bedroom and was awakened by a loud scream and "the awfulest bunch of bumping and knocking and banging and screaming and hollering," and he heard his wife yelling, "No, don't. . .

Don't hurt me. Don't kill me. Don't kill me. Don't kill me. . . . This black man is killing me, help me." He said he had backed up to run against the locked bathroom door and then it "popped open," and his wife emerged, bleeding, and said, "A black man has killed me." Then she described her assailant's exit route: "He went through the bathroom window." Those were her last words, Knippers said. He helped her to the couch and immediately called for help.

When the police picked up Dobie, they noticed he had abrasions on both legs, which they thought could have been caused by a hasty exit out the bathroom window. The time of Sonja Knippers's death was put at 12:45 a.m. by Dr. Clarence Poinboeuf, the coroner, though the record reveals that in his original report he had written 11:45 p.m. as the approximate time of death, then later changed it.

Dobie always maintained that after drinking at Fred Harris's store, he left to walk home around 11:30 p.m., arrived at his grandfather's house around 11:45 p.m., and was let into the house by his sister Cheryl. He felt "intoxicated and sick" from the drinking, he said. He took a bath and then made a telephone call to Debbie Sloan, his girlfriend, but her cousin answered the phone and said Debbie wasn't home.

Cheryl would later testify that he got home at 11:45. Johnny Sloan, Debbie's cousin, would testify that he answered the phone when Dobie called at 11:45 and told him Debbie was not at home. Dobie's uncle Samuel, who lived in the house, would also testify that Dobie arrived home between 11:30 and midnight. Dobie said he went to sleep on the living room couch until he was awakened by two police officers, "shining a flashlight up and down my body."

But Clyde Gosey, an acquaintance of Dobie's, would contradict all four of them by testifying that he had seen Dobie near the Knipperses' house, which is less than a mile from Dobie's grandfather's, sometime around 11:30 or 11:40 p.m.

After Dobie's two-and-a-half-hour interrogation in the Sabine Sheriff's Office, police officers said he confessed to murdering Sonja Knippers. His alleged confession didn't reveal how he had gotten into the house or what his motive was other than he had "been drinking," but he supposedly said he had found a knife on the back of the commode after he got into the bathroom, then waited behind the bathroom door, then stabbed Sonja Knippers and fled through the bathroom window, dropping the knife in the backyard as he ran.

After the interrogation, investigators went to the Knipperses' house and found a knife lying in the grass in the backyard about thirty feet from the bathroom window. Near the knife they also found a left glove and, under the bathroom window, two plastic milk crates. And there was the bloody curtain, with that one spot the crime lab would say matched Dobie's blood type.

Dobie did not sign a written confession, and there was no tape of his confessing. The three police officers who had conducted the questioning—Jimmy Kinney, Joe R. Byles, and James D. McComic—gave conflicting testimonies but agreed that Dobie had confessed. Normally courts rule out such testimony as “hearsay,” but an exception is made for police. So one officer was allowed to say that Dobie's sister Cheryl originally told him that Dobie didn't get home until around 1:00 a.m. despite her testimony that Dobie had returned home around 11:45 p.m.

In court, Herb Knippers readily identified a steak knife with a wooden handle, which the state presented in evidence as the murder weapon. He said he knew the knife very well because earlier in the afternoon of the murder he had used it to cut up chicken and seasonings for gumbo. He remembered that he had washed the knife and left it on the drainboard in the kitchen. But then he said to the police and later in court that possibly he might have put the knife on the back of the commode when he went to wash his face in the bathroom while making the gumbo. But, no, he testified, he was sure he had left it on the drainboard in the kitchen.

Exactly where Dobie had allegedly picked up the knife was a source of some confusion, because, the officers reported, he had first said that he walked to the kitchen, got the knife, then went back to the bathroom to wait. But both McComic and Kinney said they had stopped him and said they couldn't buy that explanation, because Dobie would have had to tiptoe past Mrs. Knippers sleeping on the couch in the living room to get to the kitchen. Then the officers said Dobie changed his story, saying that he had picked up the knife from the back of the commode.

To add to the confusion, the prosecution contended that the window screen had been cut from the outside by the killer, which presupposed a knife or a weapon of some kind. Why, then, would the murderer look for a knife in the Knipperses' house if he already had one?

There were other contradictions. For instance, Kinney testified that Dobie said, “I walked halfway down the hall and I looked and saw her laying on the couch. Then I went back to the bathroom. . . .” Then Byles testified that Dobie said he looked through the bathroom door and saw Mrs. Knippers sleeping on the couch, but later investigators found out that the couch in the living room can't be seen from the bathroom door. So they confronted Dobie about that, too, and, once again, they alleged, he changed his version of events.

Dobie's defense attorney, Michael Bonnette, in his cross-examination of the officers, pressed them on the way the confession had been obtained, taking Dobie in the middle of the night and questioning him over and over, feeding him information. Bonnette did get the officers to acknowledge two crucial pieces of information about the crime they had relayed to Dobie—that the victim had been stabbed and that the crime had taken place in the bathroom. Perhaps they had also pieced things together for him: If there was a stabbing, there had to be a knife—so where was the knife? And how did he enter and leave the apartment? Didn't he leave through the bathroom window? Didn't it have to be the bathroom window, since that was what Mr. Knippers reported his dying wife had said?

Bonnette knew the tape would reveal the way information was fed and coercion used, such as threatening a penalty of death unless Dobie confessed.

But there was no tape, so it was Bonnette's critical questioning against the credibility of local police, shored up by DA Burkett, who assured the jury that the three law enforcement officers “certainly would have no reason other than to tell you actually what was said.” He asked the jury to keep in mind that these men had been roused in the middle of the night, and all in all, he thought they deserved “hats off.”

There were other problems in the forensic evidence that Burkett had to address. How could it be that the knife identified as the murder weapon didn't have a speck of blood on it—the victim's blood or animal blood (Knippers said he had cut up chicken while cooking gumbo)—not even under the wooden handle? And how could he explain that no trace of the victim's blood could be found on Dobie's clothes—his blue jeans, his shirt, or his shoes? Given the blood splattered everywhere in the bathroom, how could a killer lean over the



victim, stab her, and not get any of her blood on him? The absence of Mrs. Knippers's blood on Dobie's shirt seemed especially problematic, because every article about the crime published in the *Index*—as Betty Williams was quick to point out—invariably included a “rolled up bloody shirt” as part of the incriminating evidence against Dobie. Finally, however, when the hard evidence was in, the crime lab reported that there was no blood on the shirt.

But Burkett called on the testimonies of two coroners—Clarence Poinboeuf and George McCormick—to interpret the bloodstain evidence to the jury. Poinboeuf said that the knife, the alleged murder weapon (for which the crime lab gave no report on fingerprints), had lain all night in the grass and had been covered by dew, which he thought could have washed off the blood. And McCormick explained that it was highly possible the assailant would have none of the victim's blood on him because, in his opinion, the bloodstains on the bathroom wall and curtain were “wiped” blood, not “splashed” blood, which occurred when the victim stood up, fell against the wall, and grabbed the curtain. So, since the blood didn't “splash,” none of it got onto the killer. McCormick also explained that because Mrs. Knippers was stabbed mostly in her back as she sat, slumped over, on the toilet, the blood tended to pool inside her nightgown and would not therefore have spurted onto the murderer's clothing. Even the jugular vein, severed in the victim's neck during the stabbing, would tend not to spurt blood, McCormick explained, because a vein, not an artery, had been severed, and veins don't spurt blood the way arteries do.

Years later, forensic expert Stuart James would be aghast at this peculiar explanation. But his expertise was not available at Dobie's trial.

McCormick also testified that he examined the scrapes on Dobie's legs and found that such scrapes did, in fact, correlate with the type of scrape across a “fixed object” such as a brick window ledge. McCormick examined the photograph of the window ledge and said that in his opinion it did seem to reveal a piece of “darkly pigmented” skin about the size that might have come from the scrapes on Dobie's legs. Such scrapes, he surmised, also seemed to indicate that Dobie could not have had his pants on when he crawled in and out of the window. McCormick also examined what he called a “puncture” wound in the web of Dobie's left hand between his

thumb and forefinger and testified that such a wound might have been received during the stabbing. The scrapes and puncture wound seemed fresh, McCormick said, and could account for Dobie's blood on the curtain.

So Burkett told the jury that Dobie “apparently was either nude at the time he went in the window or he took his clothes off after he got inside and placed them back outside.” Which posed an interesting scenario: A young black man enters a white person's home nude and unarmed, finds a fortuitous weapon, and waits behind the bathroom door for his victim—or someone—to appear. (Who knows whether or not the husband might come into the bathroom first, and what then?)

But remember the size of the bathroom window, through which the killer supposedly entered and exited—one foot eight inches by eleven inches. Mr. Knippers testified that the lock on the window was broken, but that neither he nor his wife worried about it, because “it was so small . . . [and] high up off the ground.”

It was a version of events that might have strained credulity too far for even an impressionable jury, but support came in the testimony of Ted Delacerda, the chief investigator, whom Burkett now called to the stand. Delacerda, larger in weight and build than Dobie, swore that he himself had scrambled headlong out of that window and done it in seven seconds. The word was that there was a videotape that documented Delacerda's speedy exit. However, the tape never surfaced, nor was it presented to the jury.

With such a mind-stretching escape scenario, what helped seal Dobie's guilty verdict was that drop of blood that stained the window curtain—the one that laboratory analysis had identified as highly consistent with Dobie's.

The blood on the curtain at least placed Dobie at the scene of the crime, Burkett insisted, and in his closing argument, he claimed that the various pieces of evidence—the blood on the curtain, the skin and hair on the ledge, the fresh scrapes on Dobie's legs, the puncture wound in his hand, the murder weapon found at the scene of the crime—when taken together pointed to Dobie Williams as the killer.

His demonstration of culpability done, DA Burkett faced one final challenge: to persuade the jury to sentence Dobie Williams to death. Finding Dobie guilty of murder wasn't enough. For first-

degree murder, the Louisiana statute demanded an additional “aggravating” circumstance—namely, the commission of another felony in the course of the murder. Burkett explained to the jury that “aggravated burglary” was involved in this murder. And where was the evidence of burglary? Were valuable objects missing from the Knippers’ house? Were dresser drawers opened and possessions askew in the assailant’s search for valuables? Burkett explained that “aggravated burglary,” according to Louisiana law, is “unauthorized entry of an inhabited dwelling with the specific intent to commit felony or theft.” So, with intent to commit felony included in the definition, evidence of burglary per se was not needed, Burkett explained. He argued that the stabbing, itself a felony, in this case was accompanied by the additional aggravating circumstance of another felony—namely, Dobie’s unlawful entrance and use of a weapon. The argument was highly circuitous, but the jury seemed amenable to the logic. Burkett argued, “We don’t know exactly what felony Dobie Gillis Williams intended to commit when he entered the residence that night. Maybe he intended to do just what he did, and that’s kill somebody. Maybe he intended to rape somebody. Maybe he intended to rob somebody. But there is no doubt he didn’t enter to give his greetings and see how the Knippers family was getting along that particular night. He did it with a specific intent—when I say ‘did it,’ entered the building with specific intent to commit a felony and in fact did commit a felony. He murdered someone. . . . He is either guilty of first-degree murder or he is not guilty of anything.”

The jury found him guilty of first-degree murder.

Mrs. Knippers’s murder was the first homicide case Burkett had faced after he was elected district attorney of Sabine Parish. It was a high-profile case. Here was a white woman, killed in the bathroom of her own home, whose dying words (according to her husband) were, “A black man killed me.” And while aggravated rape was never proved against Dobie (the laboratory report showed that Sonja Knippers hadn’t been raped), suspicion was palpable, especially since the killer was thought to be nude and the pictures of the victim showed her underwear down “between her buttocks and her knees,” as Dr. McCormick pointed out to the jurors. The Many community was traumatized, and Burkett devoted himself untiringly not only to

the investigation and trial, but also to the fourteen years of appeals that followed.

State and federal courts that reviewed Dobie’s case did not seem to believe that Dobie’s constitutional right to an “impartial jury” was in any way compromised by the all-white jury chosen to render judgment on his life, nor were they troubled by the fact that the grand jury in Sabine Parish had never had a black foreperson since the days of Reconstruction, even though the population of Sabine itself is more than 27 percent black. Why were black people always excluded from serving as forepersons? The Louisiana Supreme Court ordered a hearing to look into the Sabine Parish grand jury selection process. And what did the hearing show? That something of a “good ol’ boys” club existed in the town. Judges, district attorneys, and most law enforcement officials were invariably white, and the process they followed for selecting grand jury members was pretty casual, with the community leaders offering names of people they knew—who, of course, were other white people. The result, not surprisingly, was that few black people even made it onto the grand jury, much less as foreperson. When a writ of appeal came to the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals to review this process, did they agree that there was a pattern of racial discrimination?

They refused to examine it. Dobie’s lawyer, they said, had failed to raise an objection to the racial composition of the grand jury.

Back in 1982, when I was making my first visits to death row, I found out that judges wear procedural gloves. No matter how “crying for justice” an issue might be, if you don’t go through the correct procedure, you’re out of luck. Executions have taken place after writs were denied because defense attorneys filed the writ one day late or typed the wrong title of the motion.<sup>7</sup> “We are a court of laws, not justice,” U.S. Court of Appeals judge Learned Hand once said. Laws get interpreted and parlayed into procedures, which can become so rigid that they prevent justices from touching the quick of the issue, and that’s where the legal gloves come in. I remember how shocked I was when I first discovered this procedure-over-justice mentality, even in life-and-death cases. I learned early on that an inept lawyer can get you killed.

Only within the past year have Dobie’s lawyers hired Stuart James to examine the evidence against him. It’s too late, of course,

thirteen years after trial and conviction, to get any court to grant an evidentiary hearing on guilt or innocence. Most states, including Louisiana, have severe statutes of limitations on such hearings, so Dobie's appeals lawyers have been concentrating on constitutional issues, which are narrow in scope, to save Dobie's life. In effect, his guilt was decided when the jury in Colfax found him guilty. It was up to Bonnette to file an appeal with the state court after the verdict was handed down, but he had no experience with postconviction appeals. Plus, he had severely limited issues for such appeals because he had not raised the right kinds of objections during the trial itself.

Some months before Dobie's scheduled execution in June 1998, Paula Montonye, the public defender from Connecticut working with Nick Trenticosta at the Loyola Death Penalty Resource Center in New Orleans, begins to focus her energies on Dobie's case. She's fiery and fresh and determined not to see Dobie die. "He was washing through the appeals courts, which kept deciding against him on one issue after another, and there was nowhere else to go but into innocence," she said. Of course, that is just what Dobie has been telling us all along—that he is innocent.

She goes back to Many, talks to people, and persuades the defense team to hire Stuart James, whose specialty is bloodstain evidence. For the first time, someone representing Dobie's interest examines the forensic evidence, an essential step any decent defense attorney should do for his or her client, but one that Bonnette failed to do. And because he had no independent examination of forensic evidence to call upon, all Bonnette could do was raise his own commonsense questions and try to point out inconsistencies in the prosecution's experts' interpretation of the evidence—a weak and ineffective endeavor with disastrous consequences for Dobie.

When Stuart James's investigation is done, Paula arranges for us to meet. I go over to the Loyola Death Penalty Resource Center, and we get cold drinks and sit around a table to talk. Stuart James, it turns out, literally wrote the book on this sort of thing. He is a coauthor of *Interpretation of Bloodstain Evidence at Crime Scenes*, which is in its second edition. He is in his late fifties, thin, balding, low-key, and very precise.

His report sits on the table in front of him. I feel edgy, on the precipice of something big. Until now I haven't pushed much to find

out about Dobie's guilt or innocence. I never do. I don't believe that the government should be put in charge of killing anybody, even those proven guilty of terrible crimes. In the eight years I've been visiting Dobie, he has maintained his innocence, and at times certain parts of the evidence would come up—the shirt he took off because it had liquor on it, the cut on his hand from the lawn mower and how he had gone into the house to put some alcohol on it, the scrapes on his legs from football at Camp Beauregard. Mostly I just let him talk, ask him to explain some things in more detail, but I don't delve much into forensic evidence or other details of the case, trusting that the good and committed lawyers handling his appeals are doing all they can. With them, I have been hoping that the constitutional issues in his case, which seem substantive to me—the racial composition of the jury and grand jury and the ineffectiveness of Dobie's defense counsel—would be enough for the courts to overturn his death sentence and grant him a new trial. But we're coming to the end, and more and more now, the courts are turning him down, especially the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, arguably the harshest appeals court in the country, which upholds almost every death sentence presented to it.

In our meeting, Stuart is visibly upset over Dobie's imminent execution, and he starts in right away about what he learned from the bloodstain evidence, laying out photographs of the bathroom scene on the table and pointing out the blood on the wall under the window. He tells us that the blood clearly is impact spatter, not wiped blood (as the prosecution's expert contended), and he points out the copious amount, which would suggest the attacker would have some of Mrs. Knippers's blood on him, especially on his hands, from wielding a knife in eight different thrusts. Yet we know no blood whatsoever was found on Dobie's clothes, nor is there a palm print or fingerprint on the windowsill as he, supposedly, lifted himself out of the window. Nor is there any kind of alteration of bloodstains under the windowsill where his feet and legs would have rubbed as he hoisted himself through. He'd have to be some kind of trained gymnast to spring from a standing position through such a small window without leaving even a fingerprint. But even supposing such a gymnast scenario, there are no footprints in the bathroom or outside the window, either.

All of this leads Stuart to conclude that the killer did not exit

through the bathroom window and must have gone out through the bathroom door.

Paula picks up on the absence of footprints at the scene. She wonders why the prosecution would propose the absurd scenario that Dobie had exited through the window. To do that, she reasons, he would have had to stand on the toilet on which his victim was still seated, because they found no prints of any kind on the toilet seat. And the idea that Dobie could have sprung from the floor out of that incredibly small window in so short a time was even more absurd. . . . "That's the craziest thing I ever heard," she says.

Stuart also notices in the crime scene photographs that the small articles on the back of the toilet appear undisturbed. That's odd, he says, since the murder happened while the victim was seated on the toilet. Stuart tells us that there had to be a vigorous struggle from such a violent attack, and add to that that the assailant exited through the bathroom while Mrs. Knippers sat on the toilet—well, how can you have all that physical activity without turning over even one little knickknack on the back of the toilet?

Paula interjects to say that Mr. Knippers seemed to indicate all the physical activity going on when at the trial he talked about all the "knocking, bumping, screaming, and hollering" going on.

"No way are you going to have that kind of activity and all the knickknacks in place," Stuart says. "It's very strange."

And the blood on the curtain identified as Dobie's blood?

Stuart explains that when he examined the spot of blood said to be Dobie's, he noticed that it saturated the curtain. He points out that such a saturated stain would have to come from a wound on Dobie's body that was actively bleeding, and which wound was that? Certainly not the superficial wound in the web of his left hand. Stuart goes on to say that it was never really explained at trial exactly how this so-called puncture wound in Dobie's hand was received, only some casual assumption that he *must* have inflicted it on himself when he was stabbing his victim. Betty Williams later told me that Dobie cut his hand when he mowed her lawn, her father's lawn, and her brother's lawn, all on the day of the murder. Betty said her dad and sister were there and remembered Dobie asking for some alcohol to clean the wound.

But even if there wasn't another explanation for the cut, it penetrated only the outer skin and fat in the web of the hand. Stuart says

that when he magnified the photo of the hand wound, he saw how superficial it was, more like a shaving nick than a puncture wound, so he feels certain that the drop of blood that saturated a spot on the curtain couldn't have come from the wound in Dobie's hand. He also wonders how a wound capable of saturating the curtain left no bloodstains on Dobie's clothing, especially inside or near the pockets, which is where, he says, you frequently find it. Assuming that he puts his clothing on again after he leaves the bathroom, Stuart says, wouldn't you expect that his hands touching his pants or his shirt would get some of that blood on his clothes somewhere?

Stuart also questions whether such a clear-cut drop of blood could have saturated the curtain by Dobie scraping against it in an effort to squeeze through the tiny window opening. He'd be brushing against the curtain, which would leave a bloodstain other than the kind that's here, more of a brushed-against stain than such a well-defined droplet, he explains. Plus, he's bothered by how the five blood samples were selected from only a particular section of the sheer set of bathroom curtains, located on the inside, even though crime scene photographs indicate blood on the outer curtains. Usually, random samples are taken from various sections of fabrics, not all from one concentrated area, Stuart explains. He also asks why only the sheer curtains were collected as evidence, not the other curtains as well, since both contained bloodstains. According to the crime laboratory report, blood in an area designated T-2, on the left edge of the sheer curtain, was the same type as Dobie's. Four blood samples from areas designated as T-1, T-3, T-4, and T-5 matched Mrs. Knippers's blood type.

As Stuart talks about the blood samples, I remember Betty Williams's question about one bloodstain that laboratory analysis showed did not match Dobie's or Mrs. Knippers's blood. "How come they didn't do anything with that drop of blood and who it might lead to? They just pushed it aside because they knew it didn't fit in with the case they were conspiring against Dobie."

And the scrapes on Dobie's legs? Could they possibly explain Dobie's blood on the curtain? I ask Stuart James.

"Two problems," he says.

The first problem is that according to trial testimony, Dobie supposedly scraped his shins on the bricks of the window ledge on his way *out* of the window—an exit, the prosecution contended, that

was *headfirst*. So how did he get blood on the curtains, which were *inside* the window, from legs that hadn't yet been scraped on the window ledge outside?

The second problem, Stuart says, is that the kind of saturated bloodstain that is so clearly delineated couldn't have been obtained from the scratches on Dobie's leg brushing against cloth. There are bloodstains on the inside of Dobie's blue jeans from some cuts, Stuart says, but he couldn't tell from the photos whether or not the abrasions were fresh, which the prosecution had claimed. A lot of things are missing, Stuart says, such as the videotape that supposedly would have shown fresh abrasions.

(That makes three tapes not available for viewing: the one of Dobie's alleged confession, one of Officer Ted Delacerda's headlong high jump out of that window, and now this.)

Dobie said that when he got to his grandfather's house that night, he took a bath. Sometimes bathing can remove scabs, which might account for the bleeding inside the jeans. It may have been seepage, a type of bleeding that comes from wounds that are not fresh, but without a closer examination Stuart couldn't really tell. Regardless, he says, even fresh scrapes on Dobie's legs wouldn't explain the droplet saturating the curtain. Again, he says, as with Dobie's hand, this would be a brushed-against kind of stain.

He concludes his report by making several recommendations for further testing, which he said could still be done. One recommendation was for further forensic examination of the photographs to determine the freshness of the scratches on Dobie's legs. Another was DNA testing of the other bloodstains on the curtain. If the small bloodstain selected for testing had come from a bleeding wound, then in all likelihood such a wound would have bled not onto only one spot on the curtain, but on other parts as well. So why not collect other samples for DNA testing, which was far more accurate and required only a microscopic amount of evidence, no matter how old? This DNA testing is possible even fourteen years later, in 1998, Stuart says, especially since the defense conducted no independent forensic testing at the time of the trial.

Paula insists that the further testing should be done by the defense as well as the prosecution, so Dobie's interests would be protected.

Stuart says he's deeply disturbed by the case because so much of

the interpretation of the forensic evidence that the prosecution presented to the jury was erroneous or contrived. It raises serious questions about Dobie Williams's conviction for murder.

And the dark-pigmented skin the prosecution said they found on the window ledge?

"I never saw it," Stuart says. It disappeared from the plastic tube in the crime laboratory where it was brought for testing. Nor was it ever confirmed as human skin when the lab tested it.

Paula brings up another "curious thing" about the bloodstains. Some of Mrs. Knippers's blood made its way outside the bathroom and was found on one of the plastic milk crates on the ground under the bathroom window. She wonders how it got there. The curtain covered the window, she says, so it's very improbable that blood could have splattered through the curtain and onto the crate. "And as for Dobie's hands putting the blood there, I mean, how could he have blood on his hands to get on the milk crate if he didn't have blood on his hands to get it onto his own clothes?"

Stuart, getting back to the skin and hair evidence, which was supposedly in a tube from the crime lab, says that only a piece of hair remains, but hair comparisons, he says, are not enough to positively identify someone.

"When you attack the scientific evidence that the prosecution presented piece by piece," Stuart says, "the case against Dobie comes down like a flimsy pyramid." As he's talking, he gets drawn into another crime scene detail that puzzled him. The curtains are delicate fabric, hanging on a lightweight rod, like the kind you get at Wal-Mart, he says. There's a photograph from the crime scene showing those curtains hanging there as if no activity ever took place. But how could such curtains withstand Mrs. Knippers standing up and grabbing them, which the bloodstains suggest she did? How could the murderer struggle in and out of that very small window, close enough to the curtains to leave some of his blood on them, and yet not disturb them? "That's as strange as the undisturbed knickknacks on the back of the toilet," Stuart says.

Paula says she thinks it's just as bizarre that one of the state's experts proposed that overnight dew could have washed the knife, supposedly the murder weapon, clean of blood. "It should never have been presented to the jury as evidence. There was absolutely no physical evidence to link that knife to the crime," she says, "not even

a molecule of blood underneath the wooden handle of the knife when they took the knife apart in the lab. No animal blood, either, if it was supposed to be the knife Mr. Knippers used to cut up chicken for gumbo.”

But what about the glove? Could its use during the crime account for the lack of blood on the knife? Stuart says that no blood was found on either the outside or the inside of the glove. “It, too, was irrelevant,” Paula says.

What about overnight dew washing all the blood off the knife? Stuart says that in his twenty-plus years of forensic work, he’s never heard of such a thing. “Dew *settles* on things, it doesn’t *wash* things, especially under the wooden handle where blood would tend to collect during a stabbing of this kind,” he says. He calls such far-fetched interpretations of evidence “forensic cartoons.”

Although I’m no attorney, much less a forensic expert, I have enough common sense to know that emotionally, at least, it’s a great deal easier for the prosecution to make its case to the jury when there is a murder weapon to exhibit. I also think that if Dobie had had Paula Montonye as his original defense attorney, he wouldn’t be sitting on death row now.

This all leads me to ask about the knife’s location when Dobie supposedly picked it up. How could Dobie have picked up the knife in the bathroom when Herbert Knippers clearly said that he left it on the drainboard in the kitchen?

“Innuendo,” Paula says. During Mr. Knippers’s testimony, at one point he said that “perhaps” he “might” have brought the knife into the bathroom when he went to wash his face while cutting up onions. That sticks in the jury’s mind, Paula says. And even though Mr. Knippers changed his mind about that, saying, no, he’s sure he must have left it in the kitchen, “knife in the bathroom” has become part of the scenario. Then, when you have Dobie supposedly confessing that he got the knife in the bathroom, it fits the scenario perfectly. For the prosecution’s version of the crime to make sense, the knife had to be in the bathroom, because you sure can’t have Dobie walking past Mrs. Knippers on the couch to get a knife in the kitchen.

It takes a sharp defense attorney to expose what is fact and what is innuendo, Paula says. Mrs. Knippers’s underwear pulled down was another example of the prosecution’s use of innuendo. They used it

to insinuate attempted rape, though when someone’s sitting on a toilet, where else is a person’s underwear going to be?

It’s devastating to hear what Stuart and Paula are saying.

I think of Dobie going through his trial, forced to listen to the case mounted against him. He must have felt swallowed up, buried. He told me that during the trial he would be so depressed at the end of each day that all he could do was go to his cell and sleep. Dobie says Bonnette kept telling him, “Everything’s gonna be all right.” I’m angry now at Bonnette. He took that \$10,000 from Dobie’s family and didn’t even hire a forensic expert to examine the evidence. I used to think that courts were the place where everybody could come and all the sides of truth could be sounded out and debated. Now I know better.

There’s one more piece to Stuart’s findings. He’s troubled about what the police did not examine. Like Herb Knippers’s clothing. It’s important to systematically exclude everyone who had contact with the victim, Stuart says. This is basic investigative procedure. But the husband’s clothes seem to just disappear. There is no record that they were ever examined. He was an active part of the scenario, and he had contact with the victim before and after her death. It is a radical departure from procedure to automatically exclude him and not examine any physical evidence connected with him.

The job of any decent criminal investigator is to consider every possible scenario of a crime.

Stuart points out that it’s standard criminal procedure to first rule out the husband as a suspect when his spouse has been violently attacked, especially when the violence happens in the couple’s own home. Stuart has also been taken aback by what he calls a “huge omission” in the state’s investigative procedure—although the living room was an important part of the crime scene, none of the furniture or objects there were retained for examination, not the couch and pillows on which Mrs. Knippers lay or the book that sat open by her body.

Trace evidence, such as blood, hairs, and fibers, could have been transferred from Mrs. Knippers’s body and nightgown onto Mr. Knippers’s clothes, the couch, and the pillows. They could have held important information to include or exclude suspects.

Stuart’s long list of inconsistencies strengthens the claims Betty Williams had been making all along—that the investigation into Mrs.

Knippers's murder was flawed from the start. Betty remembers the morning four police officers knocked on her door, looking for Dobie. It was 2:30 a.m., just a few hours after the murder. Betty sent them to her father's house next door, where they picked up Dobie.

When Dobie didn't come home the next day, Betty called the police. She said they told her Dobie might be a witness to something, maybe a stabbing.

"The officers never did tell me what had happened. They never did tell me that Dobie was being accused of killing Mrs. Knippers," Betty said. "They never counted us."

From that first night, Betty said she witnessed a host of problems with the investigation. The police brought tracking dogs to her father's house shortly after the murder, presumably to sniff out any traces of Mrs. Knippers's blood. "My brother Bobby was watching those dogs. I was looking out of my door at them," Betty told me. "We never did see the dogs move or scent when they took them off of the back of the truck. The dogs just sat there. They never, never, never moved."

And there Betty sat, on her front stoop, in the courthouse, in the death house, watching injustice after injustice inflicted upon her son, with no power to stop it.

"Dobie was convicted the night the officers picked him up. He was proved guilty, and he was never proved innocent. Dobie never had a chance. They never gave him a chance."

It's too late to do anything now, too late to save Dobie's life. Dobie says he was drinking cognac and beer with friends at Fred Harris's store until about 11:30, when he started feeling sick and headed home. What amazes me is that every time he tells the story, I can see how bad he feels that he disobeyed his mama that night. He had promised her he wouldn't drink when he came home, and there he was, disobeying her, knowing that it was "always a bad thing" when he didn't listen to his mama. Whenever he talks of that July night, he says, "Man, I knew I should have listened to Mama." Obedience to her had always given him protection. Once she had even saved him by coming straight into the bedroom, where he was sleeping with a woman, and pulling him right out of bed. "Son, get your pants on. This lady's husband is coming with a shotgun straight over here right this very minute."

He knows, of course, that what is happening to him is entirely

disproportionate. He knows that, but what seems to gnaw at him most is knowing that he let his mama down, and now all this trouble is coming down on her and him and his whole family. All because he was so stupid as to go to Fred Harris's store that night to drink beer and sweet cognac that made him sick as a dog. "Man," he says, shaking his head, "man, why did I have to go and do that?" His mama isn't letting him forget it, either. Sometimes during visits the two of them return to the subject of his disobedience, she with fresh wrath, he with fresh remorse. It's something deep between them, and it never entirely goes away.

We're in the death house, and it's close to 3:00 p.m. Three and a half hours before execution. It's almost time for the family to leave. I've joined Dobie and the others around the table. Betty Williams is saying, "The proof is in the blood." Dobie's aunt Royce says that a few days ago she got a "warm feeling" through her body, and Betty says that warm feeling is good news for Dobie and healing for her. She says she, too, felt the Holy Spirit, "first here," and she points to her stomach; "then here," her two sides; and "out here," the top of her head. She explains that the number "three" is always a good sign. "This is Dobie's third date; the last reprieve he got was for fifteen days, that's three sets of five; and the Bible says it takes three witnesses.

"Sister Prejean, what's God telling you about Dobie?"

The question is squarely to me, because Betty's been aware that every time she has talked about Dobie's being spared, I've been silent. She wonders what God is telling me, and I answer her that whatever happens, even if Dobie is killed, I believe God's strength and love will be with him. I say that Jesus, too, agonized and asked to be spared from death before he was executed but had entrusted his life into the hands of his loving Father.

Dobie is looking hard at me as I say this. There had been considerable family discussion about whether he was "saved." When family members talked to him on the phone, especially his uncle Bobby, they kept asking him, "Dobie, are you saved? Have you taken the Lord Jesus Christ as your savior?" Dobie didn't know how to answer. The words confused him. He'd talk to me about it, and I'd tell him what I thought about faith—you so believe in Jesus that you shape your thoughts and actions to his way of seeing and doing

things, especially the way he reached out and loved everyone, even outcasts, even his enemies. Hadn't Jesus emphasized that it's not those who make an outward protestation of their faith, saying, "Lord, Lord," who know liberation and redemption, but those who carry out God's will in their lives? I pointed then to ways I saw him living out his Christian faith—the way he was patiently enduring all the years on death row, especially with arthritis; the kindness he showed his fellow prisoners, never trying to con anybody, always ready to share treats and cigarettes when he had a supply and others didn't; the way he practiced integrity and truthfulness, unwaveringly maintaining his innocence even as he protested the injustice done him, yet without bitterness or a spirit of vindictiveness. And I showed him how he was using his imprisonment to deepen his spiritual life—praying, reading his Bible, attending days of spiritual reflection offered at the prison.

Dobie wearied of the endless conversations about whether he was "saved" and finally called it all to a halt, saying, "Am I saved? Yeah, I'm saved. Sister Helen says I'm saved." That made Betty laugh, and she told me that in many ways I was the mother to Dobie that she couldn't be.

"No, Betty, no, no," I'd counter, "I'm his sister. He only has one mother."

Betty Williams had a rough life, first in her own childhood, then with men, all of which drew her children into a whirlpool of violence and chaos. Once, during an altercation with Dobie's father, she seized his gun and aimed it at him. He swept up two-year-old Dobie and held him out as a living shield.

His father soon left, but things didn't get better for Betty and her family. When Dobie was twelve years old, he found himself being put on a train to Kansas City with his brother Zeno. They were going to live with their father for a while because of the escalating violence at home. Dobie was older and stronger then and had begun to take on his mother's current boyfriend. He once told me how he and his brother cried as the train moved them farther and farther away from their mother and home and everybody they knew. "We didn't understand why Mama was sending us away." In Kansas City, Dobie got involved in gangs, did drugs, barely survived in school. After he had a fight with his stepsister, who stabbed him with scis-

sors, Betty sent for the boys. Dobie was struggling with depression. Twice he tried to commit suicide.

"I guess you could say Dobie was an abused child," Betty once told me. Of her seven children, two of the boys are diagnosed schizophrenics, on heavy medication, and in and out of mental institutions and jails. Before Dobie got so close to execution, I think Betty had some comfort that on death row, at least he was safe and cared for. She has said more than once that if Dobie had stayed on the streets, he'd be dead.

She's turned to church life at King's Chapel, a small African Methodist Episcopal community, to hold her own life and her family's life together. Religion—with its regular rhythm of worship, Bible study, and community involvement—helps inspire and strengthen her spirit and gives her family's life purpose and cohesion. When I lived in the St. Thomas Housing Project in New Orleans, I saw the important role that religion could play in the midst of all the chaos and craziness of guns, drugs, poverty, and hopelessness. I also came to appreciate the strictness of a clear moral code: *God says do this; the devil says do that*. Lack of clear boundaries or discipline could mean death, especially for young men. Mothers in St. Thomas knew that a child involved in the church had a better chance of survival.

The clock says 2:50. Around the table with Dobie, we hold hands and Betty leads the prayer. The mood is somber until Dobie's four-year-old nephew, Antonio, asks Betty to sing "Oh Happy Day," which is his favorite, and she launches full throttle into the hymn, confident from singing in many a church gathering. We become the background chorus, echoing, "Oh happy day . . .," as she makes her way through the verses about Jesus walking this earth, preaching the good news of salvation, and healing the people. The song makes Antonio happy; smiling, he looks up at his grandmother, who knows the whole hymn by heart and can sing it with a strong voice. His little voice pipes in now and then on the chorus, but mostly he just swings his feet in the chair and smiles. Dobie has his head down and is holding tight to Jean's hand. I look past Betty to the white metal door and see that Major Coody has her head down and is praying, too, with Elijah behind her being swept into heaven, the trail of his long white robe curling behind him.



Little Antonio has been in this place twice before, kissed his uncle Dobie good-bye twice before, and he's about to do it again.

Warden Cain comes into the room and asks, "How's everybody doing?" He says he's been driving around the prison, checking on the duck population. Permits are given to go duck hunting and fishing here. "Didn't see many ducks," he says. "Nothing much is happening today. In this place you can have all hell break loose with everything happening or a day like today with nothing happening."

Nothing happening, give or take a man about to be killed.

"We've had a fine visit, Warden," Betty says to him, "and we just want to thank you for the kindness and dignity you've shown us, but I know it here"—and she points to her heart—"Jesus has saved him twice and he's going to do it again." She turns to her son and tries once more to infuse her faith into him. "Believe now, Dobie. Stand on the Lord, who is your rock."

Dobie says, "I believe, Mama." He can barely talk because he knows they're all leaving now, and he clings to Jean's hand.

The warden is talking soft and fast and friendly again. "Now it's about time for y'all to leave. Now be strong. We're all in this and have to do our part. It's best for Dobie if you're strong and not crying and broken up. He's strong. See? God's with him. It's like Shakespeare says, all the world's a stage, and each of us has a role to play, and we're all just playing our appointed roles in the scheme of things, which is in God's hands, and I'm playing my role and you're playing yours." He tells them that some guards are going to take them to Camp C, where they can wait it out, just as they did before. Aunt Royce asks if a TV will be there so they can hear the news, and the warden assures her there will be a TV, even with cable and plenty of food and drinks and everything they need. They know the scene; they've been there twice before.

I'm grateful to the warden for his kindness to Dobie's family. In other prisons, such as San Quentin, the families of the condemned cannot be close like this before an execution. When the warden and I have a chance to talk together, I thank him for the dignity he shows these families. It's one of his good traits. He was the first warden at Angola to allow contact visits for death row inmates, not just immediately before execution, but regularly. In earlier days, I watched Robert Willie's mama and brothers visit him for the last time and not be allowed a good-bye hug. Visions of mamas and sons in this death house

are flowing through me now, and I again see Willie Celestine's mama reaching up to give him a quick kiss on the cheek before she hurried, almost ran, out of this building, telling me afterward, "If I had put my arms around my boy, no guard could have pried my arms loose."

Everybody's standing up to leave. There's the sound of people moving and chairs scraping across the floor. Antonio, tired of sitting still so long, takes a run toward the door. "Hug your uncle Dobie," Royce tells him, and he turns back to Dobie for his hug. Warden Cain tells Antonio that he should ask his uncle Dobie for a Snickers bar because his uncle has a "big old supply" and all Antonio has to do is ask him. So the bestowal of a Snickers gets in the mix of the final leaving, and I wonder how much of this Antonio will remember when he's a grown man. Little kids and death houses don't mix. Dobie holds him in his arms for such a long hug that Antonio starts wiggling away, ready to move out of this sad, serious place, ready for Camp C, where there will be a TV and plenty of good food and cold drinks. Dobie hugs each one, especially his mama. He hugs his mama three times. They had a little tiff earlier in the afternoon, when she repeated something about him that other people said and he said, "Mama, you always put me down." He became angry and was still getting over it. When he hugs her, he tells her he's sorry he got mad and that he loves her. She answers, "It's all right, Dobie, it's all right," and shores him up with a scripture passage that she wants him to read after they leave: "Though I walk through the valley of darkness, I fear no evil, for Thou art with me."

Everybody's strong.

Everybody leaves.

Dobie stands by the window and watches his family walk past the guards with the automatic rifles and climb into the white van that will take them to Camp C. I rush to his side along with Carol Kolinchak and Paula Montonye. We put our arms around him, holding him tight around the waist and shoulders, and wave to his family as the van pulls away. I know he is seeing his family for the last time. It's up to us now.

I get very active, talking to him, telling him what a good human being he is and that Jesus is very close to him and will give him all the strength he needs. Paula says what a good family he has and how lucky he is to have them. Carol says she feels honored to be with him now, tells him what a privilege it's been for her to work on his case,

and says how much she's come to care for him and respect him as a person. We have all moved into a mode of initiating, comforting, strengthening, not letting his spirit go slack.

A guard approaches Dobie and says he'll have to go to his cell now. Across the foyer and hallway, out of sight of this room, there are four holding cells, and Dobie will be placed in the first. I know the cell very well. In it sat three others I have accompanied to execution: Patrick Sonnier, Robert Willie, and Willie Celestine. Once Dobie's inside the cell, the guard informs us, we'll be able to sit right outside it to visit. For now I let it happen, but as soon as Dobie is settled, I go to the officer in charge and ask him to explain to Warden Cain that it's hard for us to hold Dobie's hands in the cell because of his arthritis, that he can't stretch his arms; it's too painful, so could the warden let him sit outside the cell so he can be near us and we can touch him?

I'm well aware that all these special permissions, a break from the regular protocol, are a pain to the warden. The last time, when Dobie came so close to execution, the warden said that all the special visits, the trouble involved in getting transportation for everyone, was killing him. He said this in front of Dobie and the lawyers and me, and I couldn't let it pass. "Killing you?" I asked, touching him on the shoulder. "Killing you?" So here goes another special permission, but I absolutely know we need to be close to Dobie to touch him in these, his last hours. I think of how Jesus, in the agonizing moments before his death, asked his disciples to watch and pray with him, but they all went to sleep.

A short while later, word comes from the warden that Dobie can visit with us outside the cell. Just until 4:30, then he has to go back in. Sergeant Henry, whom Dobie likes, is the guard chosen to be with him inside the holding cell section. When Paula, Carol, and I go through the metal door and enter the cell area, Sergeant Henry has the TV tuned to *The Jerry Springer Show*. I ask Dobie if he wants the TV on, that it might be a little hard for us to talk. He doesn't care, he says, and it's okay with him if Sergeant Henry wants to watch it. So I help Sergeant Henry move the TV away from the front of the cell, and he lowers the sound, saying, "It helps me keep my mind off things."

Dobie opens a pack of Camel cigarettes. "Hey, a big-time Camel

man," I tease. He usually smokes cheaper Bugler cigarettes, rolling his own, as do most indigent prisoners here.

"Might as well," he says. "Trying to use up the money in my account. Can't spend it all.

"Hey, look at this." He sees he's been trying to open the cigarettes from the bottom of the pack. "No wonder it's so hard." His fingers are so crippled, he can't even open a flip-top can. I offer to open the cigarettes, and he hands them to me. I hit the edge of the pack against my hand and a few cigarettes come out, and Paula teases, "Hey, Dobe, this must be a smoking nun. Look how she handles these cigs like a pro, huh?"

"I taught her how to roll one."

"I didn't do too well," I say. "The first was very fat and loose, and the second was very tight and skinny." Dobie smiles.

He has only a couple of hours to live, and we are talking about rolling cigarettes. We're letting the conversation go anywhere it wants. We're talking about everything. What are the best things to talk about before you die? I remember that Patrick Sonnier and I talked about God, death, love, remorse, forgiveness, his daughter Star's karate lessons, and how his mama made venison stew.

Dobie is not in a hospital dying of some disease, with his life energies and faculties fading. He's fully alive, has his full energy and emotions and consciousness. It makes his coming death impossible to comprehend. I know not to think ahead. I know that my strength is tied to his strength. I know that I am hanging by a thread of moral courage. If he comes apart emotionally, so will I. I know not to think of his being killed in just a few hours because I don't have God's grace for what lies ahead. But the grace is here now, and we are all abiding in this grace, which shores us up and links us closely to one another.

Dobie has a sack of mail at his feet. He has been getting letters from all over the world since the BBC aired two documentaries on him. He made some good friends, Liesel Evans and Carmel Lonergan, while doing that documentary. They're two charming British women who came over several times to do the filming. They got to know Dobie and to care about him. Their letters and visits have cheered him immensely. It really helps that they're women. He loves the company of women, is most himself with women, and

look, here are three women with him now in his last hours. Liesel says she will try to put a telephone call through to the death house from England if the prison will allow it. During the last close call, they let her talk to Dobie, but this time the phone's been silent. It depends on who's on duty at the switchboard. Some are more flexible than others.

It's 4:30, and we step back as the guards put Dobie in his cell.

I take his hand through the bars. I know the greatest gift I can give him now is to shore up his strength, help him make it through the unfolding last hours and die with dignity in this crazy warp, where time stands still and where it zings forward.

"Dobie, Jesus is close to us here. Jesus is helping you. Every human being is scared at a time like this, Dobie, but look at you, you're handling this. You're doing it, Dobie. You're about to do the bravest thing you've ever done in your life."

I feel like his coach.

He nods. "I'm okay," he says, and he reads a letter from his friend Father Barry Moriarity, who had been his first spiritual adviser but had been moved by his religious order to Chicago. Dobie wrote to me then, asking if I knew of anyone who could visit him. I wasn't acting as an adviser to anyone on death row at the time, so I said, "What about me?" That was eight years ago. Now, here at the last, Father Barry is coming through. He has faithfully written Dobie over the years. He's been a good friend.

Warden Cain comes in. "How y'all doing? Need anything, Dobie? Drink plenty of fluids. It'll help you." I know why he's telling Dobie to drink fluids. A greater volume of fluids keeps the veins from collapsing and will make the insertion of the intravenous lines easier. "How about some ice cream, Dobie? Want some ice cream?"

Dobie says yeah, he'd like a little ice cream.

"What kind?" the warden asks. "Any kind you want—vanilla? chocolate? strawberry?"

Dobie looks at us. Paula says, "Whatever kind you want, Dobie, we're game. We'll all eat whatever you're eating."

"Chocolate," Dobie says.

The warden is enthusiastic. He turns to one of the guards. "Get four pints of Borden's chocolate and four plastic spoons."

In very short order, guards bring in four pints of ice cream. My

senses don't work too well at a time like this, and I scarcely know what I'm eating. I remind Dobie of how Jesus ate his last supper with his most treasured friends, and here we are, all eating with him. Dobie eats slowly. "It's creamy, huh?"

A guard comes in to bring him to the phone in the captain's office. Dobie goes with the guard, and when he comes back, he says it was John Koneck, one of the lawyers up in Minnesota who had worked on his defense.<sup>8</sup> "He told me it was a privilege to work on my case." He repeats "privilege," and I can tell it amazes him that his lawyer used that word. Shortly after that call, Nick Trenticosta calls to thank Dobie and to say what a privilege it was for him, too. "He choked up," Dobie says. "He's real mad at what the courts did to me." I'm beginning to know this scene: lawyers calling to say good-bye to their clients about to be killed. They feel the failure of it, the biggest failure of all—they failed to save the life of their client. What do you say to tell your client good-bye?

I remind Dobie that he has a phone available to him if he wants to make any calls, and he says he'd like to call his aunt Ruby and his uncle Bobby. A guard hands him the receiver from a phone right next to his cell, and he tries to get his aunt Ruby first, but she's not home. So he tries his uncle Bobby. I wonder if his uncle is going to ask him one more time if he's saved. I hope they have a good conversation. Dobie thanks him for accepting his collect phone calls and for sending him a little money over his years of imprisonment. He doesn't seem to mind that his uncle never once came to visit him; he doesn't ever seem to expect much from other people, even his relatives. He's just grateful for loving attention when it comes his way, and now in the last hours of his life he mostly wants to thank people. I have noticed this same spirit of gratefulness in every person I have accompanied in this bizarre death process.

With the others, who were truly guilty of terrible crimes, I always experienced a wrenching tension—on the one hand, abhorring their crimes against innocent victims, and on the other, feeling compassion for them in their torturous ordeal. But Dobie? I feel only compassion for him and his family and a roaring anger at the injustice and cruelty done to him this night and over the past fourteen years. I reach through the bars and touch him on the arm. "Dobie, I do not know exactly where you'll be when you die. It's a big, big mystery—death. But I believe that you are going to be welcomed

into the arms of God and that somehow you're going to be at the heart of all the loving energy that is at the heart of everything, and I'm going to call on you to help me in the struggle to end the death penalty. Will you help me, Dobie?"

I didn't know all this was going to pour from me. Dobie looks at me. "Yeah, Sister Helen, I'll help you."

Who knows what it means, stretching out like that in belief to a communion with Dobie beyond death? I used to think heaven was a far-off other world for souls that had been separated from bodies. Now I believe that life is a continuum, that dying and living are like knitting and purling, all woven together, that somehow love binds us beyond death, and God is the life force that brings life out of death and loves us through all the dying.

Paula, sorting through the mailbag, hands Dobie letters from three little girls—Rachel, Annie, and Erin—the children of a good friend of mine, Karen Charbonnet. The letters, in children's big-lettered scrawl and brightly decorated with suns and flowers from busy crayons, make Dobie smile. The children pour on him earnest love and prayers. Annie tells him he's lucky because he's going to be with God and she hopes he has a "good time." That's what makes him smile, and he reads it to us. "Listen, she hopes I have a good time." We all laugh, and I can see that he's holding together emotionally, taking his death one step at a time, and the fear that so paralyzed him when he was here in June is at bay. Maybe he's just too tired to be scared anymore. This is the third time he's undergoing this ordeal, and it feels like the other two times, except this time they're really going to kill him. But how do you get your mind around that? He says how tired he is, that he can't go through it again, and there's a part of him, I know, that just wants it to be over. Not just for him, but for his mama and family. "Look what this puts them through," he says. He hasn't been able to sleep well the past few weeks and certainly didn't sleep much last night. Who, unless they were locked into fierce denial, could climb into bed and go to sleep on the night before they are to be killed?

A guard has come to get me to sign the witness agreement. I'll be present at Dobie's execution. I've signed this form three other times, and I'm very clear about what I'm doing. I sign not as an official witness to the state's killing of Dobie, but because only if I sign

will I be allowed to be with Dobie at the end. In no way do I give my consent to this killing.

Dobie and I talked about it. I told him that I'll stand where he can see me and to look at my face, to look at me, loving him, upholding his dignity, praying for him. "I'll be as close as they will let me come," I tell him.

The time is precious. I hate to leave him even for a minute. But Carol and Paula are with him. He's not alone. It's a comfort for me, too, to have them. When I return, we'll be in the last steps and things will be moving fast. Will they put a diaper on him? I know the diapering and cutting of the left pants leg were part of the electric chair ritual, but now that Louisiana has lethal injection, I'm not sure. I want to shore up Dobie's dignity all I can. I want to strengthen him against the dark, dehumanizing forces that will strap him onto the gurney and put needles into his arms.

"I'm scared of needles," he once told me. He'll be in there alone with his executioners when they insert not one, but two needles, one into each arm. For most other states that use lethal injection, one intravenous line is enough, but Louisiana has designed a fail-safe protocol so that if one line should happen to clog, there's a backup so the lethal fluids can flow unimpeded and there won't be any awkward, embarrassing hitches. It's all very medicinal, clinical, bloodless. The technicians will even rub alcohol on Dobie's arm before they inject the needle. A germ-free death.

The guard escorts me to the building next door, where I am asked to sign a form agreeing to comply with all prison regulations pertaining to the execution. Witnesses have all gathered in a nearby room. There's a buzz of voices, and I can see tables with refreshments and some people with plates in their hands, eating and drinking. I wonder if Mr. Knippers is in that room. I expect he'll be one of the witnesses, and I wonder if DA Burkett will be there, too. No doubt he'll say something proper and respectful to the press when the deed is done and Dobie has been killed. Something like "This has not been easy for me. Nobody relishes the death of a man, but I've done all I could possibly do to ensure that justice was served. I even intervened and ordered DNA testing to be absolutely sure of Dobie's guilt. It has taken fourteen years, but now at last justice has been done."

I sign the paper as soon as I can and hurry back to Dobie.

I draw on the strength of all the people I know are praying for Dobie now, including the cloistered Trappist monks of Gethsemani Monastery in Kentucky, where I go to make retreat every year. The monks promised to pray, and I know that just about this time they are assembled in their stalls in the cavernous old church, chanting comp-line. On retreat I join them for prayer, and in my mind now I can hear the drone of male voices rising and falling in the sacred prayers. Because it's Friday, the day of Christ's Crucifixion, the words that they are praying from Psalm 22 coincide with Dobie's agony: *They have pierced my hands and feet. They have numbered all my bones.*

Whenever I go for retreat, the abbot invites me to talk to the monks about my ministry to death row inmates and victims' families, and some of the monks write to death row inmates. They all know about Dobie and have sent comforting notes, assuring me that they will be praying for him and for his family, especially at the time of his execution.

Others are praying, too—the Community of Sant'Egidio in Rome, the sisters in my religious community and other religious communities across the United States, and many people in the United Kingdom who saw the BBC documentaries about Dobie. Thousands of people are caring about Dobie and praying for him this night. It is like an underground stream, unseen but real, and I feel the strength of the communion.

Things are busy when I reenter the death house. There's a swarm of people coming in and out of the door—associate wardens, staff, the Tac team that will surround Dobie and walk with him to the execution chamber. Inside the holding cell section, Sergeant Henry has turned off the TV and is standing at silent attention. Paula and Carol are as close to the bars of Dobie's cell as they can get, reaching through, holding his hand. I join them there and reach to touch Dobie for the last time. I know every word counts now, that these are my last words, and they come in a torrent, words that thank him for the gift of knowing him, that tell him he is one of the bravest people I ever met in my life, that say God is with him now and he will have all the strength he needs. "Look, Dobie, you're doing it. Look how strong you are. You have a dignity no one can take from you. Your death is so wrong, so unjust, and just know, Dobie, that I will tell your story, and the whole world will know the truth about

what happened to you. I will be your voice, and I'll tell the truth, Dobie, I'll tell the truth."

He's ready, I can tell.

Carol, as his attorney, is also allowed to be present at his execution. Dobie, ever polite and anxious not to offend his women friends, had Carol and Paula work out between them which one would witness.

It's time.

Warden Cain comes in to tell us that we will have to leave the holding cell area now, and we all reach to Dobie for the last time. Carol will go in with the witnesses. Paula will be allowed to remain in the visiting room. I notice she is holding a rosary. I will walk just behind Dobie as he walks to the chamber. *Oh, God, they're doing it again, they're killing Dobie.*

Which scripture passage to read for Dobie? For Pat and Robert and Willie, I had selected a passage beforehand, but now I'm unprepared. Guards show me where I can stand and wait, just inside the door of the visiting room. I go there and open my Bible, and it falls to Jesus's farewell discourse to his disciples in the Gospel of John. What attracts me to the passage is the part where Jesus talks about surrendering his life to God and says the rulers of the world have no power over him. I'm thinking of the DA and the courts and the police investigators and the all-white jury—all the powers of the criminal justice system and the media arrayed against Dobie, bringing about his death tonight. At least this essential spiritual freedom is his, to walk to his death with dignity and to protest his innocence to the end. Then I realize that they will ask him if he has any last words. I know how, under pressure, it is difficult for him to express what he wants to say, and I panic because I didn't think to help him get his words. But it is all too late, because he's coming now, here he comes, walking ever so slowly, surrounded by all the guards, a mountain of blue around this slight black man with rheumatoid arthritis, chains on his ankles and wrists strapped to a belt around his waist, coming now through the doorway. I say, "Dobie," and look full into his face. He is just trying to make it, his face has no expression, he is putting one foot in front of the other, dragging the chain across the floor, and I walk behind the guards, too far to touch him. Only my words can touch him now, the words from Jesus about a peace he gives that the world cannot give and about the rulers of this world having no power over him.

We're there.

There's the chamber, the gurney waiting, the bright fluorescent lights making its black cushion gleam, the steps beside it, the large clock on the wall giving the time of 6:30, Warden Cain waiting near a podium and microphone where they are leading Dobie now.

"Any last words, Dobie?"

I'm seated with the witnesses now, and I freeze. *God, please help him. Help him get his words.*

Dobie nods, looks down to his left, concentrating. "I just want to say I got no hard feelings for anybody. God bless everybody, God bless," and as he's saying "God bless," he is already beginning to turn toward the cruciform-shaped gurney.

*He forgave them. He forgave his persecutors. He forgave them all.*

Guards have to assist him onto the gurney, where they stretch out his arms and buckle six or seven straps quickly. You can hear the *click, click, click* as the buckles snap across his chest, legs, arms, and trunk. Under his feet is a small cushion about two inches high, which elevates his feet somewhat so he can't dig in with his heels if he tries to resist. He looks over toward me. I'm standing so he can see me, but then they draw the curtains so we can't see anything while they insert the intravenous lines into his arms. Until recently, witnesses were kept in another building while the intravenous lines were inserted and brought in only when the last step remained. But lawyers for the condemned objected to being so removed from their clients. The insertion of needles into human veins is not always an easy and painless process, and lawyers wanted to be nearby.

As do I for Dobie.

The curtains are drawn, and it's silent on the other side except now and then for the drone of a voice. Silence. Waiting. Five minutes. Seven minutes. I have my head down, my soul force gathered around Dobie. *Oh, Jesus God, be with him now. He's scared of needles and in there strapped down and helpless and being killed. Oh God, be with him, be with him now, be with his mother.* Carol and I are sitting next to each other. We are holding hands tightly, and she is praying, too. Ten minutes. *It's taking too long. They can't find a vein. Oh no, poor little Dobie.* I look around. There, in the front row, is Herb Knippers. I can see the side of his face. He is looking at the curtain. His face is blank. He is here, husband of the victim, front row seat, privileged witness. Will Dobie's death be healing for him?

Over in Camp C, another family waits. Betty Williams, Jean,

Royce, and little Antonio. All they know is that the execution was to proceed at 6:30, but no one is informing them, step by step, of what is happening now. All they can do is imagine and pray. When I think of victims' families, I always think of two families—the family of the murdered one and the family of the executed one. I pray for Betty Williams and Dobie's brothers and sisters at home.

The curtain is being pulled back. Almost fifteen minutes. Later, outside the gates of the prison, a journalist will inform me that they had to insert one of the needles into Dobie's neck, but that was on his left side, which I couldn't see. When they open the curtain, I see only the intravenous line in his right arm. From the gurney he turns and lifts his head to look for me. I am on my feet, reaching my hand to him, holding the cross around my neck toward him for him to see. Warden Cain is holding his hand, talking to him. Later I find out that the warden asked him if there was anything he was sorry for.

*Deathbed confession? Now's the time.*

"Yeah," Dobie said, the trouble he put everybody through, his mama and his family. And there it was again at the very end—the remorse over his disobedience to his mama, drinking that night at Fred Harris's store when he had promised his mama that he wouldn't.

Warden Cain looks up to the executioner, behind the one-way glass, and nods his head, and I know that the killing process is beginning. Immediately Dobie's eyelids start closing, and now I just want it to be over for him. I entrust him into God's merciful arms, one more black man executed by the state of Louisiana for a crime against a white victim.

Dobie is dying.

His head lifts involuntarily from the gurney, and Warden Cain puts his hand on his forehead and pushes his head back down. It must be the potassium chloride causing his heart to go into cardiac arrest.

Dobie is being killed in front of my eyes.

I know he's not suffering anymore now. He handled his fear. He walked to his death maintaining his integrity. *Into your hands, O God, I commend Dobie Gillis Williams.*

All the witnesses file out silently into the visiting room to sign the witness form. I walk into the arms of Paula Montonye, tears running down her face. I tell her, "Paula, he died very bravely." I look past her to Elijah being swept up in a fiery chariot.

We sit in silence around a long table, about twelve of us, and sign four copies of the witness form. All you can hear is the sound of papers rustling and pens scratching. Herbert Knippers and his son are sitting on the opposite end of the table from me.

Carol, Paula, and I walk past the armed guards out into the mild January night. It is January 8, 1999, a date sealed forever now in my mind. We get into Carol's car and follow a prison vehicle that escorts us out of the prison. We drive past Camp C, where Betty and the family have been waiting. They must know now. When we are standing outside the prison gates, Betty tells me that a guard came in to tell them of Dobie's execution and she said, "Well, okay, then." Impossibly mild words to mark that she now knew God's will for Dobie, that God "called him home and ended all his suffering." Several sisters from my community are waiting for me outside the gates. They have been praying for Dobie and for his family and for me and for the Knippers family—they pray for everybody. Now, seeing me, they move in and hug me warmly, each one. This is the way it always is. Every time I come out of these gates after an execution, my sisters are waiting for me. Thank God for the sisterhood.

Later, Paula would tell me that when she got home, she received a call from Stuart James, the methodical man of science—not the type you would expect to be emotional. But he was devastated. After what he had discovered, he couldn't believe they went ahead with the execution.

Five days after Dobie is killed, Sister Margaret Maggio and I drive to Many for Dobie's wake. We walk inside Jenkins Funeral Home, in the black section of town, where Betty and all the family and friends have gathered, and I see Dobie for the first time in a suit.

"Look at the peace on his face," Betty says. "God called him home and, see, he's glowing, and look how handsome he is and how good he looks in that white suit. He's the most handsome of my boys, and look at how that gold shirt sets him off. I had wanted a white shirt, but the funeral home people knew that the gold would set him off."

*Oh, Dobie, they killed you.*

I try to take it in that he's dead, but I can't. The eight years of visits, of talking, of fighting for him to get the medication he needed for his arthritis, of all the suffering he endured, of the way other guys on the Row would tease him and call him "stiff," of how the women

in his life were his biggest comfort and how glad I was that Paula and Carol and I could be with him at the end, the way that even in the last hour of his life he could taste the ice cream and say it was creamy, of the brave way he walked to his death and forgave those who wronged him and apologized for the trouble he caused his family—all of it is flooding through me now, and I'm grieving. Yes, I'm going to miss him, yes. But mostly what I feel is the outrageous wrong of his death. I'm a witness to it, and my mission is to keep getting on planes and crisscrossing this country to talk in cities and towns to awaken people's souls about the need to abolish the death penalty. Seeing Dobie dead here fires this resolve in me, and I know I will do this work until every gurney and electric chair and gas chamber sits behind velvet ropes in museums the way auction blocks and bills of sale and bullwhips and other memorabilia of slavery are on display in museums today.

Dobie's wake consists of prayers, hymns, and testimonies, and I'm asked to give a testimony. I follow Nick Trenticosta, Dobie's lead attorney in his postconviction appeal, who worked so hard to keep Dobie from execution over fourteen years. Many of the eleven stays of execution granted Dobie were due in no small part to Nick's good work.

When I get up to speak—Sister Margaret, the lawyers, and I are the only white people at the wake—I talk about Dobie's dignity, how bravely he died, how he loved his family, how wrong his killing by the state was, and how we all have to struggle for justice, that it's never just handed to us, as Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King used to say. I say what a privilege it has been to know Dobie and to be his friend. I shore up his family, so dehumanized and voiceless with all the worldly powers arrayed against them, and I tell them that it is an honor for me to know them and to be welcomed into their family.

Afterward we go to the trailer where the family lives, stand in the kitchen, eat ham and potato salad, and talk about Dobie. I repeat to Betty the promise I made to Dobie that I would write his story, and that comforts her. "Nobody ever heard his voice," she says. "He never got to speak." And then my mission to write his story is sealed. The image flashes in my mind of Dobie's head rising from the gurney when they were killing him, of the warden putting his hand on Dobie's forehead and pushing his head back down again.