

# MATTHEW DICKS

36-time  
Moth StorySLAM  
champion & 5-time  
GrandSLAM  
champion

# Storyworthy

Engage, Teach, Persuade,  
and Change Your Life through  
the Power of Storytelling

FOREWORD BY DAN KENNEDY, HOST OF THE MOTH PODCAST

“I laughed, gasped, took notes, and carried this  
book around like a dear friend.”

— SARAH McCOY, *New York Times*—bestselling author of  
*Marilla of Green Gables* and *The Baker’s Daughter*

## Praise for *Storyworthy* and Matthew Dicks

“Offers countless tips, exercises, and examples to get you on your way to better stories. Anyone who wants to take the stage, become a better writer, or simply tell better stories at Thanksgiving will benefit from *Storyworthy*.”

— **Jeff Vibes**, filmmaker

“I laughed, gasped, took notes, and carried this book around like a dear friend — because that’s exactly what a storyworthy book should be. As a novelist, I’ve studied my craft in countless ways, but never before have I seen its marrow revealed with such honest, approachable charisma. Matthew Dicks has written a perceptive companion for every person who has a story to tell — and don’t we all?”

— **Sarah McCoy**, internationally and *New York Times*—bestselling author of *Marilla of Green Gables* and *The Baker’s Daughter*

“Matthew Dicks is a master storyteller and an incredible teacher. Most importantly, he is an artist who paints his verbal canvases with moments that change how his listeners see the world. Matt taught me about the hidden arc and architecture that lie behind every well-told story, and I’ve incorporated his techniques into innumerable courtroom presentations — and told several stories before live audiences — all thanks to Matt.”

— **Ron Apter**, trial lawyer

“When I gave Matthew Dicks a recurring spot on my podcast, I billed him as ‘the most interesting man in the world.’ He really has lived quite a life. But what’s truly interesting is not necessarily what he’s experienced but how he makes you, the audience, experience it through him.”

— **Mike Pesca**, NPR contributor and host of *Slate* magazine’s daily podcast, *The Gist*

“Learning from Matthew Dicks has truly been life changing both for me as a public storyteller and for my high school students. Matt’s practical advice and techniques can be applied immediately, and that’s what Matt encourages and inspires you to do. Start crafting your best stories right now: learn a little about yourself in the process and begin living a life of yes.”

— **Jennifer Bonaldo**, English teacher, Amity High School, Bethany, Connecticut

“Matthew Dicks is not only a master storyteller; he is a master teacher. His clear and detailed instructions allow him to brilliantly give his techniques and tricks of the storytelling trade to his students. I personally benefited immensely from Matt’s workshop, and I continue to use his techniques both in my professional work as a rabbi and teacher and onstage at Moth StorySLAMs.”

— **Rabbi Ira Ebbin**, Congregation Ohav Sholom in Merrick, New York, and Moth StorySLAM winner

“I had the opportunity to take Matthew Dicks’s workshop for beginners and then his advanced workshop. They were truly life changing. From Matt’s instructions, I have been able to sculpt true stories that I have shared with an audience of five hundred people. I am not a professional entertainer. But because of Matt’s insightful direction, editing, and support, I now have the confidence and ability to turn my life experiences into stories that entertain and impact many people. Thank you, Matt. One doesn’t always have the opportunity to live a dream.”

— **Lee Pollock**, president, The Pollock Company, Hartford, Connecticut

“In *Storyworthy*, Matthew Dicks gives us all the tools we’ll need to become an effective storyteller, and he does so with wit, wisdom, and self-effacing charm. What’s more, he reminds us that through storytelling — and our willingness to be honest and vulnerable when sharing the different moments that have helped shape our lives — we invite the great possibility of deeper connection with others, and with ourselves. This book serves as a guidebook and a muse, rooted in the belief that our individual stories, when shared with heart, end up walking us down the pathway to true belonging. *Storyworthy* acts as a bright light along that journey.”

— **Scott Stabile**, author of *Big Love: The Power of Living with a Wide-Open Heart*

“Matthew Dicks is dazzling as a storyteller and equally brilliant in his ability to deconstruct this skill and make it accessible for others. His workshop was a veritable epiphany — it has been formative in my own professional career and in helping shape the work of my students. Trust me: whatever Matt has to say

about storytelling, you want to hear. In my role at Yale, I oversee courses that involve more than one hundred faculty members. I can say without a doubt that Matt is one of the finest teachers I've ever seen."

— **David A. Ross, MD, PhD**, director, Yale Psychiatry Residency Training Program



**Storyworthy**

Also by Matthew Dicks

*Memoirs of an Imaginary Friend*

*Something Missing*

*The Perfect Comeback of Caroline Jacobs*

*Unexpectedly, Milo*

# Storyworthy

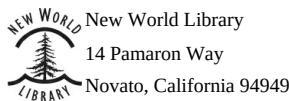
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**MATTHEW DICKS**

FOREWORD BY DAN KENNEDY



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*For George Dawes Green, who built the stage;  
Dan Kennedy, who first inspired me to speak my truth;  
and Catherine Burns, who convinced me that  
the stage is where I belong.*

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# Foreword

In early 2000, I got onstage, I told a story at this thing called The Moth, and something in my heart and head felt better. I remember talking about my biggest screwups, about some childhood dreams that hadn't come to pass, and about how my attempts to pursue them at half-steam were clumsy and ill-fated. The story I told that night, about going to Austin to become a singer-songwriter and discovering the hard way that I wasn't prepared or particularly good at songwriting, felt like the most deflating stuff any of us go through in personal defeats. Up to the moment I stepped onstage at The Moth that night, my life felt as if the stain of failure had been on me since about age twenty. But when I opened my mouth and shared a story about the details of that trip to Austin, the crowd laughed. Which made me smile through the bundle of nerves I was that night, and somehow made me feel like maybe, just maybe, everything would be okay in this life.

If I can recommend storytelling to you for any reason at all, it would be that storytelling helps you realize that the biggest, scariest, most painful or regretful things in your head get small and surmountable when you share them with two, or three, or twenty, or three thousand people. The other reason I can recommend storytelling, and learning about it with the book you're holding, is that we're all disappearing — you, me, everyone we know and love. A little heavy for a foreword maybe, but when you tell stories, you do yourself a kind favor by taking a moment to write your name in the wet cement of life before you head to whatever is next. This is a much more selfless act than conventional wisdom would have you believe. It's a little like leaving a note in the logbook on the trail that others will be hiking after you, a note that might give the next hiker a clue: "Keep your eyes open for rattlesnakes by the bluff at the two-mile mark" or "There's fresh water at the fire lookout if you're running low" or "I live in the woods now, and I don't care if I never see an iPhone again after staring at one for a decade until my head was tortured, my eyes were ruined, and my heart was broken."

Telling stories about your life lets people know they're not alone; and it lets some of the people closest to you — like family and loved ones — see your life apart from the context of family and without the kind of revisionist hindsight we can sometimes fall into concerning the ones we love most. Opening your mouth, getting out of your head, and your house, so you can be fully engaged in your life and the lives of others for the night — that's what storytelling is all about, if you ask me. Or maybe it's just as my friend Jesse Thorn joked: "Storytelling. In case you're not familiar with it, it's kind of like a less-funny stand-up comedy." That line cracked me up — in some ways, it's right on the money. Then weeks later, it oddly made me realize why I love storytelling so much: at its best, it's not out to razzle-dazzle you at any cost. There's no adversarial relationship with the audience; they're not people leaning back in their chairs, drinking their two-drink

minimum, signing an implicit contract that basically says “You better make me laugh.” There is no volley of anger like I’ve seen in comedy clubs; just a crowd of people who want to hear what you have to say and in some cases might be stepping up to the mic right after you to share something about themselves.

Sometimes it’s the funniest thing you’ve heard, and you’re rolling. Other times someone is getting attacked by a shark. Or going to space. Or sitting next to their crashed car and reevaluating their life. Or wondering how they got caught up in a world of white-collar crime. Or just dealing with an average Tuesday evening and trying to make sense of life like the rest of us on the planet. How can you not walk out of that room a changed person after feeling that connection?

In my early years of hosting The Moth StorySLAM, I never gave much thought to the numbers the judges in the audience hold up to score each storyteller. The scoring has always seemed in the spirit of fun, a device used to get the audience involved and to add some friendly stakes to the show. And early on, it never seemed to me that the storytellers were any more concerned with the scores than would be, say, a few friends throwing darts in a bar or playing poker for acorns on a camping trip. Even when we weren’t great onstage (and I’m also pointing the finger at myself here, as a host who sometimes tries to tell a story in the top or middle of the show), it was just part of the fun, because we were all there for each other, laughing or shrugging it off when a story went sideways on us. If nothing else, when I bombed something, I figured maybe I had been of service — hey, maybe someone in the audience who was too nervous to put their name in the hat and share a story heard me and thought, “What am I afraid of? I’m not going to do any worse than that guy!”

At some point as the years started racing past, I noticed storytellers caring about the scores; sometimes people would get angry if they didn’t get the score they thought they deserved. Storytelling was getting a lot of press at this point — *The Moth Podcast* was up to tens of millions of downloads a year, and tons of other great new storytelling shows were popping up around the country. And it was around this time that I started noticing a different kind of people coming around — a more competitive type of personality. I was vexed, frankly. It had always seemed like the most humble, fun-loving thing in the world to me. I mean, even the name of it never sounded cool: *storytelling*. How could you develop an ego or agenda to become internet- or podcast-famous (actual things, swear to god)? It’s a little like wanting to have the biggest house on the tiny-home scene.

It seemed like there was a phase when suddenly people who you could tell were seasoned actors or comedians were there; it felt like they were just there looking for a way to get another gig on their résumé, hanging around just long enough to see if this was going to be the thing that got them on TV somehow. Oh, no — the cool kids were coming around!

I felt I was developing a way of sussing out people who were the real deal and not just coming around for a hot minute to use storytelling as a stepping-stone.

That had to be right about when I met Matthew Dicks. And here's the twist: not only could you tell he was the real deal, the kind of person you wished was a family friend back home, but he somehow made me see that it was okay to want to work at getting better at this stuff. He's the person I would watch whenever I was lucky enough to be hosting a show he was in. He taught me that trying to get better at storytelling also meant trying to get better at being a friend, or a son, a boyfriend, a brother, or just a better person. He's a guy you can tell has been as heartbroken as you or me or anyone else carrying a heart around on earth, but he manages to set that aside, in the background and subtext of his stories.

It would be easy for a guy like Matthew Dicks to get onstage and tell an emotionally overwrought story to manipulate listeners into feeling something; oversharing and "emotion porn" are super-fast ways to get a reaction from an audience in the heat of the moment, and they wear off just as fast, leaving a mental hangover in their wake. But Matthew Dicks forgoes the aforementioned tricks and instead tells stories like the one about trying to impress his mom by jumping his BMX bike off the roof of his house growing up. And having it end miserably, but not without his sister nailing her cue of turning to their mother, as instructed by Matt, and exclaiming a then-popular TV show's catchphrase: "That's incredible!" This story is a perfect example of how Matt somehow gets you to feel bigger emotional stakes in subtext instead of hitting you over the head with them.

Matthew came along at a time when the New York storytelling scene needed someone to remind it that storytellers are, first and foremost, a family, no matter how large, no matter how many different shows exist, no matter in how many different cities or countries. The family might be millions of people all over the world at this point, but Matthew Dicks is the guy who makes you realize it was that big all along. That those of us performing on this so-called storytelling scene haven't been doing anything new at all, just stepping up to a mic to partake in something that's been happening since the dawn of time.

This book is the helping hand they didn't have in the caves of Altamira. I mean, in fairness, they didn't need it back then — they seemed to do just fine at telling stories. But the world has changed a bit over the past thirty-five thousand years, and the book you're holding is a great resource. I've always said that a good storytelling show feels like a cross between therapy, rehab, and hanging out after dinner with friends. The idea of reading a book to get better at telling stories might seem a little academic, but you're about to find out that this is a book written by someone with a great heart, who believes you've got a great life full of stories in you and ahead of you.

I have to admit I have a soft spot for the way Matt fell into storytelling — that he went to a Moth StorySLAM to make good on a promise, secretly hoping deep down that his name wouldn't get called. And once he was in that room with everybody, he stuck around, but it's almost as if he didn't quite know what good could possibly come from it. Matthew Dicks hasn't so much written a book about

storytelling technique, or angling to get ahead in the smallest waters of the entertainment scene, or marshaling the will and ego to elbow your way past folks. He's written a book about you and how it would be great to have you hanging out and telling stories with everyone. Even if you don't quite know what good could possibly come from it.

— **Dan Kennedy**, host of *The Moth Podcast*

## PREFACE

# A Coward Tells a Story

It's July 12, 2011. I'm sitting in the Nuyorican Poets Café in downtown Manhattan on a Monday night, though the buzz in the room makes it feel like a Saturday. It's hot and crowded. A possible firetrap. The smell of stale beer lingers in the air. Hipster is piled upon hipster, sitting in metal folding chairs, standing at the rear of the club, and crowded around small, wobbly tables. A spotlight is trained on a small stage peppered with Igloo coolers, black electrical cords, and audio equipment. A single microphone stands at center stage under the spotlight's warm glow.

Dan Kennedy — a man I've never met but whose voice I know from his audiobooks and *The Moth Podcast* — is standing onstage, hosting the show. Dan is lean, with a wry smile and dark hair. He's in his midthirties. Relaxed. Confident. Everything that I imagined from listening to his voice so many times. Plus, he's funny. Effortlessly funny. Also sweet. Within minutes, he's wormed his way into my heart.

This is my first time attending a Moth StorySLAM. The first time I plan to take the stage and bare my soul. Ten minutes ago, I dropped my name in a canvas tote bag. Dan called it a hat, but I didn't dare quibble over terminology. All I know is that from that proverbial hat, ten names will be drawn to tell stories.

I'm praying that my name doesn't get picked.

After months of imagining this moment, the last thing I want to do now is perform for this audience. I'm only here because I stupidly promised my friends that I would someday tell a story at The Moth. Now all I want to do is bolt. Either that or sit here silently for the rest of the night. I'd be willing to remain silent the rest of my life if I could avoid going up on that stage.

Two years ago, my friend Kim recommended that I listen to The Moth's weekly podcast. The Moth, an international storytelling organization, produces shows that feature true stories told live onstage without notes. Experienced storytellers, terrified rookies like me, and the occasional celebrity take the stage to share meaningful moments from their lives with hundreds and sometimes thousands of people. Kim suspected that I'd enjoy the stories featured on *The Moth Podcast*, and she was right.

Listening to The Moth's storytellers, I instantly fell in love with their vulnerability, humor, and honesty. A Moth story offered me a rare glimpse into an entirely new world. I was amazed by the instant connection I felt to storytellers whom I could not see and did not know.

I didn't know it at the time, but even though storytelling seemed mysterious

and impossible, I was already immersed in the craft. Whether I was delivering a talk about my latest novel or speaking to parents during an open house or even flirting with my future wife, it turns out that I have been telling stories for a long time.

More importantly, I also had a natural affinity for sharing my less-than-noble moments with others. I've always known that embarrassment could get a laugh. Telling about my most shameful and foolish moments had always brought me closer to listeners. Honesty is attractive. A friend of mine once said that I "live out loud." It describes me well.

Perhaps I first learned this lesson on the page. Having written a blog since 2004, I've long understood the power of unbridled honesty and unflinching vulnerability. I've managed to capture the attention of a sizable audience by writing openly and truthfully about my life. I've established friendships with people from around the world through the power of my words. But this was new. Listening to a storyteller share a private story so openly in front of an audience captivated me.

I eagerly awaited Tuesday afternoons for the new episodes of *The Moth Podcast* to drop. I researched other storytelling podcasts and began listening to them too. Consuming stories in greater and greater numbers. I didn't know it yet, but I had begun my education in storytelling.

Over the course of the next year, The Moth grew in popularity, and as it did, more and more people began finding their podcast. Friends who'd become fans of The Moth were soon calling me, telling me that I should go to New York and tell a story.

"You've led such a horrible life!" they'd say. "Your life has really sucked. You'd be great at storytelling."

Although I wouldn't say that my life has sucked, they weren't entirely wrong. To say my life has been colorful would be an understatement. The short list of moments that my friends were referring to includes:

- Paramedics brought me back to life through CPR on two separate occasions.
- I was arrested, jailed, and tried for a crime I did not commit.
- I was robbed at gunpoint. Handguns pressed against my head. Triggers pulled.
- I lived with a family of Jehovah's Witnesses, sharing a small room off their kitchen with a guy named Rick, who spoke in tongues in his sleep, and with the family's indoor pet goat.
- I was the victim of a widespread, anonymous smear campaign that included a thirty-seven-page packet of excerpted, highly manipulated

blog posts that was sent to the mayor, the town council, the school board, and more than three hundred families in the school district where I teach. This packet compared me to the Virginia Tech killer and demanded that I be fired, along with my wife (who was teaching with me at the time) and my principal. If I wasn't fired, the authors of the letter warned us, the packet would be sent to the press, and legal action would commence.

- I discovered that I am a carrier of a gene that will ultimately lead to a disease that killed my grandfather, my aunt, and my mother.

That's just the tip of the iceberg.

My friend Rachel recently told me about the time that her alarm company called as she and her husband were driving home from Cape Cod. "Your house might be on fire," the representative from the alarm company warned. "We're sending the fire department over right now just in case."

Rachel and her husband, David, spent the next twenty minutes wondering if their house was a smoldering pile of ash before finally pulling onto their street and discovering it was a false alarm.

"Oh!" I said excitedly when she was finished telling her story. "That reminds me of the time my house caught fire when I was a kid, and firefighters pulled me from my bed while I was asleep!"

"Of course that happened!" she said, rolling her eyes. "I have a story about my house possibly burning down, and you have a story about an actual fire, complete with firefighters and a midnight rescue. Is there anything that *hasn't* happened to you?"

It was a good point. I've led a difficult life in many regards.

So as more of my friends began finding *The Moth Podcast* and listening to the stories, more and more of them began reaching out, encouraging me to go to New York and tell a story for The Moth.

*Tell the story about the time you went headfirst through the windshield and died on the side of the road!*

*What about the time you accidentally flashed our sixth-grade math class?*

*What about the time you called your dog back across the street into the path of an oncoming truck?*

*Tell the story about the time you were hired as a stripper for a bachelorette party in the crew room of a McDonald's!*

*Weren't you hypnotized onstage once and somehow ended up completely naked in front of the entire audience?*

"Yes!" I told my friends. "I'll go to New York and tell a story."

They were excited. They were certain that I would succeed. They were so enthusiastic that I couldn't help but get excited too. I was going to tell a story for The Moth. I told everyone about my plan. I was going to take the stage at a Moth StorySLAM in New York City and compete against the best storytellers in the world. I was going to bare my soul just as I had heard so many storytellers do on the podcast. I couldn't wait.

*Then I didn't go.*

Despite my excitement, I also knew the truth: I wasn't a storyteller. I didn't know the first thing about storytelling. I was a novelist. I made my living by inventing my characters and plots. I didn't tell true stories. I wasn't burdened by annoying facts and inconvenient truths. My talent lay in making up stuff quietly in a room by myself.

Not only did I have no idea how to craft a true personal story, but I was also terrified about performing in front of hundreds of disaffected New York hipsters wearing organic denim rompers and drinking Pabst Blue Ribbon. They were the cool kids from high school who listened to underground indie bands and oozed irony. I was terrified. Though I'd been working as a wedding DJ for almost two decades and was more than comfortable speaking to large audiences, I'd never actually *performed* in front of an audience before. No one had ever expected me to be entertaining or funny or vulnerable or honest. I simply steered the party in the right direction. Kept the best man sober and on his feet through his toast. Introduced "Mr. and Mrs." to their wedding guests for the very first time. Coaxed overwrought aunts and exhausted coworkers onto the dance floor for the Electric Slide. Mainly I spoke clearly and played music. I wasn't prepared for the high-stakes world of storytelling.

So instead of heading to New York, I remained safely at home. I taught my fifth graders, DJed my weddings, wrote my novels, and avoided The Moth. I made excuses, which were really lies.

*I'll go over winter break.*

*I promise I'll go once I finish my next novel.*

*Maybe I'll give it a shot during my school's April vacation.*

*I'll just wait until this school year ends.*

*I'll go next year.*

I became an excuse machine. The excuses became part of a playlist of lies that was perpetually cued up in my head and fell instantly from my lips. Each excuse was worse than the last. Each excuse made me feel worse than the last. And it was getting hard to keep my excuses straight — which ones I'd told to which group of friends.

Then I had an idea. Rather than performing for strangers in New York City, I'd

start my own storytelling organization in my hometown. I had no idea what that might entail, but anything sounded better than New York.

Yes, I decided that it would be easier to write a business plan, explore nonprofit status, negotiate contracts with venues, book storytellers, and purchase sound and recording equipment than it would be to stand on a stage in Manhattan and tell a five-minute story. Better to launch a company so I could tell stories for friends and family than compete against seasoned professionals in front of complete strangers.

This was the solution. I would create an opportunity to tell stories in a warm, safe, and accepting environment somewhere nearby. Maybe even right around the corner from my home. Brilliant.

Then I didn't do that either. Just as I did with performing for The Moth, I delayed. I made excuses. I assured my friends that I'd begin producing my own storytelling show any day. I'd find the perfect venue and launch an organization dedicated to storytelling and modeled after The Moth. But instead of doing that, I deflected their inquiries. Pushed back time lines. Made more and more excuses. Just like when I'd gone to New York to perform, I was afraid.

My failure to follow through on my promises began eating away at me. This was one of the only times in life when I'd said that I was going to do something without any real intention of doing it. Guilt and shame began to weigh on me. I started to think of myself as a coward. Finally I couldn't take it anymore. I had to come clean. I had to do the thing I was afraid to do.

In June of 2011, I told my wife, Elysha, that I needed to go to New York and tell a story. I said that I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I didn't. "One and done," I said over a dinner of chicken and rice. "I'll check it off the list and never look back."

"Sounds good," she said, far too nonchalantly for my taste. Elysha has this consistent, annoying confidence in my abilities. She assumes that I'm capable of almost anything, which both undermines her appreciation for my abject terror and sets expectations far too high for my liking.

"I'll get tickets," she said, thus spelling my doom.

This is how I find myself sitting at a wobbly table in a packed performance space, praying that Dan Kennedy won't call my name. With luck, I can return home and tell my friends that I tried like hell to tell a story at The Moth. Bad luck got in my way, I'd explain. My name remained stuck in the bag. This failed attempt at storytelling might buy me a year of dignity. Maybe my friends would forget about my promise entirely.

Things are looking good for me. Name after name has been drawn from the hat, which really is a tote bag, despite what Dan Kennedy continues to say, and my name has yet to be called. Storytellers have taken the stage and told their stories on the theme of "ego." I've liked most of the stories too. Overall the storytellers

seemed to know what they were doing and adored the spotlight, although not everything has gone perfectly for them. An older man who called himself Uncle Frank told a story that referred to his penis. When Dan Kennedy asked for scores from the three teams of judges, each held up two white cards indicating the storyteller's score on a ten-point scale (though it appeared to really be a 7.0–10-point scale, with tenths of a point differentiating stories).

Except that one of the teams ignored the 7.0–10 norm and gave Uncle Frank a 5.0, a score so low that it didn't make any sense. His story wasn't bad at all. I really enjoyed it. I flinched when the score was announced, almost as if I'd been the one scored poorly. The score seemed harsh and irrational. More to the point, the scoring suddenly seemed unpredictable and terrifying. I didn't know Uncle Frank at the time, but already I wanted to hug him.

“What's up with the score?” Dan Kennedy asked the judging team who'd rated Uncle Frank the lowest. “You really think his story was that bad?” Dan's quick defense of Uncle Frank reassured me.

“I heard that guy tell a story last week,” one of the female judges yelled. “He talked about his penis in that story too. I'm sick of his penis.”

The room burst into laughter and applause. Dan laughed. Even Frank managed a smirk.

Instead of laughing, I tensed up. My story didn't refer to my penis, but I had a few penis-related jokes about my last name. I wondered if these references might not sit well with the judges either.

But it looks as though I need not worry. The night is nearly over. Nine names have been drawn from the tote bag, and mine is still safely inside. Just one to go, and I can escape this night unscathed.

Dan opens the final slip of paper and reads the name:

“Matthew Dicks.”

I freeze. I can't believe he's called my name. I was convinced that I was in the clear. I'd already begun the mental drive on I-95 back to Connecticut as the conquering hero. I was already preparing my tale of woe:

“I put my name in the tote bag at The Moth. Sadly, it wasn't drawn, but still, mission accomplished. I tried, damn it, which is more than I can say for a lot of people. I'll try again someday, maybe.”

Now those dreams are dashed under the weight of having to walk onstage and tell a story.

Then it occurs to me: No one in the club knows me. I'm a stranger in a strange land. If I don't move or say a word, Dan will eventually give up on Matthew Dicks and call another name. This has already happened during the first half of the show. A name was drawn, and the storyteller failed to materialize. Dan tossed the paper

aside and drew another. I can do the same thing. I can just sit still and remain silent.

That is exactly what I do. I don't move. I don't make a sound. Then Elysha's foot connects solidly with my shin. I look up.

"That's your name," she says. "Move it."

I'm trapped. I have to tell my story. My terrible wife is making me. I rise and slowly make my way to the stage. I ascend the steps and find myself standing beside Dan Kennedy. He shakes my hand and smiles, acting as if this stage is no big deal. As if standing in front of a throng of expectant New Yorkers is something we do every day. I'm a little starstruck.

As Dan begins to step aside to allow me to approach the microphone, Jenifer Hixon, the show's producer, calls out to Dan, reminding him that he hasn't recorded the scores for the previous storyteller yet.

Dan turns to me. "Sorry," he says. "Wait just a minute." He motions for me to step off the stage so he and Jenifer can record scores from the judges on a large paper chart.

Instead I remain onstage. I stumble over to the coolers along the wall and sit. I don't want to tell my story. I don't want to compete. I don't want to be here at all. I want to go home and forget this stupid idea forever. But if I'm going to tell my story to this room of storytelling connoisseurs and judgmental New Yorkers, I want to do well. I don't want to look like a fool. With this in mind, it occurs to me that spending a couple minutes onstage, getting a sense of the space and lighting and the audience, might help.

So I stay. I soak in the scenery. The height of the stage. The angle of the spotlight. The position of the audience and the microphone. I try to relax. I try to make this space my home.

Jenifer records the scores from the prior storyteller. It's time for me to take the microphone and tell my story.

I hate this night. I despise every bit of it.

Then I begin speaking my first words into the microphone and fall instantly in love. Alone on the stage, standing before a room packed with strangers, I tell a story about learning to pole-vault in high school. I reveal my secret desire for my teammate to fail, so I could look better than he did in our teammates' eyes. I bare my soul to that room. I tell them about the ugly truth that resided at the center of my seventeen-year-old heart. I make them laugh. I make them cheer.

When I finish, I step off the stage and return to Elysha and our wobbly table. I have no idea how I've done, but I know it felt great. I already want to do it again.

Dan Kennedy asks the judges for their scores. When the final score is announced, a woman sitting beside me leans over and says, "You won!"

I look at the scoreboard. She's right. I've won my first Moth StorySLAM. I can't believe it. I return to the stage for a bow. Jenifer informs me that I'm automatically entered in the next GrandSLAM championship. I have no idea what a GrandSLAM is or what she's talking about, but I smile and thank her. I shake Dan Kennedy's hand.

I can't believe it. The next day I write the following blog post:

*Yesterday was one of those days that I will never forget. Last night I had the honor of telling a story at one of The Moth's StorySLAMs at the Nuyorican Poets Café in the Lower East Side. My goal was to simply be chosen to tell my story, but at the end of the night, I was fortunate enough to be named the winner of the StorySLAM.*

*I got home last night around 1:30, went to bed around 2:00, woke up around 5:30 to play a round of golf, and I was still walking on air. I know it sounds a little silly, but in the grand scheme of things, the birth of my daughter was probably the most important day of my life. Next comes the marriage to my wife, and then the sale of my first book, and then maybe this. Definitely this. It was that big for me.*

*Perhaps I'll tell more stories in the future, and The Moth will become old hat for me. Maybe this day will recede into the past with other forgettable memories. But on this day, at this moment, I couldn't be happier.*

Little did I know how prescient those words would prove to be. Less than six years later, I'd won thirty-four Moth StorySLAMs in fifty-three attempts. Thirty-four wins is among the highest win totals in the two-decade history of The Moth. I'm also a five-time GrandSLAM champion (also one of the highest totals in Moth history).

Since that fateful night in 2011, I've told hundreds of stories in bars and bookstores, synagogues and churches, and theaters large and small to audiences ranging from dozens to thousands. I've performed throughout the United States and internationally, telling stories alongside other talented storytellers and in my own one-person shows. My stories have appeared on *The Moth Radio Hour* and their weekly podcasts many times and have been listened to by millions of people.

I began my storytelling career by listening to storytellers on *The Moth Podcast*. Today people listen to my stories on that same podcast and on the radio. I still can't believe it.

But remember this: I didn't go to school to become a storyteller, and I didn't grow up in a family of storytellers. My parents were like the adults in a *Peanuts* television special. There was occasional mumbling from the other room through a cloud of secondhand smoke, but little more. My family didn't communicate through story. We barely communicated at all. I grew up in a broken home with a

family that had little time or inclination to fill our lives with conversation.

I didn't dream of becoming a storyteller. As I've made clear, I only started telling because my friends shamed me into giving it a try. In other words, I'm not special. I was not groomed to be a storyteller from an early age. Storytelling is not a part of my DNA.

If I can do this, you can too.

But my friends were wrong about one thing. They thought I would be a good storyteller because I've led an unusual and challenging life. They thought that my stories of homelessness and near-death experiences and encounters with the law would make me a great performer.

In that regard, they were wrong. Terribly wrong. Fortunately for both you and me.

You need not spend time in jail or crash through a windshield or have a gun jammed against the side of your head to tell a great story. In fact the simplest stories about the smallest moments in our lives are often the most compelling.

We all have stories. You may not believe this yet, but you will. You just need to know how to find them in your everyday life and then capture them for future telling.

Let me show you how.

## Part I

# Finding Your Story

No one ever made a decision because of a number. They need a story.

— *Daniel Kahneman*

Writing myself into existence. I think that's what I was trying to do. And it's cool to write a song and then have it come true.

— *Ani DiFranco*

It's a human need to be told stories. The more we're governed by idiots and have no control over our destinies, the more we need to tell stories to each other about who we are, why we are, where we come from, and what might be possible.

— *Alan Rickman*

## CHAPTER ONE

# My Promise to You

About a year ago, a man in one of my workshops asked, “Why am I here? I don’t want to stand on stages and tell stories. I don’t want to compete in story slams. I’m not an entertainer. I don’t get it.”

It was a good question, particularly because the man in question hadn’t chosen my workshop. His wife had asked him to attend.

He wasn’t the first person to attend a workshop for this reason. “My wife told me to take your workshop” is a surprisingly common reason given by men sitting before me in workshops.

Perhaps you’re asking the same question. If you have no desire to stand on a stage and bare your soul, why learn to find and tell great stories?

Not that long ago, I was asking the same question. Two years into my storytelling career, Elysha and I founded that Hartford-based storytelling organization that I’d once talked about with friends. We call it Speak Up. Together we produce shows throughout New England to sellout audiences numbering as high as five hundred people.

About a year into Speak Up’s existence, I started teaching storytelling too. But as with my journey to becoming a storyteller, my career as a teacher of storytelling began against my will. As our Speak Up audience grew and people wanted to learn to tell stories, they began asking me to teach them the craft.

I balked. I had no interest. But they were persistent. Many wanted to take a stage and tell a story. Others saw storytelling as a potential asset in their careers as attorneys, professors, salespeople, or therapists. Still others thought storytelling might help them to make friends and improve their relationships. Buckling under the weight of their pressure, I announced that I would teach one storytelling workshop.

One and done.

Ten people spent six evenings with me in a conference room at the local library. I taught them everything I knew about storytelling. I told stories and explained my process for crafting them. I listened to their stories and offered feedback.

As with storytelling itself, I quickly realized how much I enjoyed teaching the craft. Deconstructing the elements of a good story. Building a curriculum around what I knew and was still learning. Listening to stories and helping to find ways to shape them better. Turning my students into the kinds of people who can light up a room with a great story.

My “one and done” workshop has grown into something I do regularly and with zeal today. I travel the world teaching the art and craft of storytelling.

The people I teach are varied and diverse. I teach performers and would-be performers who want to become better storytellers. Some have never taken the stage before, and others are grizzled veterans looking to improve their skills. Many of these former students have gone on to take the stage at The Moth, Speak Up, and other storytelling shows. In August of 2016, one of my students beat me in a Moth GrandSLAM competition for the first time. I finished second, and she finished first. Perhaps I taught her a little too well.

I teach attorneys, salespeople, and business leaders who want to improve their presentation skills, sales pitches, and branding.

I teach novelists, essayists, screenwriters, television writers, poets, archivists, and other creative sorts who want to refine their understanding of story.

I teach professors, schoolteachers, ministers, priests, and rabbis who want to improve their lectures and sermons and hold the attention of their audiences.

I teach storytelling to people who want to improve their dating skills. I teach people who want to be more interesting at the dinner table. I teach grandfathers who want their grandchildren to finally listen to them. I teach students who want to tell better stories on their college applications. I teach job applicants who are looking to improve their interview skills. I teach people who want to learn more about themselves.

People have quit therapy and opted to participate in my storytelling workshops instead. While I don’t endorse this decision, it’s apparently working for them. Wives send their befuddled husbands to my workshops, hoping that storytelling will spark something inside them. Later they tell me how their husbands have opened up like never before. One woman told me that her husband has opened up “a little too much.”

People take my workshops again and again to discover more about themselves and find ways to connect with other people through their own personal narratives. A married couple once spent their anniversary attending one of my all-day workshops because they knew it would be a chance to laugh together and learn about each other. They brought champagne.

I teach the children of Holocaust survivors who want to preserve the stories of their parents and grandparents. I teach psychiatrists and psychologists who want to help their patients reframe their lives through story. I teach politicians, labor organizers, health-care advocates, and educational reformers who need to change hearts and minds.

I promise that whatever you do, storytelling will help. While I am often standing on a stage and performing, there are few things I do in life that aren’t aided by my ability to tell a story. Whether I’m teaching the metric system to my

fifth graders, pitching Speak Up to a new venue, selling my DJ services to a prospective client, or making small talk at a professional development seminar, storytelling helps me achieve my goals. Storytelling makes me a better dinner companion. It compensates for my inability to hit a golf ball accurately. It makes me far more palatable to my in-laws.

No matter who you are or what you do, storytelling can help you achieve your goals. That is why you are reading this book. That is why that man was sitting in my workshop that day.

In these pages, you will find lessons on finding, crafting, and telling stories that will connect you to other people. Make them believe in and trust you. Compel them to want to know more about you and the things you care about.

You'll find specific examples of well-told stories. Exercises designed to locate meaningful, compelling stories in your life. Step-by-step instructions for crafting those stories.

I hope to entertain as well. As much as I want you to learn to become a storyteller, I can't help but tell some stories along the way. In addition to teaching you how to tell an effective, entertaining, and moving story, I hope to give you a peek into my life as a storyteller. My plan is to pull back the curtain and show you some of the highs and lows of my storytelling career. In short, I plan to tell you some stories.

I also want you to trust me. There's no codified curriculum when it comes to storytelling. No universally accepted laws or rules, no canonical absolutes. Storytelling is more art than science. It's an ancient form of communication and entertainment that has been practiced since humans first developed language, but the rise in the popularity of personal storytelling is relatively new. There are no official schools of thought. No hard-and-fast formulas.

But I tell my students this: If you apply my strategies and methods to the craft, you will become a highly successful storyteller. Not every storyteller agrees with my strategies, but every student who has followed my instruction has become an effective, entertaining, successful storyteller.

My instruction works. You too can be a great storyteller. It's time to learn how.

## CHAPTER TWO

# What Is a Story? (and What Is the Dinner Test?)

A couple years ago, a woman asked Elysha why she first fell in love with me. Fortunately I was standing right beside her when the question was asked.

I waited for Elysha to say something about my rugged good looks, quick wit, or enchanting eyes. “I thought it was this situation,” I said, motioning up and down my body.

“It’s never been *this situation*,” Elysha informed me.

Instead she told the woman that it was storytelling that first made her fall for me. She told the story of the night when she and I went to Chili’s for dinner — our first meal alone — before our school’s talent show.

Just so we’re clear: This was not a date. Maybe I wanted it to be a date, but at that time, I thought Elysha was out of my league. I still think this today. Please don’t tell her.

Elysha and I were fellow teachers and slowly becoming friends, but we were both involved with other people at the time. We were technically unavailable. Also Chili’s was one of the closest restaurants to our school.

My point: I didn’t take Elysha on a first date to Chili’s. I’m not that guy.

Okay?

Elysha explained to the woman that over the course of our dinner, she had asked me some questions about myself. We’d known each other for a couple years by then, but we didn’t know much about each other personally. When I’m asked a question, I tell a story, so I told some stories that night. I was still more than seven years away from taking a stage and telling my first official story, but even back then, I was always ready and willing to share my life with others, warts and all.

Elysha told the woman, “That was the night I started falling for Matt. Listening to his stories, I realized that he wasn’t like anyone I had ever met before, and I knew I wanted to hear more. I liked the way he told a story.”

Beautiful, right? I found the perfect spouse through storytelling.

Right after the beauty of the moment washed over me, I quickly shifted to annoyance. By then I had been performing onstage and teaching storytelling for a few years. I had made a name for myself in the storytelling world. I’d attracted interest from businesses, universities, nonprofits, and performers. Knowing all this, why had she waited until now to inform me that my storytelling had been the key

to her heart?

I told her that the story about falling in love with me through storytelling fit perfectly into my personal narrative and explained how useful it could have been to me for the past couple years of teaching and performing. “You’re telling me that I found the perfect wife through storytelling! That’s like a baseball player hitting a home run into the right-field bleachers that’s caught by the woman he eventually marries. It’s amazing! How could you keep this from me?”

“I’m not in the business of helping you construct your personal narrative,” she said.

She’s lucky I love her. But you see my point, right? Even before I was telling stories onstage and thinking of myself as a storyteller, the ability to tell a good story was helping me immensely.

Let’s also be clear that when I talk about storytelling, I am speaking about personal narrative. True stories told by the people who lived them. This is very different than the traditional fable or folktale that many people associate with the word *storytelling*. While folktales and fables are entertaining and can teach us about universal truths and important life lessons, there is power in personal storytelling that folktales and fables will never possess.

A folktale or a fable would never have convinced Elysha that I was the love of her life. My friends would not routinely invite me to play golf if I promised them a well-told folktale between swings. I would not be hired for a job by answering questions with folktales. Nonprofits, corporations, universities, and school districts would not be able to improve their image and messaging through fables. You can’t become the life of the party by telling a good folktale.

Most importantly, folktales and fables do not create the same level of connection between storyteller and audience as a personal story. I have never listened to someone tell a folktale and felt more deeply connected to the storyteller as a result. I may have loved the story and admired the storyteller’s skill and expertise, and I might have been highly entertained, but I have never felt that I knew the storyteller any better at the end of their story. The storyteller who tells folktales and fables is a highly developed, highly skilled delivery mechanism, often more entertaining than television, radio, or a YouTube video, but never revealing, vulnerable, or authentic.

Folktales and fables don’t require vulnerability. They do not demand honesty and transparency from the storyteller. They can never be self-deprecating or revealing, because the story is not about the storyteller. They are entertaining, possibly educational, and often insightful, but they do not bring people closer together.

We tell stories to express our hardest, best, most authentic truths. This is what brings thousands of people to hear stories at theaters and bars every night in cities

all over the world.

They want the real deal. They want the kind of stories that just might make them fall in love with the storyteller.

As we prepare to embark on this journey together, keep in mind that there are a few requirements to ensuring that you are telling a personal story:

## Change

Your story must reflect change over time. A story cannot simply be a series of remarkable events. You must start out as one version of yourself and end as something new. The change can be infinitesimal. It need not reflect an improvement in yourself or your character, but change must happen. Even the worst movies in the world reflect some change in a character over time.

So must your story. Stories that fail to reflect change over time are known as anecdotes. Romps. Drinking stories. Vacation stories. They recount humorous, harrowing, and even heartfelt moments from our lives that burned brightly but left no lasting mark on our souls.

There is nothing wrong with telling these stories, but don't expect to make someone fall in love with you in a Chili's restaurant by telling one of these stories. Don't expect people to change their opinions on an important matter or feel more connected to you through these stories. These are the roller-coasters and cotton candy of the storytelling world. Supremely fun and delicious, but ultimately forgettable.

### Matt's Five Rules of Drinking Stories

1. No one will ever care about your drinking stories as much as you.
2. Drinking stories never impress the type of people who one wants to impress.
3. If you have more than three excellent drinking stories from your entire life, you are incorrect in your estimation of an excellent drinking story.
4. Even the best drinking stories are seriously compromised if told during the daytime and/or at the workplace.
5. A drinking story about a moment when you were over the age of forty is often sad, pathetic, and even tragic except under the following circumstances:
  - It is absolutely your best drinking story of all time.
  - The storyteller is over seventy. Drinking stories about the elderly are acceptable in any form, because they are rare and oftentimes hilarious.

### Matt's Three Rules of Vacation Stories

1. No one wants to hear about your vacation.
2. If someone asks to hear about your vacation, they are being polite. See rule #1.
3. If you had a moment that was actually storyworthy while you were on vacation, that is a story that should be told. But it should not include the quality of the local cuisine or anything related to the beauty or charm of the destination.

## Your Story Only

You must tell your own story and not the stories of others. People would rather hear the story about what happened to you last night than about what happened to your friend Pete last night, *even if Pete's story is better than your own*. There is immediacy and grit and inherent vulnerability in hearing the story of someone standing before you. It is visceral and real. It takes no courage to tell Pete's story. It requires no hard truth or authentic self.

This doesn't mean that you can't tell someone else's story. It simply means you must make the story about yourself. You must tell your side of the story.

Back in 1991, I was living with my best friend, Bengi, in an apartment in Attleboro, Massachusetts, that we called the Heavy Metal Playhouse. It was thanks to Bengi that I had a roof over my head. He was attending Bryant University but decided to live off campus during his sophomore year. I was graduating from high school at the time, and my parents expected me to move out and begin taking care of myself. But I had nowhere to go. I worried that I might become homeless.

While my classmates were counting down the remaining days of high school with great anticipation, I spent much of my senior year worried about where I would be living after the school year ended. Then salvation. On a warm spring evening, while Bengi and I were sitting in the cab of an idle bulldozer on the site of a future grocery store, he asked me if I wanted to live with him. I couldn't believe it. I was ecstatic.

There was only one problem: I knew that living with Bengi would be hard, because unlike anyone I had ever met, Bengi was a person who held on to grudges. Cross him in any way, and he did not forget. I suspect that it was the result of being an only child and not facing the constant adversity that comes with sibling rivalry. Growing up as the oldest of five, I was awful to my siblings. I made their lives miserable. I tricked my brother Jeremy into believing that the yellow bits in the Kibbles 'n Bits dog food were real cheese and convinced him to eat them fairly regularly. I constantly short-sheeted his bed. Sold his Star Wars action figures to raise cash. Locked him out of the house every other day. Jeremy had every reason to despise me.

To his credit, Jeremy occasionally enacted his own revenge. When it came time to vote on a new patrol leader in our Boy Scout troop, Jeremy orchestrated a coup that placed himself in the leadership position that I had once held and left me powerless to stop him. For a time, I despised him for making me look like a fool.

But when you grow up with siblings, you learn to forgive and forget. You have no other choice. As an only child, Bengi lacked that ability. Instead of forgiving, he would rank his friends on lists according to how he was feeling about them that day, which made things difficult given that we shared many of the same friends. His inability to forgive made it difficult to be around him at times. Sometimes

impossible.

Then salvation. One night we were sitting in the living room of the Heavy Metal Playhouse with friends, waiting for *The Simpsons* to come on, when things finally came to a head. Voices were raised. Heated words were spoken. In a fit of anger, Bengi stormed out of the house and into a downpour. He told us he was going for a run.

Bengi was not a runner at the time, and he suffered from a paralyzing fear of water. He couldn't swim, and he wouldn't even consider going out in the rain without a hat to keep the water from his eyes.

Yet he was off, hatless and frantic. He left me sitting along with our friends in the living room, contemplating what might happen when he returned. I wondered if Bengi and I might stop being best friends. He was ideal in so many ways, but I worried that his insistence on holding grudges might be the wedge that would eventually drive us apart. It saddened me. I sat on that couch and resigned myself to the idea that this might be the beginning of the end for us. Eventually my friends and I returned to watching television as we awaited his return.

Less than an hour later, the door burst open, and a dripping, panting, red-faced Bengi entered the house. He looked different. Waterlogged clothing and plastered hair, but he was also smiling. Really smiling. He looked relaxed. He looked happy. Then he walked over to me, bent down, and kissed me on the lips.

It was gross. He was wet and panting and hot. And it wasn't a peck. It was a real kiss. His yucky man lips pressed against mine.

Then he took a step to the left and kissed Pat, who was sitting beside me. He moved in to kiss a third guy, but by now everyone was on alert and able to get the hell out of the way.

We stared at him, wide-eyed, wondering what had happened.

Something important had happened. Something enormous. On that run, Bengi had somehow found a way to let go of every grudge he had ever held. Somehow he had decided that it wasn't worth holding on to them anymore. He was a new man. He was a better man. He has been that new, better man ever since.

This is Bengi's story of transformation. It was a momentous moment in his life. A life-altering experience. One of his big stories.

When I told Bengi that I had told the story to a workshop full of students, he said, "So you tell my stories now?"

"No," I said. "I told my side of your story. It was a story about a friend who saved my life, and yet he was also a friend who I didn't think would be my friend forever because of this terrible hang-up about grudges. Then one night, my friend went for a run and somehow changed himself forever. That terrible part of him went away. He left it behind in the rain. Then he kissed me. I thought it was

disgusting, but I also knew in that moment that we would be friends until our dying days.”

“That’s a pretty good trick,” Bengi said. “You should include that in your book.”

So I did.

Don’t tell other people’s stories. Tell your own. But feel free to tell *your side* of other people’s stories, as long as you are the protagonist in these tales.

My wife and I work with Voices of Hope, an organization dedicated to preserving the stories of the Holocaust. We work with the children of Holocaust survivors, teaching them to tell their parents’ stories.

But these second-generation survivors don’t really tell their parents’ stories. They tell their own stories, dipping into the past somewhere in the midst of them to show how the experiences of their parents have changed their lives too. They share a bit of their parents’ histories, but the stories are grounded in the storytellers’ lives. The reason these stories work so well is that they are not history lessons or biographical sketches. They are the stories of the people telling them. The storytellers are the protagonists, so they are able to bring their own vulnerability, authenticity, and grit to the tales.

There is the woman whose story opens on a living-room couch. *Schindler’s List* is coming on television, and she wonders if tonight will be the night when she finally watches this movie. She’s Jewish, and the child of a Holocaust survivor, and yet she’s never watched the film before, mostly because she worries that watching it will bring the stories of her father into greater focus. Her finger hovers over the power button on her remote control, paralyzed by indecision. Then she tells about some of her father’s experiences during World War II. She explains the horror he witnessed and the suffering he endured. Then she returns to the couch. The movie is about to come on. Will tonight be the night she finally watches this film? Can she finally bear witness to the horrors of her father’s youth? She ends the story by leaving the audience to wonder if this will be the night she finally finds the courage to watch.

It’s her story, filled with honesty and vulnerability, but embedded within her own narrative is the story of her father.

There is the woman who drove to her father’s apartment after he had fallen on the living-room floor and hurt himself. Waiting for an ambulance to arrive, she searches the freezer for something frozen to put on his back. The freezer is packed from top to bottom with food. “Not the Lean Cuisine!” her father yells from the living room.

Why is her father’s freezer jam-packed with food? He nearly starved during the Holocaust. As she tells about dealing with an aging parent, she dips into her father’s experiences during the war, making us understand how his life today is

still dictated by the past in so many ways. Then she returns to the present and closes the story at her son's bar mitzvah. Her father, still in great pain from the fall, has made it to the temple despite that pain. A man who was once a starving Jewish teenager in Nazi Germany is now witnessing his grandchild's rite of passage. This would have seemed impossible to that starving boy. Our storyteller talks about how happy she is to have her dad present at such a momentous occasion. "He can have all the Lean Cuisine he wants," she says. "He's earned it."

She's telling a story about her own life as the daughter of a Holocaust survivor, but through her telling, we learn much about her father as well.

Then there is the woman who returns to the concentration camp where her mother was once imprisoned. As she makes her way through the camp, she juxtaposes what she sees on that day with what her mother witnessed during the war. The storyteller is standing at the front of her story, talking about what she sees and feels in the present, but her mother, now deceased, is right behind her, casting a long shadow over everything.

Each of these storytellers does a brilliant job of telling *their own stories*, complete with all the elements of a well-crafted tale, and yet at the same time, we come away with a greater understanding of their parents and that terrible period of history.

A story is like a diamond with many facets. Everyone has a different relationship to it. If you can find a way of making your particular facet of the story compelling, you can tell that story as your own. Otherwise, leave the telling to someone else.

## The Dinner Test

Lastly, the story must pass the Dinner Test. The Dinner Test is simply this: Is the story that you craft for the stage, the boardroom, the sales conference, or the Sunday sermon similar to the story you would tell a friend at dinner? This should be the goal.

The performance version of your story and the casual, dinner-party version of your story should be kissing cousins. Different, for sure, but not terribly different.

This means that you should not build in odd hand gestures. When I see a storyteller mime the birth of an idea with hands that flutter like butterfly wings over their head, I think, "You would never do that at the dinner table. Why now? This isn't a theatrical production. You're just telling a story."

This means that when I hear a storyteller say that the purple pansies were particularly pleasant on their plush pillow of purple petunias, I think, "No one talks like that. This isn't poetry. You're just telling a story. No one would ever have dinner with someone who talked like that."

This means that when I hear a storyteller begin their story with dialogue like

“Mom, I told you not to look under my bed!” or even a random sound like, “Boom!” I think, “I would not eat dinner with someone who started their story with unattributed dialogue. Why do storytellers think that this is a good idea?”

Just imagine how this might sound:

*Me: Hi, Tom. How was your day?*

*Tom: Not bad. Did I tell you about Liz and the dog?*

*Me: No. What happened?*

*Tom: (pauses for a moment and then begins) “Liz, I’m taking the dog for a walk around the lake!” The screen door slams as Fido and I run toward the water.*

*Me: Check, please.*

If you wouldn’t tell your story at dinner that way, for goodness’ sake don’t tell it onstage that way. Storytelling is not theater. It is not poetry. It should be a slightly more crafted version of the story you would tell your buddies over beers.

When telling a story to an audience, we play a game with them: we pretend that we are speaking completely off the cuff. Extemporaneous storytelling, unprepared and unrehearsed. This is not usually true. While most storytellers don’t memorize their stories (and I strongly advise against it), they are prepared to tell them. They have memorized specific beats in a story. They know their beginning and ending lines. They have memorized certain laugh lines. They have a plan in place before they begin speaking.

As a player in this game, the audience also pretends that the story is extemporaneous. Off the cuff. Unprepared and unpracticed. This is what the audience wants. They want to feel that they are being told a story. They don’t want to see someone perform a story.

The audience and the storyteller find a common space in between the extemporaneous and the memorized, and this is where the best stories ideally reside.

My hope is that all my stories occupy this space. If they do, they will pass the Dinner Test. The stories that I tell onstage for thousands of people should be similar to the versions that I would tell for just one person. I would be less methodical at the dinner table, of course. I would allow for interruptions. I might be more inclined to offer an amusing observation or an aside. But essentially it should be the same story.

This is the Dinner Test. It will guarantee that you don’t sound “performance” or inauthentic. It will ensure that your audience will think of you as a regular human being. It will prevent you from sounding like the occasional Broadway actor who finds his way downtown to The Moth to tell a story, complete with dramatic flourishes and over-the-top vocalization. We hate those people at The

Moth. We also hate people who behave that way in real life. Don't be one of those people.

Okay, now you know what a story is and is not. Time to find some good ones.

## CHAPTER THREE

# Homework for Life

I'm eating dinner with my family. I'm sitting at the table with my wife, Elysha, my daughter, Clara, who is five at the time, and my son, Charlie, who's almost three. We're all enjoying our meal except for Charlie. Charlie is not eating his dinner. Charlie never eats his dinner. Tonight we're having chicken nuggets, and as I hand him a nugget, Charlie throws it onto the floor. Every chicken nugget that I place in front of him ends up on the hardwood, and we have the only dog in the world that won't eat table scraps. She's sitting at my feet, watching these tiny poultry bombs land all around her. She stares at them blankly.

I'm losing my mind. I'm losing my mind because my daughter, Clara, has never thrown a piece of food in her entire life.

She's perfect. She's just like me.

But Charlie is not. For whatever reason, Charlie throws food at every meal, and it doesn't matter if it's chopped liver or chocolate-covered chocolate. It all ends up on the floor. So I turn to Elysha and I ask, "What are we going to do about Charlie and the food?"

Elysha tells me that she's taking Charlie to the pediatrician tomorrow for his regular checkup, and says she'll ask the doctor for advice.

"Great," I say. I love it when experts solve my problems.

Twenty-four hours later, we're back at the table having dinner. Tonight it's peas. It turns out that Charlie is an Olympic pea-throwing champion. It's as if he's somehow turned them into antigravity peas. He can make them roll from the dining room to the kitchen with ease, and he thinks it's the greatest thing in the world.

I think he could probably roll peas upstairs if I gave him the chance.

Once again, I'm losing my mind, so I turn to Elysha and ask, "What did the doctor say about Charlie and the food?"

Elysha stops eating. She puts her fork down and takes a deep breath. I sense that something important is coming. I steel myself.

She says, "The doctor said that when Charlie throws food, we have to take all the food away from him, and I know that's going to be hard for you."

She's right. It's going to be hard for me to take all the food away from Charlie, but I don't know why she would say something like that. I've always been perfectly capable of punishing my kids when needed. As an elementary-school teacher, I understand the value of painful consequences.

“Why do you say it’s going to be hard?” I ask.

She takes another deep breath. “I know that when you were a little boy, you didn’t always have enough food to eat, so taking away food from Charlie is going to be hard for you.”

This is true too, but I’ve never told Elysha about my childhood hunger. I’ve never told anyone that when I was a boy, I was hungry most of the time. It’s a secret that I’ve kept close to my heart, hidden away for decades, because when you’re poor and hungry, the last thing you do is tell anyone in the world that you are poor and hungry. It’s a source of great shame and embarrassment, especially when you’re a child.

But my wife has spent almost ten years with me. She’s listened to me talk about my childhood. She’s heard my stories. She’s figured it out. She knows my secret.

Then she tells me that every morning, when I put together Clara’s lunch for school, I pack more food into her lunch box than a child could ever eat in a single day. Then after I’ve left for work, Elysha comes downstairs and unpacks the lunch box. She’s never wanted to tell me this, because she knows how important it is to me to send my kids to school with enough food every day. More than enough food.

I’m sitting at my dining-room table, staring across at my wife, when I realize that she knows me better than any person in the world. She probably knows my heart better than I do. It’s a moment I will never forget.

Here’s the thing about that story: We experience moments like this all the time. This one may sound special and unique and maybe even beautiful, but only because I’ve crafted this particular moment into a story. In truth, these moments are everywhere. They exist in multitudes for all of us. They’re like dander in the wind. They exist all around us. More than you could ever imagine. The problem is that we don’t see these moments. We fail to notice them or recognize their importance, and when we happen to see one, we don’t reach out to catch it. We don’t record it. We don’t save it. We fail to keep these precious moments safe for the future.

Years ago, I found a way to recognize and collect these moments, and it has changed my life. It’s turned me into a storyteller with an endless supply of stories. Stories that don’t rely upon near-death experiences or unlawful imprisonment or homelessness to be effective. It’s also made me a happier person.

Let me explain. Back in 2013, I was becoming desperate. I’d been telling stories onstage for almost two years, and I was head over heels in love with storytelling. As I continued to perform night after night, I realized two things:

1. I needed more stories. If I was going to continue to perform, I was going to have to generate more content.
2. The stories that my friends initially thought would be great — the near-

death experiences, the arrest and trial for a crime I didn't commit, sharing a bedroom with a goat — are all good stories. Audiences love them. But the story about Charlie throwing his food and my wife uncovering my childhood secret — a tiny story that takes place at a dining-room table between a husband and a wife — that's the kind of story that audiences love best of all.

Here's why: If I tell the story about the time I died on the side of the road and was brought back to life in the back of an ambulance, it's going to be challenging for an audience to connect with my story and with me. It might be exciting and compelling and even suspenseful, but audience members are probably not thinking, "This is just like the time I died in a car accident and the paramedics brought me back to life!"

There's nothing in the horror of a car accident for an audience to connect to. Nothing that rings true in the minds of listeners. Nothing that evokes memories of the past. Nothing that changes the way audience members see themselves or the world around them. But if I tell you about my secret childhood hunger, that story is much more likely to resonate with you.

Why? We all have secrets that we hold close to our hearts. Maybe it's a secret that you never want anyone to know, or maybe it's one that you desperately wish someone would uncover. Or maybe, like me, you had a secret that was discovered by a friend or loved one. Either way, we all know what it's like to have a secret like mine. We know how powerful and painful secrets can be.

We all know what hunger feels like. We know what it's like to want something important and essential — food, friendship, acceptance, love — but never to have enough of it. And we all know what it's like to feel embarrassed or ashamed of never having enough of something that you so desperately need.

If you're a parent, you also know what it's like to want your children's lives to be better than your own. You understand the desire to fill that lunch box to the brim with food.

This is why tiny moments like the one at my dining-room table with my wife and children often make the best stories. These are the moments that connect with people. These are the stories that touch people's hearts.

The story about my wife uncovering my childhood secret, in the full seven-minute version, is one of the most popular stories that I tell, but it's not terribly funny or suspenseful or extraordinary. It doesn't involve a near-death experience or law-enforcement officers or indoor farm animals. It's a simple moment between a husband and wife that has come to mean so much to me, and in turn to many of my fans.

This is not to say that the big moments, like the time I died on the side of a snow-covered road two days before Christmas (I tell this story in chapter 13), can't

make a great story, but it turns out even these big stories need to be more about the little moments than the big ones. We'll get to that in a later chapter.

As I said, there was a point at which I realized that I'd need to start finding more stories to tell. I couldn't wait for the next time my heart stopped beating or the next time I was arrested for a crime I didn't commit. I needed to find these little moments. I needed to hunt them down. My goal was to identify the small stories that existed in my life already.

I've been a schoolteacher for almost twenty years, so it was only natural that I assign myself homework. I assigned myself Homework for Life. This is what I did:

I decided that at the end of every day, I'd reflect upon my day and ask myself one simple question:

If I had to tell a story from today — a five-minute story onstage about something that took place over the course of this day — what would it be? As benign and boring and inconsequential as it might seem, what was the most storyworthy moment from my day?

I decided not to write the entire story down, because to do so would require too much time and effort. As desperate as I was for stories, even I wouldn't be able to commit to writing a full story every day, especially if it wasn't all that compelling. Instead I would write a snippet. A sentence or two that captured the moment from the day. Just enough for me to remember the moment and recall it clearly on a later date.

I also allowed myself to record any meaningful memories that came to mind over the course of the day, in response either to something I added to the spreadsheet or something that came to mind organically. Oftentimes these were recovered memories: moments from my past that had been forgotten for years but had returned to my mind through the process of doing Homework for Life.

To do this work, I decided to use an Excel spreadsheet. It works well for several reasons. First, it forced me to capture these moments in just a few words. As you can see, my spreadsheet is broken into two columns: the date and the story. That's it. As a result, I don't allow myself to write more than the story cell allows. For a novelist who is accustomed to writing hundreds and sometimes thousands of words per day, the temptation to write more was great, but I believe in simplicity. I believe in strategies that are easy to apply and maintain even on our busiest days. This is the best way to develop a habit.

10/29/15	Jaime and Monica's wedding: First family wedding ever. So much was missed that can never be recovered. Always feel like an outsider.
10/30/15	Hit the ball onto the first green again.
10/31/15	Elysha is horrified by my Meatloaf Pandora station.
11/1/15	Didn't connect my work voicemail until November 1. Only missed one call. Kids answering phone. Kids protecting me from phone call.

11/2/15	Started taking yoga.
11/3/15	I couldn't wait to get to school today to see David and hassle him about the Giants. More than anything else. Crazy.
11/4/15	I went through the tollbooth on the bridge without any money or my EZ Pass. Terrified. Worried about strangers when I normally don't care. Berated by tollbooth operator. Ticketed.
11/5/15	Taught Clara about the Rolling Stones while lying in bed with her.
	Walked Kaleigh. 2:00 AM. Underwear. Birds. Rain. Beauty.
	When I'm 12 years old, I find out that Measleman, our childhood dog, is named after the doc who gave my father his vasectomy. Tonight, for the first time, I realize that my father lost his dog in the divorce, too. How awful.
	I'm 18 years old, and I'm having sex with J. on the 18th green of a golf course in Walpole. Sprinklers kick on at midnight. SO MUCH WATER. SO MUCH LAUGHTER. Never laughed while naked with a girl so much.
	Woman in vet had brand-new puppy. So excited. Wanted to tell her the joy and heartache ahead. Yikes! Same with my kids?
11/6/15	Dog humped my leg at Petco. Woman is less than apologetic. I guess rightfully so. Meaningless apologies.
11/7/15	I prefer to write at McDonald's because I like racial and socioeconomic diversity as opposed to cashmere and American Express (divorced dad, employee).
	Sam emails me about life coaching. Friends divorce. Susan as a divorce consultant.
11/8/15	Faculty hoops game. Same strategy as Pete Dechecco game. Not much changes.
11/9/15	Man gets in line at Southwest Airlines, has moment with me, now my best friend, now trying to skip line, now a jerk, but still, my only friend.
11/10/15	I make dinner. Hot dogs and macaroni and cheese. The only dinner I can actually make.
11/11/15	I brought canned jellied cranberry sauce to my class's Thanksgiving Day feast and was loved for it.
11/12/15	Megan is so disappointed in Chris. I made Megan into the manager she is today. Mommy too.
11/13/15	I made Haley cry by accident by accusing her of pushing when she was not. Later, kids came to her defense and Stacey explained to me that girls are more complicated than I know.
11/14/15	Clara makes snowman almost without my help. So proud. So afraid that she won't need me much longer.
	Charlie has taken to head-butting me and gouging my eyes out. Considering that he was ignoring me prior to this, I see the violent streak as an improvement.
11/15/15	I hit on Elysha by spending an hour of my morning getting the kids dressed, folding laundry, doing dishes, and cooking pancakes.

By creating a system requiring that I write only a few sentences a day, I was also sure that I'd never miss a day, and this is important. Miss one day, and you'll allow yourself to miss two. Miss two days, and you'll skip a week. Skip a week and you're no longer doing your Homework for Life.

Moreover, by placing these most storyworthy moments in a spreadsheet, I could sort them for later use. I could copy, cut, and paste these ideas into other spreadsheets easily, allowing me to ultimately separate the truly storyworthy ideas from the ones that merely had potential.

Finally, by placing the stories in a spreadsheet, I was better able to see patterns in my life, and sometimes these patterns became stories too.

For example, Elysha and I never fight. We may disagree at times, but even those moments are rare. We have never raised our voices to each other and have never said anything that required an apology. It's disgusting. I know.

Then one day last year, at the onset of the summer, Elysha asked me to install

the air conditioners in the windows throughout our home. I didn't want to. When we were looking at houses years ago, we both agreed that central air was a nonnegotiable. We had to have it. Then we caved at the last minute and bought a house without central air. I was admittedly on board at the time. I liked the house a lot and agreed to the concession.

But I'm annoyed at myself today for not holding out for a home with AC. Putting the air conditioners into the windows each year is a reminder of how I failed to hold the line on this nonnegotiable point.

The air conditioners also get heavier every year, which of course is not the case, but it certainly seems as if they do. They serve as annual reminders of my slow march toward death and the inevitability of my mortality. Each year I grow weaker and frailer. I hate it.

I don't handle my mortality well at all.

So I told Elysha, "No. Not today. I'm not putting in the air conditioners. I don't feel like it!"

"Okay," she answered from the living room. "No problem."

Then I stewed for ten minutes. Thoughts swirled in my head: *Easy for her to ask me to install the damn air conditioners. She doesn't have to carry them up from the basement. Besides, I grew up without a single air conditioner in my house. She can handle one more hot day without her precious cool air. I have things to do. More important things than carry four air conditioners up two flights of stairs and jam them into window casings.*

I quietly grumbled and groused for ten minutes, and then, in a huff, I stomped down the stairs to the basement and started bringing the air conditioners up, banging them around a little more than necessary and grunting as I did so.

"Are you okay?" Elysha called from the other room.

"I'm fine!" I called back. "I'm bringing up the air conditioners."

"Oh," she said, her voice as sweet as pie. "Thanks!"

She had no idea how annoyed I was. In truth, I don't think she cared one bit if I brought the air conditioners up on that day or three weeks later. She had no idea how I was feeling. I jammed those air conditioners into the windows while stewing in my own petty, infantile anger.

That was the story I recorded that day. Not exactly a storyworthy moment in its own right, but perhaps an anecdote for a larger story someday.

Two months later, I reacted the same way when she asked if I could mow the lawn. I protested. I grumbled silently about her request. I paced back and forth in a huff. Then I mowed the lawn. Angrily. Pushing that lawn mower as if I wanted it dead.

Seeing that same behavior appear twice on my list made me realize something surprising: I do fight with my wife. I just don't fight with words. I fight by grudgingly and loudly doing chores that I don't want to do. I yell at her by banging air conditioners into walls and pushing my lawn mower furiously across the grass in neat, even rows.

Best of all, she has no idea that any of this is going on.

This pattern-turned-realization became a very funny story about my marriage that audiences love, and I learned something about myself and my marriage in the process too. My spreadsheet allowed me to see this pattern.

When I started my Homework for Life, I didn't know what the results would be. At best, I hoped to find a handful of stories that I might be able to tell onstage someday.

Instead, something amazing happened. As I reflected on each day of my life and identified the most storyworthy moments, I began to develop a storytelling lens — one that is now sharp and clear. With this lens, I began to see that my life is filled with stories. Moments of real meaning that I had never noticed before were suddenly staring me in the face. You won't believe how plentiful they are.

There are moments when you connect with someone in a new and unexpected way. Moments when your heart fills with joy or breaks into tiny pieces. Moments when your position on an issue suddenly shifts or your opinion of a person changes forever. Moments when you discover something new about yourself or the world for the first time. Moments when a person says something you never want to forget or desperately wish you could forget.

Not every day contains a storyworthy moment for me, but I found that the longer I did my homework, the more days did contain one. My wife likes to say that I can turn any moment into a good story, and my friend Plato has said that I can turn the act of picking up a pebble from the ground into a great story. Neither of these statements is true. The truth is this: I simply see more storyworthy moments in the day than most people. They don't go unnoticed, as they once did.

I discovered that there is beauty and import in my life that I never would have imagined before doing my homework, and that these small, unexpected moments of beauty are oftentimes some of my most compelling stories.

Look at the highlighted item on my spreadsheet, for example. It reads:

*Walked Kaleigh. 2:00 AM. Underwear. Birds. Rain. Beauty.*

What does this mean?

My dog, Kaleigh, wakes me up at two in the morning. She almost never does this, so I'm surprised. Annoyed too. It's clear she needs to pee. I'm wearing a pair of Valentine-themed satin boxers, given to me by my mother-in-law (a fact I try hard to forget every time I put them on), and nothing else.

I have a decision to make: take the time to get dressed or bring the dog out while I'm wearing nothing more than my boxers.

It's early November, but we're in the midst of a bout of warm weather. I live on one of those short side streets that you don't drive on unless you live on the street. I know all my neighbors. None of them are the type to be awake in the middle of the night. And it's two in the morning. I'll likely have the street to myself.

"Fine," I say, staring down at Kaleigh from my bed. "Let's go."

I bring her onto the lawn and wait as she does her business. My boxers-only decision is looking good. I'll be back in bed in no time.

But apparently peeing is not enough for Kaleigh, because once she's done, she turns and starts walking down the street. I'm still only wearing my boxers, but I think, "This will be fine. I live on a little street with almost no traffic. It's two in the morning. No one will ever see me. And even if they do, I'm wearing boxers. Practically gym shorts."

So I walk with my dog under the yellow glow of streetlights. The air is cool. The sky is starless. Kaleigh has an unusual bounce in her step. Her tail is wagging. She's happy. When we reach the end of my street, where she typically turns back for home, she pauses. Looks back at me. Then she turns right.

*Great.* She wants to walk around the block. And it's a busy block once we're off my street. One more right turn, and we'll find ourselves on Main Street. Still, it's the middle of the night. How many people are driving around at 2:00 AM? And Kaleigh looks so damn happy.

Fine, I decide. We'll go around the block.

I start walking. It's a nice walk. If you've ever been outside in the middle of the night, you know that the birds are louder when the sun is down than any other time of the day. They sing their hearts out at 2:00 AM. On this night, they are especially loud. Riotous. So here I am, walking my dog around the block, listening to the birds sing, wearing nothing but boxer shorts. It's a little crazy, but it's fine. Nice, even. Unnerving but nice.

We turn right again onto Main Street, the farthest point on the block from my home and one of the busiest streets in town, when something unexpected happens. It's one of those moments when it wasn't raining, and then one second later, it's a downpour. Noah's Ark-level precipitation. I am instantly soaked.

Now I know why the sky was starless. Storm clouds were overhead.

Now I know why the birds were so riotous. They knew what was coming.

So here I am, with my dog and my boxers and the birds and the rain, and I still have two sides of this block to walk before we're home. And now I'm on Main Street. It's the middle of the night, but still, it's called Main Street for precisely

what's happening right now. Cars and trucks are passing me by.

Years ago, I would have been angry at this turn of events. Angry with myself for blundering into this mess, and angry with Kaleigh for dragging me to this point. I would have seen nothing in this moment other than a forgettable series of terrible decisions, extreme irritation, and likely embarrassment. I probably would have picked up Kaleigh and marched her home, swearing most of the way.

Fortunately, on that day I had my storytelling lens intact. By then, my lens was well developed. So I stopped on that corner despite the rain and the location and my scanty boxers, and I looked down at Kaleigh. She looked up at me. Her tail was still wagging. Her tongue was hanging out in a doggy smile.

This occurs to me: Kaleigh is fourteen years old. She is my best friend. I've lived with her longer than I've lived with my wife, but I know that she's not going to be around for much longer. She's old. She's been hobbling a bit. She's already survived a ruptured disk and back surgery. She's reached the end of her expected life span. This might be the last time that we walk in the rain together.

So I stand on that corner in the pouring rain and soak in the moment in all its glory. It is beautiful. Crazy and absurd but beautiful.

What would have been just annoying and forgettable five years ago is now something that I've captured and will have for the rest of my life. Just from reflecting, absorbing, and recording that moment, it will never be lost to me. I don't know what else happened on that day, but when I see those words:

*Walked Kaleigh. 2:00 AM. Underwear. Birds. Rain. Beauty.*

I am right back on that corner with the birds and the rain and my best friend. And when I'm lying on my deathbed centuries from now, I'll be able to look back on that spreadsheet, see that handful of words, and return to that time and place as if I'm a time traveler. At that point, my best friend will have been dead and buried for years, but in my mind's eye, I will see her as clear as day.

I never expected any of this to happen. In searching for stories, I discovered that my life is filled with them. Filled with precious moments that once seemed decidedly less than precious. Filled with moments that are more storyworthy than I'd ever imagined. I'd just been failing to notice them. Or discounting them. Or ignoring them. In some instances, I tried to forget them completely.

Now I can see them. I can't help but see them. They are *everywhere*. I collect them. Record them. Craft them. I tell them onstage. I share them on the golf course and to dinner companions. But most important, I hold them close to my heart. They are my most treasured possessions.

But that's not all. Other amazing things began to happen as well. As that storytelling lens became more refined and I started seeing stories in my everyday life, stories began welling up from my childhood that I'd long since forgotten. It was like digging into the earth and suddenly striking a geyser.

It happened that night in the rain with Kaleigh. I'm standing on that corner in the rain, staring down at Kaleigh, who is still smiling up at me, when a new memory fills my mind. One of those unexpected geysers. It's the image of Measleman, a beagle mutt that my family owned when I was a boy.

Measleman, the first dog that I loved with all my heart, who was named after the doctor who gave my father his vasectomy. Measleman, who followed my father wherever he went. Measleman, whom my father thought of as a third son and I thought of as a four-legged brother. Kaleigh has momentarily disappeared. Main Street and the birds and my boxers have disappeared. Measleman is suddenly filling my mind's eye.

Standing on that corner in the rain, I can see Measleman as if he were standing beside me, smiling at me the same way Kaleigh was smiling at me a moment ago. Long tongue hanging out of his mouth. Panting. Sitting tall on his haunches. The combination of a memory of a dog long since dead with my aging dog of today somehow sparks a thought in my mind, and I realize — for the first time in my life — that not only did my father lose his wife, children, home, horse farm, and horses when my mother left him for another man, but he also lost his dog, Measleman.

My father moved into a room behind a liquor store and was forced to leave his Measleman behind. Not only did my father lose the dog he loved so much, but Measleman became the property of the man who'd stolen his wife and usurped his family.

As I stand in that warm rain, it somehow feels like the worst loss of all, and suddenly the shame that my father must have felt in losing his home and family to another man is my own. For the first time in my life, I look upon my father's losses through the eyes of a man instead of the eyes of a boy, and I realize how complicated, painful, and terrible it all must have been for him.

Another story. A much more difficult story to tell, but one I will tell someday.

Just as quickly, that memory is replaced by another. Now I'm a teenager, having sex with a girl named Jennifer on the eighteenth green of a local golf course when the sprinklers fire off at midnight, producing more water than I ever thought possible, drenching us as the rain is drenching me right now. The combination of the downpour and my half nakedness have returned this memory to me.

What a memory. I have never laughed so much while naked with a girl. We were as riotous as the birds are now on that night, but until this moment on this corner, that memory had been lost to me.

Two more storyworthy moments, both probably suitable for the stage if crafted properly, but also moments that I am grateful to have unexpectedly recovered. The memories come back so quickly and in such force that there are times when I need to brush them away.

All of this happens because I sit down every evening and ask myself: What is

my story from today? What is the thing about today that has made it different from any previous day? Then I write my answer down.

That's it. That's all I do. If you do it, before long you will have more stories than you could ever imagine.

I know many professional storytellers, including some of my favorites, who only have a handful of stories to share. I ask them to perform in shows that I produce, and they tell me they can't. They don't have any more good stories.

I tell these storytellers that my current list of untold story ideas is more than five hundred items long. They think this number is crazy. They say it's impossible. I think it's crazy that they don't do Homework for Life.

But even if you're not in the story-collecting business (and you should be if you're reading this book), other remarkable things will begin to happen when you do Homework for Life.

I received one of the best phone calls of my life from a Homework for Life convert. When I answered the phone, there was a woman on the other end, and she was crying. My initial thought: "Oh, no. Who is this? What terrible thing has happened?"

The woman doesn't tell me her name. She's just crying. A second later she starts talking. She tells me that she took a storytelling workshop with me six months before. She had listened closely as I assigned her Homework for Life, and she started doing it that night. She's calling to tell me that she's fifty-two years old, and for her entire life, she'd never felt like an important person in this world. She'd always thought that she was just like everyone else — simply another face in the crowd — and that one day in the future, she was going to die and "go out quietly. Unnoticed."

Then she started doing my Homework for Life, and within three months, it had changed her life. She says that searching for stories in her everyday life and recording them has made her feel like an important person for the first time. She tells me that she has real stories — important and significant moments in her life that she had never seen before — and that she feels that they are a part of a much larger story. She says she feels like a critical cog in the gears of the universe. Her life matters. She tells me that she can't wait to get out of bed every morning and find out what will be the thing that makes that day different than the last.

It's probably the best phone call I've ever received, and I never got the woman's name. She thanked me and hung up while she was still crying.

But it's true. As you start to see importance and meaning in each day, you suddenly understand your importance to this world. You start to see how the meaningful moments that we experience every day contribute to the lives of others and to the world. You start to sense the critical nature of your very existence. There are no more throwaway days. Every day can change the world in some small way.

In fact, every day has been changing the world for as long as you've been alive. You just haven't noticed yet.

I hear accounts like this all the time. A workshop graduate once told me that she's not doing Homework for Life to find stories, because she has no intention of ever taking the stage and performing. But Homework for Life has become therapeutic for her. It's made her life richer and fuller, so she can't stop now, even if she wanted to. Another workshop graduate told me, "It's the most important thing that I have ever done in my life." Another told me, "It saved my life." Still another said, "It's like I can see the air now."

As workshop student Anne McGrath wrote in a recent blog post on Brevity:

Here's the most incredible thing I've discovered: this habit of collecting ideas has changed something in my mind and how I am in the world. It has instilled in me a sense of patience, made me see with wonder, be more willing to try new things, and look with fresh, curious eyes. The process of writing has become more important than the *outcome* or me and I feel fortunate every day that I am able to create something. I have stumbled upon things in New York City I might have missed if I was less attentive — an exhibit of Nabokov's butterflies at the public library, a baby squirrel fallen from its nest in Central Park, the homeless woman outside the subway station who had been a Jackie Gleason dancer. Visceral stories are floating all around us, waiting to be brought to life.

It's not just me. This strategy works.

There's an added bonus to Homework for Life. It's unrelated to storytelling, but it's worth mentioning. It might just be the most important reason to do the exercise. As you begin to take stock of your days, find those moments — see them and record them — time will begin to slow down for you. The pace of your life will relax.

We live in a day and age when people constantly say things like:

*Time flies.*

*That last school year went by in the blink of an eye.*

*I can't even remember what I did last Thursday.*

*I feel like my twenties went by in a flash.*

I used to feel the same way. Then I started doing Homework for Life, and the world slowed down for me. Days creep by at remarkably slow speeds. Weeks feel like months. Months feel like years.

I cannot tell you what a blessing this is. I don't lose a day anymore. I can look at any one of those entries on my spreadsheet from the years I have been doing my homework, and I am right back in that moment. And I will have these moments forever. When I am on my deathbed, I'll be able to look back at an Excel

spreadsheet filled with moments from my life. It'll probably be a hologram by then, hovering over my body, but as I scroll through the pages, I'll be able to return to every one of those moments. Every one of the moments that made one day different from the rest. A lifetime of storyworthy moments at my fingertips.

I found this unexpected gift while desperately searching for stories, and it has changed my life. It can change yours too.

I conducted a storytelling workshop for principals and administrators in my school district a few summers ago. I assigned them Homework for Life. Five months later, at another training session, one of the principals approached me and said, "You know why your Homework for Life works?"

"No," I said, desperately trying to remember his name.

"I've missed three days since that training. Three days when I forgot to write down my story for that day, and it kills me. I lost three days, and I'm so angry about it. I'll never get those days back. That's how I know it works."

Over the years, I have assigned Homework for Life to thousands of people, but only a small percentage has begun doing it. A tragically small percentage. This is because Homework for Life requires two things that are often lacking in the world today:

Commitment and faith.

Commitment that you will sit down every night and reflect upon your day. It's crazy to think that you won't give five minutes a day over to something that will change your life, but many won't.

Instead, you'll blindly give two hours of your life over to a television show that you will barely remember a year later. You'll give at least that much time to aimless surfing of the internet and the liking of baby photos on Facebook, but you won't give five minutes of your day to change your life.

You may also lack faith, because this change won't happen instantly, and in this world, most people want their results instantaneously. But this process does not happen overnight. It didn't happen immediately for me. The stories that I was finding and recording early on were not very good. I couldn't see the moments of true meaning, nor could I distinguish them from moments that might be interesting, or even amusing, but ultimately carry no weight. My storytelling lens had not yet been focused and refined, but I was so desperate to find stories that I refused to stop. I kept on doing my homework, even when it seemed pointless, because I was desperate to remain on the stage, and I thought that finding even one story would make it all worth it.

It may take you a month, six months, or even a year to refine and focus your storytelling lens. You might give up five minutes of your day for an entire year and receive nothing in return. This process requires you to believe that eventually you will begin seeing these moments in your life, just as I and so many others have.

Once it starts to happen, you will find your life changed forever.

Last week my daughter, Clara, who's nine years old now, asked me to pick her up. It was early in the morning, and she was feeling sleepy and a little sad that the weekend was over and we were heading back to school.

I pick Clara up every time she asks, because I know that at some point, probably sooner than later, she will be too heavy for me to lift, or even worse, she will stop asking.

So I'm holding Clara in my arms in our living room. The morning light is casting a warm, yellow glow in the room. The house is quiet. She and I are the only two awake. She wraps her arms around my neck and holds me tight.

A minute later my arms start to shake. I'm struggling to keep her aloft. My right foot, which has a torn ligament, begins to throb. I decide to put her down.

At that very moment, Clara pushes her face into the crook of my neck and whispers, "It's just so nice to be held this close."

Then it occurs to me: I'm the only person in the world who picks up my daughter like this anymore. She's become too big for my wife or her grandparents to lift. I'm the last person who will ever hold her like this. I'm the last person who will hold her like a little girl.

I tighten my hold on her. I ignore my throbbing foot and tiring muscles. I whisper back, "Let's just stay like this for a little bit. Okay?"

"Sounds great, Daddy," she whispers back.

We hold each other in the growing light of a spring morning until she sighs and whispers, "Okay, let's eat."

If I hadn't been doing my Homework for Life, this moment would have been lost to me. Even if I had recognized its importance (which is doubtful), I would have been hard-pressed to recall it years later.

If you're a parent, you know this is true. Our lives are filled with beautiful, unforgettable moments with our children that turn out to be entirely and tragically forgettable.

But now I will own that moment for the rest of my life. I can close my eyes today and return to that room, with the morning light streaming through the windows, my daughter pressed close to me, whispering words that I will never forget.

Someday that moment may find its way into a story.

Nowadays, Homework for Life doesn't even take me five minutes. Today I can see most of the moments while in the midst of them. I recognize them in real time. I have often inputted them into my spreadsheet long before the end of the day. This will eventually happen for you too. If you have commitment and faith.

I give this to you: Homework for Life.

Five minutes a day is all I'm asking. At the end of every day, take a moment and sit down. Reflect upon your day. Find your most storyworthy moment, even if it doesn't feel very storyworthy. *Write it down.* Not the whole story, but a few sentences at most. Something that will keep you moving, and will make it feel doable. That will allow you to do it the next day. If you have commitment and faith, you will find stories. *So many stories.*

There are meaningful, life-changing moments happening in your life all the time. That dander in the wind will blow by you for the rest of your life unless you learn to see it, capture it, hold on to it, and find a way to keep it in your heart forever.

If you want to be a storyteller, this is your first step. Find your stories. Collect them. Save them forever.

In addition to my many other jobs, I'm an elementary-school teacher, so I feel like I have the right to assign homework to anyone I choose.

I choose you.

## STORY BREAK

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### **Naked in Brazil**

I'm telling stories to an audience of about seven hundred high-school students at an American school in São Paulo, Brazil, in the summer of 2015. When I finish performing, I open the session to questions. They come fast and furious.

I love Q&A. Ask me a question, and I'll tell you a story.

I've been answering questions for about fifteen minutes, handing out prizes to students who ask me especially challenging questions, when a student asks me:

"You write novels. You blog every day. You write musicals and magazine articles. You tell stories on stages. Why? Why do you share so much of yourself?"

I stop. I think for a moment. I've never been asked this question before.

An unexpected answer comes to mind. "I think . . ." I say slowly, wondering if the answer I'm about to give is correct. Trying it on for size. "I think," I repeat, "that I'm trying to get the attention of a mother who never paid me any attention and is now dead and a father who left me as a boy and never came home."

It's a remarkable thing. I have been writing every single day of my life since I was seventeen years old, without exception. I have been blogging every single day of my life since 2003, sharing my thoughts, ideas, complaints, and moments from my life with thousands of readers. I've been publishing novels since 2009. And I've been standing on stages since 2011, spilling my guts, sharing my deepest, darkest secrets and most embarrassing, hilarious moments, and not once did I ever ask myself, "Why?"

"Why do you do it, Matt? Why do you share so much of yourself with the world?"

Now I know. Standing in the carpeted aisle of an auditorium five thousand miles from home, I have stumbled upon the answer to a question I never asked.

That is storytelling at its finest.

The auditorium goes silent. I go silent. Seven hundred teenagers stare at me, waiting for my next move.

After a moment, I say, "Okay, remember when we talked about finding those five-second moments in our lives? Those moments of transformation? Realization? I think I'm having one right now. Yup. I am. Definitely."

I still stand by that answer today. I have yet to craft or tell the story about the time I discovered my primary reason for writing and telling so many stories (in front of seven hundred Brazilian teenagers), but I will someday.

The young lady who asked me that question received a prize that day.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# Dreaming at the End of Your Pen

I don't dream well.

When I was twenty-two years old, I was robbed at gunpoint while managing a McDonald's restaurant in Brockton, Massachusetts. Guns were pressed to my head and triggers pulled in an attempt to force me to open a lockbox at the bottom of the safe.

I didn't have the key to the lockbox, as a placard on the safe clearly indicated. The gunmen didn't believe me or the placard and thought they could get me to open the lockbox by convincing me that I was about to die. Knowing that these men had killed a Taco Bell employee the week before, I was certain that they were serious. I was convinced that this was the end of my life.

It's one of my big stories.

I first told this story at a Moth GrandSLAM in Brooklyn's Music Hall of Williamsburg in 2013, but I have no recollection of telling it. The performance isn't a blur; it's a perfect hole in my memory. A total loss of seven minutes of my life, even though those seven minutes were spent onstage in front of more than four hundred people.

More on this in a later chapter.

Two years later I told a more complete version of the story in a Moth Mainstage at the Brooklyn Academy of Music under the brilliant direction of The Moth's artistic director, Catherine Burns. You can find a recording of that performance on the "Storyworthy the Book" YouTube channel. We will be looking at this story more closely in a later chapter as well.

As a result of the robbery and my failure to seek treatment, I suffered from untreated post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) for more than twenty years. When Elysha and I started dating in 2004, she asked me why I woke up every night screaming and crying and shaking like a leaf.

I told her it was "my thing."

Some people collect stamps. Others ski. Some people like to bake cookies. I suffer from reoccurring dreams of a horrific robbery and the absolute certainty that I am about to die.

"Relax," I told her. "It's just my thing."

Elysha told me that my nightmares did not qualify as a "thing" and sent me to a therapist. He discovered that in addition to my nightmares, I had lived a life of constant anxiety and meticulous precision in an effort to deal with my trauma.

Among the many things that he discovered (that I already knew):

- I create a mental map of the entrances and exits of every space that I enter.
- I position myself so that I can monitor the primary entrance to any space that I occupy.
- I constantly catalog potential threats as they enter and exit a space.
- I keep a baseball bat under my bed and have escape plans from every room in my home in the event of a home invasion. When Elysha and I began living together, I reviewed these escape plans with her regularly.
- What was most concerning to my therapist was that I would hear the click of the gun while wide awake. As I was walking down the street. Reading a book. Driving a car. Watching television.

It turns out that Elysha was right. I was a bit of a mess. Two years and many therapy sessions later, I stopped hearing the click of the gun while walking down the street. I relaxed a bit. My need to constantly plan my every moment receded. My anxiety level decreased significantly.

Best of all, my nightmares have become far less frequent. They aren't gone by a long shot, and they probably never will be, but I can get through entire nights without seeing those three masked men and their guns in my dreams.

Those are very good nights for me. On those nights, I dream the dreams of a normal person. Dreams that I adore. Loosely constructed narratives that often diverge and intersect along odd, incomprehensible, and incongruent routes, filled with overlapping ideas and images of every variety. Kind of like *Alice in Wonderland* on steroid-filled mushrooms.

Even with a journal at my bedside, it's almost impossible to remember any of these dreams, and rarely do I generate any useful ideas or content from them. But I have developed a way of engaging in a version of this dreamlike state while I am awake that has been incredibly productive and has resulted in many ideas for stories, anecdotes for stories, and much more. It's also damn good for your soul.

## Crash & Burn

The exercise is called Crash & Burn. It's a simple concept, and certainly not groundbreaking in any way, but it relies on adhering to a few simple rules that I have developed that are necessary to make the exercise work well.

Essentially Crash & Burn is stream-of-consciousness writing. I like to think of it as dreaming on the end of your pen, because when it's working well, it will mimic the free-associative thought patterns that so many of us experience while dreaming.

Stream of consciousness is the act of speaking or writing down whatever

thought that enters your mind, regardless of how strange, incongruous, or even embarrassing it may be. People have been utilizing stream-of-consciousness strategies for a long time, beginning first with psychologists in the late nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, these strategies were adopted by writers and thinkers as a means of generating new ideas. Entire novels have been written to mimic stream-of-consciousness thinking.

I hate those novels.

But for our storytelling purposes, we will be utilizing stream-of-consciousness writing to generate new ideas and resurrect old memories, applying three important rules:

### Rule #1: You must not get attached to any one idea.

The goal of Crash & Burn is to allow unexpected ideas to intersect and overrun current ones, just as that rain-drenched corner of Main Street with my dog produced an important revelation about my father and a memory of sex on a golf course. Two intersecting ideas crashed into and overran the meaningful moment that I was experiencing with Kaleigh.

So, regardless of how intriguing or compelling your current idea may be, you must release it immediately when a new idea comes crashing in, even if your new idea seems decidedly less compelling than the original one. When Crash & Burn is at its best, ideas are constantly crashing the party, slashing and burning the previous ones. It's in these intersections of ideas that new ideas and memories are unearthed.

### Rule #2: You must not judge any thought or idea that appears in your mind.

Everything must land on the page, regardless of how ridiculous, nonsensical, absurd, or humiliating it may be. Similarly, grammar, punctuation, and capitalization are meaningless. Penmanship is irrelevant.

This can be difficult for many people. For years, writing teachers have demanded that students think about grammar, spelling, and punctuation as they write. They have required students to outline their essays and stories before placing a single word on the page. They have handed their students archaic graphic organizers and insisted that they be completed prior to writing. They have ignored the reality of writing, which is this:

Many writers have no idea what their next sentence or paragraph will be. Much of writing is done in the dark. The next sentence is often as much of a surprise to the writer as it is to the reader.

The artificial demands of outlines, graphic organizers, and planning often subvert the creative process and force would-be writers to think about what they

are writing before a word even hits the page rather than allowing them to spill their guts and evaluate the material later. This is because writing teachers often are not writers themselves and therefore never engage in the writing process in an authentic, honest way. Rather than teaching the writing process followed by actual writers, they speculate about strategies that might help a writer or follow the advice written in writing tomes by people who only write writing tomes, often doing more damage than good.

When it comes to Crash & Burn, you must free yourself of this dreadful, hobbling, ingrained need to prepare and self-monitor. You must spill your guts on the page, free from judgment or worry about whether what you are writing is good or right. Just put the damn words on the page as they appear in your head and on your fingertips. Ignore your inner demons.

### Rule #3: You cannot allow the pen to stop moving.

I say *pen* because, although I do almost all my writing on a keyboard, I have found that engaging in Crash & Burn with a pen tends to trigger greater creativity (and there is some science to support this claim). But if you must use a keyboard, go for it.

Either way, your hand or fingers cannot stop moving. You must continue writing words even when your mind is empty. To make this happen, I use colors. When I have no other thought in my mind, I begin listing colors on the page until one of them triggers a thought or memory. For example:

*Red, green, blue, black, brown . . . I tell kids that brown is my favorite color, and it makes them all crazy, which makes no sense, but in truth, I have no favorite color, which makes them even crazier . . .*

Writing down numbers is also a popular strategy utilized by my workshop students, though I recommend that the numbers be listed *in word form*. For example:

*One, two, three, four, five . . . I have five fingers on each hand, and there are scars on five no six of them, which seems like a lot, but maybe not . . .*

I've known frequent travelers to list countries. I had a mechanic in one of my workshops list engine parts. I had a teenager in a workshop list the names of his previous girlfriends (and apparently had more than enough names to work with). It doesn't matter what you choose. Your list of items simply needs to be long and familiar to you.

That's it. Set a timer for ten minutes, follow these three rules, and go.

Here is an example of one of my Crash & Burn sessions from a recent workshop. When I'm teaching, I speak my Crash & Burn aloud as I write so my students can hear how my mind is working. Specifically, I want them to hear:

- how new ideas come crashing in.

- how I embrace these new ideas without hesitation or judgment.
- how I am willing to leave a good idea behind in favor of a new one, regardless of how little promise the new idea seems to hold.
- how I manage to keep my hand moving at all times.

If you go to the StoryworthytheBook YouTube channel, you can see me engage in this process, speaking it aloud as I do in my workshops. But below is a Crash & Burn final product, transcribed from pen to digital text.

I always launch my Crash & Burn sessions with an object in the room, but you can start any way you want. On this day, there was a bowl of grapes on a table, so I started with the word *grape*. Slash marks indicate the moments when new ideas or memories came crashing in.

*Grape. Grape juice. White grape juice / When I was a kid I stepped on a broken Mello Yello glass bottle and cut my foot — got infected — happened by a pond / oh, the pond, Yawgoog had three different waterfronts and Ashaway Aquatic Center — I never took / I was a lifeguard at Yawgoog — so boring so dumb to be a lifeguard at a Boy Scout camp — at least you give yourself a chance to look at girls but I saved that kid who couldn't swim and didn't want to tell anyone / when Eric and what's his name? Rory yes Rory flipped their canoe adults facing away from pond and Jeff and I went to / a pirate is a criminal on the sea — I should commit a crime on the sea so I can be legally called a pirate / I was a criminal but if you're found not guilty were you never a criminal or a former criminal? actually I was definitely a criminal: mailbox baseball and stealing the shoes lots of other crimes — isn't everyone a criminal or am I just especially bad / list of crimes would be / story about a guy who commits a crime at sea just to be a pirate and wears an eye patch for effect / I used to walk the train tracks as a kid but I wouldn't want my kids to walk the tracks even though it must be safe, right? how does a train sneak up on you? Not possible / nail polish for women has weird and crazy names maybe I could do something with it / green red yellow blue gray / The Confederates wore gray uniforms, right? Seems like the least inspiring color — British wore red to conceal blood and make fellow soldiers / I took that ASVAB test and would love to see the results — I had no idea what kind of job I might have landed in military — thank God I didn't re-sign at 17 I wonder what / I took the pledge at 17 in a fake way and then had to take it again at 18 and refused thinking I would but does that make me a bad guy of some kind? / bad guy the black and the white is inconvenient Stephen King says that the side of the good is the side of the white which I like but sort of places it in unintentionally racist terms similar to "forgot the face of your father" is great but / haven't read Dad's letter yet why am I so scared all I want is a relationship and /*

Once I've finished with a session, I look back and pull out threads that are

worth saving. Story ideas. Anecdotes for future stories. Memories that I want to record. New ideas. Interesting thoughts.

Here is an annotated look at what I produced in those ten minutes:

*Grape. Grape juice. White grape juice / When I was a kid I stepped on a broken Mello Yello glass bottle and cut my foot — got infected — happened by a pond /*

I have no idea how grape juice brought me to Mello Yello, but my mind somehow made the connection, and it brought me back to a day of swimming with my family at a water hole when I was five or six years old.

I had forgotten about the Mello Yello bottle and the cut on my foot until this Crash & Burn session, but more importantly, it brought back another memory from that day, not recorded during my session, because a new idea came crashing in, a much more meaningful memory than the one about my infected foot.

It was a memory of my father jumping in the pond from the edge of a large, flat rock and remaining underwater for so long that I was sure he was dead. I was absolutely certain that he had drowned before my eyes. I remember a wave of crushing sadness washing over me, overwhelming me. My father was gone. The only man I loved was lifeless on the bottom of the pond. I knew in that moment that my life had changed forever.

As I opened my mouth to scream, my father's head emerged amidst a patch of lily pads, and "forever" had miraculously come to an end. Life was instantaneously returned to normal. Rarely have I experienced such an emotional swing in my life.

It turns out that I have inherited my father's ability to hold his breath for a frighteningly long time. Over the years, I have terrified many people, including my wife, by disappearing under the water for excessive periods of time, never once thinking about that moment by the pond when I thought I had lost my father forever. This is probably a story that I will tell someday.

*oh, the pond, Yawgoog had three different waterfronts and Ashaway Aquatic Center — I never took / I was a lifeguard at Yawgoog — so boring so dumb to be a lifeguard at a Boy Scout camp — at least you give yourself a chance to look at girls but I saved that kid who couldn't swim and didn't want to tell anyone /*

The memory of the Mello Yello water hole triggered memories of Yawgoog Pond, at the center of Yawgoog Scout Reservation. Yawgoog was the Boy Scout camp where I spent many summer days as a boy. The bit about the stupidity of working as a lifeguard at an all-boys' camp might be worth exploring for part of an essay or perhaps for my stand-up routine. It feels funny. Or at least potentially funny.

As for the boy who nearly drowned (after being too embarrassed to admit that he couldn't swim), I had forgotten about that moment entirely until this Crash & Burn session, and it will certainly make a good story someday.

*when Eric and what's his name? Rory yes Rory flipped their canoe adults facing away from pond and Jeff and I went to /*

Yawgoog Pond brought me to a pond in Vermont. While visiting friends at their vacation home years ago, a boy named Eric and his friend Rory turned over their canoe over in the middle of the pond. The two boys weren't wearing life jackets, so they were clinging to the edge of their submerged canoe for dear life. My friend Jeff and I were the only adults who noticed that the boys were in trouble, so we raced out in a canoe to help. The boys credited us with saving their lives, but in truth they could have clung to their canoe for quite a while. I was still happy to take the credit.

Possibly a story, or at least part of a story.

A more storyworthy moment from that visit to Vermont came when Eric walked in on my wife, Elysha, fully naked and six months pregnant. Elysha nearly killed the poor boy, who ran for his life and later denied seeing anything, though we all knew that was impossible.

By some bizarre twist of fate, Elysha would become Eric's fifth-grade teacher two years later, making him perhaps the only ten-year-old boy in the history of American education to see his elementary-school teacher fully naked while pregnant. Now that is a story that needs to be told.

As you know, I'm simply needing to tell my facet of the story.

*a pirate is a criminal on the sea — I should commit a crime on the sea so I can be legally called a pirate /*

Something about the memory of racing onto that lake in a canoe brought the idea of piracy to my mind. I'm not sure if committing a crime at sea would make me a pirate, but it felt right when I wrote it.

If it's true, and if I need not be arrested or convicted of a crime to be classified as a pirate, I may add this to my bucket list. Commit some petty crime — steal silverware from a riverboat cruise — so I can add "pirate" (or even better, "buccaneer") to my résumé.

*I was a criminal but if you're found not guilty were you never a criminal or a former criminal? actually I was definitely a criminal: mailbox baseball and stealing the shoes lots of other crimes — isn't everyone a criminal or am I just especially bad / list of crimes would be / story about a guy who commits a crime at sea just to be a pirate and wears an eye patch for effect /*

In 1991, I was arrested and tried for a crime I didn't commit. Even though I was ultimately found not guilty in a court of law, did my arrest make me a criminal? At least for a while?

What about all the crimes that I've committed over my lifetime but was never

caught or prosecuted for? Destroying private property in endless games of mailbox baseball (a game in which you score a home run by knocking a mailbox off its foundation with one blow from a baseball bat). Stealing shoes and a display table from a children's shoe store. Making and selling fake driver's licenses to underage college students. Picking up hitchhikers. Posing as a charity worker to steal money from would-be donors (a story that we will look at in close detail). Driving over a "No Parking" sign on the front lawn of a church. Smashing the windshield of my ex-stepfather's car multiple times.

Do these criminal acts make me a criminal? Is my list of unprosecuted crimes lengthier than most? Are these crimes more egregious than most? These are questions that might be worth exploring in a blog post or magazine piece.

*I used to walk the train tracks as a kid but I wouldn't want my kids to walk the tracks even though it must be safe, right? how does a train sneak up on you? Not possible /*

I really can't say how piracy and crime led me to memories of time spent walking the train tracks as a child, but it did. It's one of the benefits of Crash & Burn. It allows for random thoughts to enter your mind at any moment.

From a frighteningly early age, I was permitted to roam free, without any adult supervision. I would often leave my house just after sunrise, armed with a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich in a paper bag, and would not return home until dinnertime. And some of that freedom was spent — for reasons I can't explain today — walking with friends on the railroad tracks that cut through town. I hadn't thought of this memory for years until this Crash & Burn session.

I write for several magazines, including *Parents*. This feels like the basis for a parenting essay or perhaps a blog post.

*nail polish for women has weird and crazy names maybe I could do something with it / green red yellow blue gray / The Confederates wore gray uniforms, right? Seems like the least inspiring color — British wore red to conceal blood and make fellow soldiers /*

Once again, I can't explain how railroad tracks transitioned to nail polish, but this is Crash & Burn at its best. Random, incongruous, inexplicable thoughts colliding.

Regardless of how the mental leap was made, I happen to know a person whose job is to assign names to nail-polish colors. Something humorous could be done with these names, perhaps as part of my stand-up routine or as an amusing detail in a story.

*I took that ASVAB test and would love to see the results — I had no idea what kind of job I might have landed in military — thank God I didn't resign at 17 I wonder what / I took the pledge at 17 in a fake way and then had to take it again at 18 and refused thinking I would but does that make me a bad guy of some kind?/*

Thoughts of Civil War soldiers led me to memories of my encounter with the United States Army. When I was seventeen, I took the military placement test, accepted a position in the army, signed a contract, and swore an oath in front of an American flag.

I knew that the contract and oath were only symbolic. Since I was only seventeen, I knew I would need to re-sign my contract and have the oath readministered when I turned eighteen and became legally eligible to sign. The recruiter used the symbolic contract and oath as a bit of pomp and circumstance to make me feel committed to the army, but I knew exactly what I was doing: opening a door to an opportunity that I might or might not walk through upon graduation from high school.

Ultimately, I chose not to re-sign the contract. As you know, I moved in with Bengi. The recruiter was not happy. He and I had quite the verbal confrontation. It was one of my first real arguments with an adult who was not a parent or a teacher. There is probably a story to tell here, and I hadn't thought about that experience in years. I would also like to see the results of my testing, though they probably don't exist anymore.

*bad guy the black and the white is inconvenient Stephen King says that the side of the good is the side of the white which I like but sort of places it in unintentionally racist terms similar to “forgot the face of your father” is great but /*

The phrase *bad guy* triggered thoughts of the way that good and evil are characterized in Stephen King's Dark Tower series, which I had recently reread. King's characters refer to the side of the good as the side of the white. I like the nonreligious nature of this characterization, but it also feels a little racist. I wish it didn't.

Characters in the Dark Tower novels also say that a person who does a foolish thing has “forgotten the face of his father.” I like this expression a lot too, but it's admittedly patriarchal. I also wish it wasn't.

I can't imagine doing much with these bits.

*haven't read Dad's letter yet why am I so scared all I want is a relationship and /*

The phrase *the face of your father* caused me to think of the face of my own father. I rarely see my dad and barely know him, but he sent me a letter three weeks ago. I have yet to open the envelope. I'm afraid of what he may have said or not said in the letter, so it remains sealed. I'm protecting my heart, at least for now.

I feel this might be the start of a story. I'm probably in the midst of the story, still waiting for the end.

Addendum: I opened the letter two weeks after this Crash & Burn session. I was sitting in a movie theater with my wife, watching commercials flash across the

screen, when I removed the letter from my pocket, opened it, and read.

Elysha asked why I had chosen this odd moment to read my father's letter — in a movie theater minutes before the trailers were set to begin. I explained that if my father's words were disappointing or upsetting, I would have a two-hour comedy to help me forget my troubles. It was my way of protecting myself from possible pain. This has now become a story that I tell, beginning with the moment first recorded during my Crash & Burn session.

This was a productive session. Ten minutes of effort yielded:

- six potentially new stories
- three amusing anecdotes / possible stand-up bits
- three possible magazine articles / blog posts
- one possible addition to the résumé (pirate)

Stories are gold. Precious and priceless. Finding six potentially new stories is thrilling.

Even better, I recovered memories from my past that had been lost to me until I sat down to write. Forgotten moments that will remain with me now until the day I die.

With each recovered memory, my life feels more expansive and significant. The years gather greater meaning and purpose. Surprising, significant associations between the past and the present are discovered. My life becomes brighter and sharper and better with every memory that is uncovered.

The reason is simple: We are the sum of our experiences, the culmination of everything that has come before. The more we know about our past, the better we know ourselves. The greater our storehouse of memory, the more complete our personal narrative becomes. Our life begins to feel full and complete and important.

As I said, Crash & Burn is damn good for the soul.

Instead of the five minutes a day that I've asked you to dedicate to Homework for Life, this exercise requires about fifteen minutes at a time. Although I think it's a highly productive exercise, I realize that fifteen minutes every day is asking a lot.

*So I'm asking a lot.* Do it every day. Close Facebook and Twitter and Instagram. Ignore your children for a quarter hour. Turn off the television. Find a quiet room with a lock on the door. Make it the bathroom or a closet if necessary. Give everyone in your home a cookie and tell them to go away for a little while.

Author Zadie Smith says, "Protect the time and space in which you write. Keep everybody away from it, even the people who are most important to you." She's right. Storytellers must selfishly guard their time, especially from the people they love most.

Storytellers need to know how to tell a good story, but they also need good stories to tell. Lots of them. Crash & Burn will not only give you the content you will need, but it will change the way you perceive yourself and your life in the process.

Give me fifteen minutes a day, and I'll guarantee you some amazing results.

In case you were wondering, my father wrote me a beautiful and hilarious letter describing his recent foray into gardening. Avoiding the issues surrounding our relationship (or lack thereof), he offered me a glimpse into a life that I want to know better. Since that first letter, we have exchanged about a dozen in all and continue to write. I don't know if my father and I will ever be able to spend much time together or open our hearts to each other, but these letters have been a blessing for me, and, I hope, for him.

## STORY BREAK

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### **Storytelling Instruction Can Apparently Be Romantic**

In 2014, I was teaching a storytelling workshop in Hartford, Connecticut. There were about thirty people sitting in a group in front of me, and one by one, they were explaining what had brought them to the workshop on this day.

People attend my workshops for a wide range of reasons. There are business folks looking to improve their communication skills. Attorneys and doctors wanting to explain things better to clients and patients. Ministers and rabbis seeking ways to improve their sermons. Grandparents hoping to get their grandchildren to pay attention. Archivists with basements full of stuff that they want people to see. People looking to improve their dating prospects.

Knowing what has brought my students to a workshop can often help me cater to their needs. At this particular one, I had already learned that one couple had driven from Toronto and another man had driven from Philadelphia to spend the day with me.

I was not happy. I like a low bar. When people travel eight or ten hours to spend the day with you, the stakes are high.

I pointed to a couple in the front row that I thought I recognized. “And why are you two here?”

They explained that it was their wedding anniversary, and in lieu of a weekend in Vermont, they had chosen to spend their anniversary in my workshop. “We attend your Speak Up events all the time, so we thought this might be fun too.”

They had even brought a bottle of champagne.

It was an honor to have someone think that my workshop would be a good way to celebrate their anniversary.

It was also unfairly nerve-racking and set a bar way too high. I can be entertaining for ten or fifteen minutes onstage, but an eight-hour workshop? Not possible.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# First Last Best Worst: Great for Long Car Rides, First Dates, and Finding Stories

I spend a lot of time searching for stories. Perhaps you've noticed. In truth, if I retired from storytelling tomorrow, I'd still be on a relentless search for new stories.

Not only are stories the currency I need to continue entertaining audiences, but more importantly, finding new stories both *fills in* and *fills out* my life. They bring breadth and meaning to my life. Recalling a forgotten moment from your life or suddenly seeing it as more than what you once thought can expand the boundaries of your perceived life, while filling in gaps and connecting disparate memories into a more complete picture. Stories will both fill in the holes in the mental map of your life and help you to see how expansive that map truly is. It's priceless.

Let me explain. As you know, when I was eighteen years old, I was kicked out of my childhood home. I wasn't physically removed. My clothes weren't tossed onto the street. My parents didn't change the locks or stick a "No Trespassing" sign into the front lawn. The expectation was simply that I would move out and make my own way upon graduating from high school. To reinforce this expectation, I was given a set of bath towels and a microwave for my eighteenth birthday. Pots and pans and a toaster for Christmas. A vacuum cleaner on graduation day. The message was clear: it's time to hit the road, kid.

Despite an excellent GPA and a list of extracurricular activities that included champion pole-vaulter, middling bassoonist, op-ed writer for the school newspaper, and founder of the short-lived chess club, no parent, teacher, or guidance counselor ever spoke the word *college* to me. While my friends were being called out of class to discuss SAT scores, safety schools, and financial aid, I sat quietly at my desk and waited for my turn.

It never came. I'll never understand why. As a result, I came to believe that college was not meant for me. I would have to find my own way.

This was not going to be easy for me. I was not a terribly brave person. I was spectacularly unadventurous. I was a creature of routine and habit. I hardly felt equipped to take on the world. I grew up in a tiny town of less than five thousand people and rarely strayed beyond the town limits. My family never went on vacations, never went to the beach or the mountains or anywhere in between. I never traveled anywhere unless I was tagging along with friends or flying to California with the marching band. Now all of that ordinariness was about to be

upended with my graduation from high school. I was a small-town boy who needed to suddenly find his way in the world, and I wasn't close to being ready.

During my junior year, I took my first steps to try to secure my future. I applied for a job at a McDonald's restaurant in Milford, Massachusetts, and was hired on the spot. Within six months, I had been promoted to manager and was working full-time despite my full class load.

I turned out to have all the qualities needed in an effective restaurant manager. I was quick on my feet. Made good decisions. Kept my cool. I had the stamina required to work twelve-hour shifts without complaint. As the eldest of five and a longtime leader in the Boy Scouts, I had acquired an innate understanding of how to motivate a multitude of personalities. Most important, I had the desperate desire for someone — anyone — to finally notice me and acknowledge that I was capable of doing something well. As a result, I worked my ass off to become the best McDonald's manager I could possibly be. During my senior year of high school, I was named Manager of the Year for my regional district — an award never before given to a high-school student. I would win that award three years in a row.

By the time I graduated from high school, I had a secure, albeit low-paying job that I could depend upon. A stable source of income.

But I still had no home. No prospects for a future residence. No idea how to rent an apartment or find a roommate. When the world lacked an internet, information was at a premium, and I had none. While my friends were worrying about college-acceptance letters and prom dates, I spent my senior year worrying about where I would be living in June.

That all changed on that night in early May, when Bengi and I climbed into the cab of that idle bulldozer and planned our future together. Bengi was finishing his freshman year at Bryant University in nearby Smithfield, Rhode Island. Tired of living in the dorms, Bengi asked if I would be willing to move in with him off campus while he finished his last three years of school.

As you already know from chapter 2, I said yes. But what you don't know is that I practically shouted my answer into the night. I breathed an enormous sigh of relief. I had found my next home.

Bengi and I moved into a townhouse in Attleboro, Massachusetts, with a third friend named Tom, who lasted less than a year before returning home broke. Attleboro was equidistant from Bryant University and my restaurant, making it an ideal location for us, but neither one of us knew the area at all. We found a grocery store, two or three fast-food restaurants, a gas station, and the local dance club, all within a mile or two of our home. The town seemed small but sufficient. As teenage boys, we didn't need much.

I'd been living in Attleboro for about a year when I found myself driving down Route 152 — the main drag — and noticed that a long line of cars were turning left

at a traffic light. I'd driven through the intersection hundreds of times before but never considered where the left might take me. I got curious. I suddenly needed to know where this street led. So even though I was running late, I turned left and followed the procession of vehicles. I drove about half a mile down the street before reaching another traffic light. I looked left and right, wondering which way to turn, and I couldn't believe my eyes.

I had discovered another main drag, bigger than the one I'd just been driving on. Just from this spot in the intersection, I could see a McDonald's restaurant, a Kentucky Fried Chicken, a bowling alley, a pizza place, a sandwich shop, another grocery store, and much more. It was a whole new world of food, entertainment, and retail options almost within walking distance of our home.

Running even later now, I turned left and drove, taking inventory of the multitude of businesses that lined the street. I couldn't wait to tell Bengi of my discovery. As I passed a pair of gas stations, I saw the on-ramps to Interstate 495 — a highway I drove almost every day of my life — and just like that, enormous pieces of my mental map of the area clicked into place. Sections of one part of town connected with the other, and in an instant, my understanding of Attleboro's geography coalesced in my mind. A single exploratory turn had changed everything.

Something else far more important happened that day. A boy who had never driven far from home suddenly felt like an explorer. I hadn't traveled more than five miles from our townhouse, but this was the first time that I had followed a road just to see where it led. This was the first time I had driven into undiscovered territory for the purposes of discovery. I felt unfettered for the first time in my life. It was such a small, seemingly inconsequential decision, and yet it changed everything that was to follow.

Two weeks later I drove into Boston for the first time to see comedian Steven Wright perform. A city that once frightened me was suddenly just waiting to be explored. A month later I made my first trip into New York City to watch my beloved New York Yankees play the hated Boston Red Sox. Before long I was traveling throughout New England and beyond. The beaches and the mountains were all suddenly within reach. I traveled to New Hampshire for girls and New York for comedy. I drove to Virginia with a girlfriend on a whim to see the famed two-headed cow in their state fair. I drove to Ohio with Bengi to visit the Football Hall of Fame. I drove up and down the coast, from Maine to Florida, chasing girls, lying on beaches, and playing video games. I visited Disney World for the first time and old Yankee Stadium for the last time.

One left-hand turn had *filled in* my mental map of Attleboro and *filled out* all the other possibilities on the map. Where I once saw limits and danger, I now see endless possibility.

Finding stories from your life can have the same effect. They can fill in the

forgotten moments of your life while expanding your previously perceived boundaries. Moments that once lacked meaning and relevance can suddenly be recognized as critical and essential to your life story.

Make it your mission to find, see, remember, and identify stories, and you will begin to see your life in a new and more compelling light.

The last story-finding exercise — and one that's ideal for this filling-in and filling-out process — is adapted from an idea given to me by The Moth's artistic director, Catherine Burns. She shared this method for generating story ideas as we watched our children play in the museum one day, and I've since turned her idea into a workshop exercise that I use quite often.

It's called First Last Best Worst. All you need to play is pen and paper.

As you can see from the worksheet that follows, the top row of the page (the x-axis) is labeled with the words "First," "Last," "Best," and "Worst," along with a column labeled "Prompts." Along the left side of the page (the y-axis), the prompts are listed. The prompts are the possible triggers for memories.

*What was your first kiss?*

*What was your last kiss?*

*What was your best kiss?*

*What was your worst kiss?*

For each of these prompts, you fill in the word or words that indicate the answers to those questions. That's it.

The sheet here contains the list of prompts that I use most often in my beginner's workshops, and it also contains my responses.

Prompt	First	Last	Best	Worst
Kiss	Laura	Clara	Elysha	Sheila
Car	Datsun B210	Hyundai Tucson	1976 Chevy Malibu	Datsun B210
Pet	Measleman	Toby & Pluto	Kaleigh	Prudence
Trouble	Corner in kindergarten	Speeding ticket	Inciting riot upon myself	Arrested
Injury	Mysterious head wound	Elbow tendinitis	Pole-vault pole snaps	Datsun B210 accident
Gift	Puppy	12 dates for 12 months	Friends as family	Bath towels
Travel	Pasadena 1988	Lewiston, Maine	Honeymoon	Disney with Cushman

After completing my chart, I analyze it. Specifically, I ask myself three questions:

1. Do any entries appear more than once (the signal of a likely story)?
2. Could I turn any of these entries into useful anecdotes?

### 3. Could I turn any of these entries into fully realized stories?

I mark potential stories (or stories that I have already told) with an *S*. I mark potential anecdotes with an *A*. Below is the same sheet, now marked for possible stories and anecdotes.

Prompt	First	Last	Best	Worst
Kiss	Laura (S)	Clara	Elysha (S)	Sheila (S)
Car	Datsun B210 (S)	Hyundai Tucson	1976 Chevy Malibu (S)	Datsun B210 (S)
Pet	Measleman (S)	Toby & Pluto (S)	Kaleigh (S)	Prudence (S)
Trouble	Corner in kindergarten (S)	Speeding ticket	Inciting riot upon myself (S)	Arrested (S)
Injury	Mysterious head wound (A)	Elbow tendinitis	Pole-vault pole snaps	Datsun B210 accident (S)
Gift	Puppy	12 dates for 12 months	Friends as family (S)	Bath towels (S)
Travel	Pasadena 1988 (S)	Lewiston, Maine (A)	Honeymoon (S)	Disney with Cushman (S)

Here are some details of the analysis: The Datsun B210 appears three times on the chart, and the best gift entry, “Friends as family,” also pertains to the Datsun. These four entries are all related to “This Is Going to Suck,” the story of one of my near-death experiences as the result of a car accident. I won a Moth GrandSLAM championship with this story, and it’s been featured on *The Moth Radio Hour* several times.

My worst gift, bath towels, will be part of the sequel to “This Is Going to Suck,” which will tell the hilarious and heartbreaking story of Christmas Day spent in the pediatric ward of the hospital following the accident.

My first kiss entry, “Laura,” and my first travel entry, “Pasadena 1988,” are also related. My first kiss took place in Pasadena, California, on January 1, 1988, with my high-school sweetheart, Laura Marchand. I told the story of that kiss (“The Promise”) at a Moth GrandSLAM championship, and it’s also been featured on *The Moth Radio Hour*. It’s one of my most popular and most requested stories.

I’ve also told stories related to my best car (1976 Chevy Malibu), my worst pet (Prudence), my first trouble (corner in kindergarten), my best trouble (inciting riot upon myself), and my worst trouble (arrest) at Moth GrandSLAM championships in New York and Boston, winning two of them.

I have yet to tell the story of my best kiss (Elysha), my worst kiss (Sheila), my first pet (Measleman), my best pet (Kaleigh, who has at least three stories attached to her), my best travel (honeymoon), my last pets (Toby & Pluto), or my worst travel (Disney with Cushman). All have great potential and will likely be told as stories onstage someday.

The anecdote called “Mysterious head wound” relates to an incident that

happened when I was three years old. I emerged from my bedroom with a gaping wound in my forehead that left me with my first set of stitches and a cross-shaped scar on my forehead (which was later obliterated when I went through the windshield of a Datsun B210). My parents were never able to determine the cause of the injury. I think it could make for an interesting anecdote in a story about the brief period when my parents were still married and the few precious memories I have from that time.

The other anecdote (Lewiston, Maine) is from a recent trip I took to perform in Maine, where I met a young Muslim woman who confirmed that she was gay by watching lesbian pornography on a laptop provided by her school. I'm not sure how that might fit into a story, but it's interesting enough to me to add to my list.

In all, nineteen of the twenty-eight possible entries could be told as stories. This is admittedly a high percentage, but there are two things to keep in mind:

1. I have a highly developed lens for stories. I may be able to see them in moments where you cannot yet. But if you're doing your Homework for Life, you will develop a similar lens before long.
2. These are highly suggestive prompts that typically generate lots of ideas. I use them in workshops for that reason. They are prime real estate for finding stories.

Recently a class challenged me to complete a chart of prompts that they assigned, wondering if I would be as effective if given more challenging prompts. Here is what that chart looked like:

Prompt	First	Last	Best	Worst
Tree	Oak at bottom of driveway (S)	Sarah (S)	Grandma's pine grove	Emma (S)
Toaster			Threw at Mike (S)	Christmas present (S)
Monopoly	Making our own board (A)		Slumlord	Bengi conspires against me (A)
Flag	Cub Scouts with Mrs. Dunne	Veteran's Day	Nathan forced to pledge (S)	Nathan forced to pledge (S)
Socks		Sock lesson in class	Electric socks for Mom (S)	Socks as mittens (A)

The results are admittedly not as good. I have blanks in several places, where I simply had no memory of a moment that fits the prompt. Still, I managed to find eight stories in twenty possible prompts (though it's not actually eight, because some of these items apply to the same story).

My last and worst trees (Sarah and Emma) are trees in the front yard of my home. My daughter, Clara, named the trees and fell in love with them more than any person has loved a tree. When Emma became diseased a few years ago, she had to be taken down, breaking Clara's heart. She still walks over the spot where

Emma once stood and grieves the loss. I could turn this into a sweet story about my sensitive, perhaps oversensitive, daughter.

My first tree, the oak at the bottom of my childhood driveway, is already featured in a story entitled “My Sister and the Toilet,” and it could easily appear in other stories as well. It was the tree my siblings and I stood beneath for years while waiting for the school bus, and many things happened during those long waits.

The best toaster was thrown at a guy named Mike who was trying to leave a party at the Heavy Metal Playhouse while intoxicated. I eventually blocked his car with mine, hoping that he would give up and agree to stay. Instead he began ramming his rear bumper into my car until I finally moved it.

My worst toaster was one of the gifts my parents gave me in preparation for my departure after graduation, and therefore it will be part of the sequel to “This Is Going to Suck.”

The best and worst flags are the same flag. Years ago, one of my fifth-grade students — a boy named Nathan — decided to exercise his right to not pledge allegiance to the flag each morning in protest of the reference to God in the pledge. While his classmates stood with their hands over their hearts, Nathan remained seated and silent. His silent protest went almost unnoticed until I was absent one day and my substitute teacher forced him to stand and pledge allegiance. Nathan attempted to protest, but the teacher refused to listen. The entire class was so outraged by this unfair demand that they refused to pledge allegiance to the flag for the rest of the school year, in support of Nathan and in protest of what had been done to him.

This was a Moth StorySLAM winner. When I told that story in Connecticut, Nathan was in the audience with his family. His father wept.

“Electric socks for Mom” were the socks worn by my mother after she had seriously injured her back while working in a hospital pharmacy. Instead of settling her disability claim, the hospital administrators forced her to accept a job as a security guard (a job they deemed possible with her back injury), even though she was barely five feet tall and weighed eighty-nine pounds. They were hoping to get her to quit rather than pay her claim. They forced her to work outdoors during the winter, and it was her battery-powered electric socks — equipped with enormous D batteries — that kept her feet warm enough to make it through the winter before the hospital officials finally capitulated and settled her claim. It’s a story about my inability to help my mother in her direst hour, and I had forgotten it until my class offered me the prompt.

As you can see, I also found three new anecdotes — two completely forgotten until prompted — making it a highly productive First Last Best Worst session for me (much to the dismay of my students, who were hoping to prove me wrong). Even when the prompts are intentionally uninteresting, First Last Best Worst works.

First Last Best Worst is a game that can be played many ways. For someone on the hunt for stories, you can play alone, as I often do. Prompt yourself, using objects in the room, a random page in a dictionary, or ideas you hear on the television or a podcast.

In class, we use First Last Best Worst as an improv game. You are given a prompt and must tell a story using the first, last, best, or worst version of that prompt. Not only does it generate storytelling ideas, but in class it helps promote extemporaneous-speaking skills and teaches my students to utilize the skills and strategies we learn in class without rehearsal. The best storytellers can spin a hilarious and heartbreak tale with little or no preparation. Eventually it becomes as natural as walking or breathing. That is what I want each of my students to be able to do.

First Last Best Worst is also an excellent game for long car rides, first dates, or other moments of potential awkwardness and silence, or simply as a means of getting to know a person better. Regardless of where or how you play, I promise you that it will generate story ideas for you, and more importantly, you will find yourself *filling in* and *filling out* your life, making connections never seen before and expanding your memory beyond what you might have thought possible.

I've given you three tools to find stories.

- Homework for Life
- Crash & Burn
- First Last Best Worst

Do all three with regularity and fidelity, and you will find yourself drowning in stories before long. Your list of potential stories will grow beyond your ability to tell them all. What a wonderful problem to have.

Now it's time to learn to craft a story.

## Part II

# Crafting Your Story

The most powerful person in the world is the storyteller. The storyteller sets the vision, values and agenda of an entire generation that is to come.

— Steve Jobs

Tell me the facts and I'll learn. Tell me the truth and I'll believe. But tell me a story and it will live in my heart forever.

— Ancient proverb

There are people who write every now and then. And there are writers who are people every now and then.

— Dan Kennedy

## CHAPTER SIX

# “Charity Thief”

I’m starting part 2 of this book with a story because I’ll be using it to model the skills and strategies that follow. This doesn’t mean that it’s my best or my most popular story. It’s simply one of my most crafted stories. Perfect for teaching.

I first told it at a Moth StorySLAM in New York City. I finished in second place (and had a memorable encounter with The Moth founder George Dawes Green, which I will discuss in a later chapter), then I recrafted the story and told it at a Moth StorySLAM in Cambridge, Massachusetts. My name was drawn first that night. Although I ended up with the spot most loathed by storytellers, I won the slam — the only time I’ve ever won (or seen anyone win) from first position.

The story is transcribed from a performance at one of my shows and is lightly edited for the page. I mention this because stories that are told orally differ greatly from stories written for the page. You’ll see that there is less formality and more repetition. I’ve left all of these elements here to give you a sense of what the live version sounds like. You can also listen to the live version of the story on the “Storyworthy the Book” YouTube channel.

It’s the fall of 1991. I’m twenty years old. I’m driving down a lonely stretch of New Hampshire highway. I’m driving home from the very first booty call of my entire life, and I’m excited because I don’t know that this is also going to be the very last booty call of my entire life.

It’s in this moment of excitement that the right front tire of my 1976 Chevy Malibu blows out, but it doesn’t just deflate. It disintegrates. It throws rubber and wire across the road in a way I didn’t think was possible, and it takes everything I have to get the car over to the shoulder and to a stop.

And it’s 1991. I don’t have a cell phone. I don’t have a spare tire. I haven’t seen a car on this stretch of road for a long time. So I do the only thing I can think of doing: I start hiking back up the road to search for help.

Seven hours later, after having given all my money to a half-naked mountain man named Winston in exchange for a balding spare tire, I’m back on the road, heading home, a hundred miles between me and my apartment in Attleboro, Massachusetts, when I look at the instrument panel and see that I have no gas.

All the money I had — every penny to my name — is in the hands of a half-naked mountain man. I don’t have a credit card. I don’t have an ATM card. I don’t even have a checking account.

So I take the next exit and roll my car into a Citgo station, and as I park the car on the edge of the lot, facing a field of fall foliage, I grip the steering wheel in

anger. I'm angry, but I'm also sad. I'm twenty years old. I'm a McDonald's manager. I make \$7.25 an hour, and I am the richest person I know. My mother is living on welfare with my pregnant teenage sister. My brother joined the army a year ago, and I haven't heard from him since. My father disappeared from my life ten years ago. The only person I know who can help me, who even has a credit card or a car that can make this hundred-mile trip to New Hampshire, is my friend Bengi, and he is off on some college weekend. I can't get in touch with him, because in 1991, when you want to call someone, you need to make a phone ring on a wall, and you need to make that phone ring at the moment the person you want to speak to is near that phone, and you need the number for the phone to make it ring, and all of that is impossible for me to get.

This was not the plan for my life. I'm sitting behind the wheel, staring into a field of bright colors, yet I feel anything but bright. I was not supposed to be this alone this early in my life. You're not supposed to be twenty years old and have absolutely no one in your life to call for help. As I sit there in my car, staring into that field of orange and yellow, I see my future ahead of me. An endless series of moments just like this one, when I need help but will have none.

So I make a plan. I'm going to beg for gas, because it's 1991. Gas is eighty-five cents a gallon, so eight dollars is all I need to get me home. I'll offer my license, my wallet, everything in my car as collateral in exchange for eight dollars' worth of gas and the promise that I will return and repay the money and more. Whatever it takes.

So I rehearse my pitch, take a deep breath, and walk in. There's a kid behind the counter, probably about my age. I tell him my problem. I ask him to help. I make my offer. The kid refuses. He doesn't want to risk his job.

So I leave. I go back to my car. My plan is simple. I'm going to wait for this kid to go home. Wait for the next person to come on duty, and while I wait, I'll refine my pitch. I'll beg again. I'll beg until someone, anyone, gives me some money for gas. But as I climb back into the car, I see my crumpled McDonald's uniform on the backseat, and I suddenly have an idea.

An hour later, I'm standing on the porch of a small, red-brick house on a quiet residential street. I'm knocking on a blue door.

I'm wearing my McDonald's manager's uniform. Blue shirt. Blue pants. Blue tie. Gold name badge. I'm holding a gray McDonald's briefcase with a big *M* engraved on the front like a shield.

I knock on that blue door again.

When the door opens, a man is standing in front of me. He looks about fifty, but he might as well be five hundred. He's one of these guys who looks as if he has all the wisdom of the world wrapped up in him, and in that moment, I know that he knows that I'm about to do something terrible.

And I agree. This is a terrible idea. I know this now.

But it's two o'clock on a Sunday afternoon. I'm standing on his porch in a McDonald's uniform. It's one of those moments when you realize that the only way to get out of a terrible situation is to go through with it. So I take another deep breath and say, "Hi, I'm Matt, and I'm collecting money for Ronald McDonald Children's Charities."

The man doesn't move. He doesn't say a word. He's like Stonehenge. Frozen in time and forever waiting for this moment. Waiting for me to arrive.

The next words that come out of my mouth surprise me as much as they surprise him, because they are completely unplanned. "My mom died of cancer when I was a little boy, and now my sister is dying of cancer, and I'm just trying to do whatever I can to help."

The man finally moves. He points his finger at me and says, "You stay right there." Then he walks back into his house, and I know what he's doing. He's calling the police, and they will come and arrest me for stealing money from McDonald's (which will actually happen two years later, but not on this day). On this day, he returns to the door with a twenty-dollar bill in his hand, which is like \$20,000 to me on this day. As I raise my hand to say, "No, it's too much," he says, "No. My wife, Lisa, died of cancer five years ago."

Now it's my turn to freeze.

He keeps talking. He tells me about her cancer. Her death. He tells me that his two kids came back from California for the funeral, but he hasn't seen them since that day. He says that the last two years of Lisa's life were hard, but it was the very last year that he regrets the most. He tells me how hard his wife fought to stay alive, and he wishes now that he could have told her that it was okay to go, but he loved her too much to say the words.

Before I realize what is happening, I'm sitting on the porch with this man as he spills his guts to me, and in that moment, I know that I am, without a doubt, the single worst person on the face of the earth.

The man talks to me for twenty minutes about his wife and his children, and when he's done, he hugs me as if he hasn't hugged a person in five years. Then he presses the twenty-dollar bill into my hand. It feels like poison now.

I say good-bye. I walk down the stone path, up the street, and back to the gas station. I use his money to put gas in my car, and I hit the road, once again heading in the direction of home. And as I pull onto the highway, I remember the last time I was sitting behind this wheel, just an hour or so ago, feeling lonely, worried that I would be alone for the rest of my life. Now I know how stupid I was, because tonight I'll sit with my friends in the living room and eat pizza, drink beer, and watch *The Simpsons*.

But that man — he will be alone tonight behind that blue door. He'll be alone

tonight and tomorrow night and probably for many, many more nights. I leave New Hampshire knowing that I know nothing about loneliness, but also knowing that I never want to know about loneliness the way that man understood it that day and will probably understand it for many, many days thereafter.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Every Story Takes Only Five Seconds to Tell (and *Jurassic Park* Wasn't a Movie about Dinosaurs)

There are many secrets to storytelling, but there is one fundamental truth above all others that must be understood before a storyteller can ever be successful:

All great stories — regardless of length or depth or tone — tell the story of a five-second moment in a person's life.

Got that?

Let me say it again: Every great story ever told is essentially about a five-second moment in the life of a human being, and the purpose of the story is to bring that moment to the greatest clarity possible.

I know this sounds a little ridiculous, but it's absolutely true. Also, rejoice! This truth — once understood and embraced — makes the storyteller's job much easier.

These five-second moments are the moments in your life when something fundamentally changes forever. You fall in love. You fall out of love. You discover something new about yourself or another person. Your opinion on a subject dramatically changes. You find forgiveness. You reach acceptance. You sink into despair. You grudgingly resign. You're drowned in regret. You make a life-altering decision. Choose a new path. Accomplish something great. Fail spectacularly.

These are the moments that make great stories. They are the moments that we seek when doing our Homework for Life. They are often small and sudden and powerful. These are the best stories. They are the only stories worth telling.

In "Charity Thief," my five-second moment comes when I realize that I know nothing about loneliness, and more importantly, I never want to know loneliness in the way that man in New Hampshire knew it on that day. In the story, that moment happens when he tells me that his wife, Lisa, has died of cancer and that his children haven't returned home in more than five years. I can still remember that moment as if it were yesterday. As he spoke those words to me on that tiny porch, I felt my heart sink. All the strength in my body left me. At that moment I was sure that I was the worst person on the planet. It was the moment when I understood how truly stupid, self-absorbed, and selfcentered I was.

That is the purpose of my story. I'm trying to tell my audience that there was a time in my life when I felt alone and lost, thinking that I was facing a lifetime of solitude, only to discover how foolish and blind I was to feel that way. The rest of

the story is crafted to serve that singular moment in time and only that moment. Anything in the story that doesn't help bring that moment to the greatest clarity possible is marginalized, shaded, or removed entirely. Anything that helps bring clarity to that moment is strengthened and highlighted.

We'll talk about lies of omission in a coming chapter, and you will see how much I have left out of that story for the sake of my five-second moment. You'll see how much I have left on the cutting-room floor to bring my five-second moment to the greatest clarity possible.

Understanding that stories are about tiny moments is the bedrock upon which all storytelling is built, and yet this is what people fail to understand most when thinking about a story. Instead they believe that if something interesting or incredible or unbelievable has happened to them, they have a great story to tell. Not true.

Think about the story that I mentioned in chapter 3 about my secret childhood hunger. In that story, my wife tells me she knows that I was hungry as a boy. She has uncovered my lifelong secret. The full version of that story runs about seven minutes (and can be seen on the "Storyworthy the Book" YouTube channel), but it all boils down to that singular moment at a dining-room table with my wife. Everything else I chose to include in the story only serves to bring that moment to the greatest possible clarity.

In the complete version, I describe the food insecurity that I experienced so often as a boy. I make you laugh when I tell about all the clever and bizarre ways that I managed to find food for my siblings and myself. I introduce you to my wife and kids. I talk about my marriage. I show you my unending frustration over Charlie's throwing food. All of this seeks to bring you as close to seeing and experiencing that five-second moment with as much clarity as possible. I want you to understand its weight. Feel its power. I want you to feel as if you are sitting at that table with us. If I'm good, you may even feel something akin to what I felt in that moment.

It's a story that makes people laugh and weep. It's one of my most-requested stories, and yet the moment is tiny. A few words spoken by a wife to a husband at the dinner table. A moment that would possibly have been forgotten if I hadn't been doing my Homework for Life. Yet it was one of the most important moments of my life. It's the moment I realized that my wife knows my heart better than I do. I'm so grateful that I was able to see it for what it was.

Many times storytellers fail to understand the importance of these five-second moments. They see the big when they should be looking for the small. They come to me and say, "I went to Tanzania last summer. I want to tell that story onstage."

My answer is always the same: No. Visiting Tanzania is not a story. Your ability to travel the world does not mean that you can tell a good story or even have a good story to tell. But if something happened in Tanzania that altered you in

some deep and fundamental way, then you might have a story. If you experienced a five-second moment in Tanzania, you might have something. Think of it this way: If we remove Tanzania from the story, do you still have a story worth telling?

If the answer is no, then you probably don't have a story. If the answer is yes, you might have something I want to hear.

A storyteller and friend named Christina O'Sullivan tells a story about her trip to Laos in her early twenties. She climbs a mountain and discovers a one-room schoolhouse in a monastery at the summit. Inside are thirty boys and one girl, along with their teacher, who is a man. She's invited to stay and visit. She meets children more invested in their education than she has ever been. She learns why there is only one little girl in the classroom. In doing so, she discovers something fundamental about herself that changes her outlook on life forever.

This is a great story, because if we remove Laos completely, Christina still has a story to tell. It does not rely on an exotic locale or unusual food. It doesn't depend upon an audience's interest in a foreign culture. The story hinges upon Christina's five-second moment in that school, and that school could have been anywhere. It could have been in her hometown.

Years ago I sat on a panel of Moth storytellers and producers, listening to storytellers pitch their stories as part of The Moth's book tour for their first collection. A man told us about a time in his childhood when he drove his father's truck through the garage and into a swimming pool. It was a story filled with excitement, suspense, and humor. He pitched it well. When he finished, one of the producers asked the man what that story meant to him. "How did it change your life?"

The man explained that whenever he's sitting on a barstool or eating dinner with friends, he knows that he has a story that can make people laugh.

"Yes," the producer said. "But did the experience fundamentally change you in some way?"

"Yes," the man said. "I always have a good story to tell. Something to make people laugh. I love that."

The producer explained that this man had more of a romp than a story. A romp is an entertaining and amusing anecdote — often longer than you might imagine an anecdote to be — but not something that will move an audience emotionally. There was no resonance to his story. No lasting effect. Nothing for the audience to connect to. It was fun and exciting and surprising, but it was unlikely to remain in the hearts of the audience in the way a good story can. He had no five-second moment, so the story could never be great.

These five-second moments can also be found in film and literature. My favorite example (and one I will refer to again and again in this book, so you should probably go and watch the film) is the original *Jurassic Park*, written by

Michael Crichton and David Koepp and directed by Steven Spielberg. That movie was an enormous success, and most people assumed that it was because the dinosaurs had been rendered by computer-generated imagery and looked truly lifelike for the first time in Hollywood history.

Nope.

In fact *Jurassic Park* is not a movie about dinosaurs at all. Crichton, Koepp, and Spielberg use the dinosaurs to entertain and excite their audience, raising the stakes and building suspense (more on this later), but the dinosaurs are not at the heart of the story. The five-second moment in that movie has nothing to do with dinosaurs at all.

*Jurassic Park* is a movie about a paleontologist named Alan Grant, who is in love with a paleobotanist named Ellie Sattler. Grant and Sattler are a couple, but they are not married. It appears that the primary sticking point in their relationship is Grant's unwillingness to entertain the thought of having kids. In fact, he does not like children at all, much to Sattler's disappointment. He considers them noisy, time-consuming, boring, and expensive. He says that they smell. In one of the first scenes of the film, he explains to a small boy about how a dinosaur might eviscerate him, using a fossilized dinosaur claw to demonstrate.

Over the course of the movie, Grant finds himself thrust into the company of two children, and ultimately he and these two kids must survive *Jurassic Park* on their own. Grant risks his life repeatedly to save these children, and as he gets to know them, he discovers a surprising affection for each one. The boy, Tim, is adventurous and bumbling, and he loves dinosaurs as much as Grant himself. The girl, Lex, is an old soul. Mature and wise. Skilled with technology. Surprisingly calm in the face of danger.

Grant slowly comes to understand that these children are not just smelly, expensive pests. They are interesting and compelling human beings, despite their youth and small stature.

The five-second moment in the film happens when Grant and the two children are perched in a tree, resting for the night. Grant has Tim and Lex nestled in each arm as he talks to them about the plant-eating dinosaurs that they've just fed by hand.

Here's how the original screenplay reads:

Satisfied, Tim settles in for the night. Grant shifts too, getting comfortable, but something in his pocket pinches him. He winces and digs it out. It's the velociraptor claw he unearthed so long ago in Montana. Yesterday, actually. He looks at it, thinking a million thoughts, staring at this thing that used to be so priceless.

LEX

What are you gonna do now if you don't have to dig up dinosaur bones any

more?

GRANT I guess we'll just have to evolve too.

TIM What do you call a blind dinosaur?

GRANT I don't know. What do you call a blind dinosaur?

TIM A Do-you-think-he-saurus. What do you call a blind dinosaur's dog?

GRANT You got me.

TIM A Do-you-think-he-saurus Rex.

Grant laughs. Both kids finally close their eyes, but after a moment, Lex pops hers open again.

LEX What if the dinosaur comes back while we're all asleep?

GRANT I'll stay awake.

LEX (skeptical) All night?

GRANT All night.

Grant lets the claw fall to the ground.

It's important to remember that Grant used this same claw at the beginning of the film to frighten the boy he didn't like. It's a boy he thought was smelly and stupid. Now he has let his fossilized claw go. Instead of holding on to this precious bit of ancient dinosaur, Grant is now holding on to children — one who made him laugh a moment ago and the other whom he has comforted like a father. This is Grant's five-second moment. It's the most important moment of the film. It's a moment of true transformation. This is why he tells Lex that he will have to evolve too. The word *evolve* is important and purposeful. Grant has already evolved. He sees these children as something new and wonderful. His genuine laughter at Tim's joke, his comforting assurances to Lex, and his release of the fossil are all designed to signal this momentous change. These are the indicators of Grant's five-second moment, and therefore form the climax of the story.

Grant likes children. In fact, he loves these two, and he could presumably love others. As a result, he and Sattler will live happily ever after.

This is the end of the movie. More must happen, but only because Grant's story of transformation is set in an action-adventure film on an island full of dinosaurs. As a result, there is unfinished business. Exciting encounters with velociraptors and electric fences and walk-in coolers. But the rest of the film only seeks to wrap things up.

How will they escape the island? Who will live and who will die (though if you know anything about storytelling, you would have known this right from the start)? How will our heroes conquer these impossible odds?

But none of that is important to the story. In this tree, Alan Grant changes his feelings about children. He likes them. Loves them, even. Story over.

Imagine if I asked you to join me for a movie about a middle-aged man who must learn to appreciate and love children so he can secure his relationship with the woman he loves. Would you be excited about the offer?

Probably not. But place that heartfelt, deeply resonant story on an island full of dinosaurs, and your opinion may change. And you'll probably leave the theater thinking that the movie was great. You'll find it lingering in your mind and heart longer than any dinosaur movie before or since. You'll think it was because of the action and suspense, and that might be some of it, but deep in your bones, you'll love the story because it wasn't about dinosaurs. It was about transformation and love.

Another example: *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, the first (and best) of Spielberg's Indiana Jones films. You might think it's a story about a man who is trying to find a religious artifact before the Nazis can get their hands on it. You might even think that it's a love story between Indy and Marion.

Nope. *Raiders of the Lost Ark* is a story about a man who lacks faith. He does not believe in God. Indiana Jones is all science and no spirituality. Then, in his most desperate moment, he finds faith when he needs it most.

That is the real story of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. It's a story about a scientist who finds God.

Don't believe me?

In the beginning of the film, Indy makes it clear that he doesn't believe in all of the supposed religious power contained in the Ark of the Covenant. He's hunting for it because of its historical value and not because of its potential to alter the course of World War II. When a military officer asks if the Ark of the Covenant contains the actual Ten Commandments, he says, "Yes, the actual Ten Commandments. The original stone tablets that Moses brought down from Mount Horeb and smashed, if you believe that sort of thing."

"If you believe that sort of thing." It's clear that Indy does not.

When the officer asks Indy about the light emanating from the ark in a picture that he shows them, Indy says: "Who knows . . . lightning . . . fire . . . the power of God or something."

Indy is dismissive. He is clearly not a believer. He regards lightning, fire, and the power of God as one and the same. This is just a picture to Indy. It doesn't represent the truth of the ark in any way. The tone of his voice speaks of a lack of

faith of any kind.

Yet at the end of the film, as the Nazis are about to open the ark for the first time, Indy, who is now tied to a pole with Marion, closes his eyes and tells Marion to do the same. He warns her to look away. If the ark was merely an artifact, Indy the scientist would want nothing more than to see what it contained. He's spent the entire movie risking his life for this very moment.

But this does not happen. Instead the scientist has become a believer. Just as the ark is about to be opened, Indy finds faith in its power (and therefore in God), and it's his newfound faith that saves his and Marion's lives. The Nazis die, faces melting off their skulls, leaving only Indy and Marion alive.

This is Indy's five-second moment. The moment he finds faith. The moment he believes in the power of God.

This is how most big stories operate. At least the good ones. Big stories contain these tiny, utterly human moments. We may be fooled by whips and snakes and car chases, but if it's a good story, our protagonist is going to experience something deep and meaningful that resonates with the audience, even if the audience doesn't fully realize it.

Another one of my more popular stories is one called "This Is Going to Suck." I will tell it in full in chapter 13 (and you can watch it on the "Storyworthy the Book" YouTube channel), but essentially it's a story about an event that took place in my life when I was seventeen years old. On December 23, 1988, I was involved in a head-on collision — 1976 Datsun B210 versus Mercedes-Benz — that sent my head through the windshield and embedded my legs in the underside of the dashboard. Minutes after the accident, I was dead. I was lying on the side of the road without a pulse or respiration. Paramedics administered CPR and brought me back to life. All this sounds like the makings of a great story, but the story isn't about the car accident at all.

Like *Jurassic Park*, the real story isn't about the big thing. In fact, when people talk to me about the story, they rarely mention the car accident or my near-death experience. Instead, they speak about my five-second moment, when I find myself alone in the emergency room two hours after the accident, waiting for surgeons to operate on my ruined legs. Upon hearing that I was in stable condition, my parents decide to check on the car before checking on me, leaving me alone, frightened, and in terrible pain in the corner of a cold, sterile emergency room.

Except it turns out that I'm not alone, because my friends from McDonald's find out about the accident and quickly fill the waiting room, making the kind of noise that only a gang of teenagers can make. When nurses realize that my parents aren't going to make it to the hospital before I am rolled into surgery, they push my gurney to the other side of the emergency room, prop open the double doors to the waiting area, and allow my friends to stand in the doorway to see me. The girls tell me that they love me, the boys shout extremely inappropriate things to make me

laugh, and they chant my name as I am rolled down the hall to the operating room.

This was my five-second moment. It was the moment when I realized that I had family after all. My friends were my family, and they remained the only family I had and the only family I needed until I met my wife fifteen years later. It might be the greatest five-second moment of my life.

Audiences cry when I describe the opening of those double doors. If I'm not careful, I often tear up myself. But no one ever mentions the accident or my death or my miraculous return to the land of the living. The moment that they connect with is the moment those emergency-room doors open and I discover that I am not alone.

The accident itself is like the dinosaurs of *Jurassic Park* or the car chases and poisonous snakes in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. It's big and compelling and remarkable, but it's ultimately just a car accident. Without my friends showing up in the emergency room when I needed them most, it's just another car-crash story. Turn on the news at 11:00 PM and you'll see that they are a dime a dozen.

Without my friends arriving at my time of need, there is little for the audience to connect to. But add my friends to the mix, and everything changes. We've all felt alone at some point in our lives. We've all been let down by loved ones, perhaps even by our parents. We've all had moments when we are unexpectedly lifted from pain or despair by the kindness of a friend. This is what people connect to. Few people will ever understand what it's like to crash through a windshield or awaken to paramedics performing CPR on your body. But feeling alone? Forgotten? Lost? We all know that feeling.

Without Alan Grant's transformation from a man who despises children to a man who loves them, *Jurassic Park* is just another dinosaur movie in a long line of dinosaur movies, simply with better special effects. None of us will ever know what it's like to be chased by dinosaurs or electrified by fences or trapped in a kitchen with velociraptors. But we all know what it's like to have something large and seemingly implacable standing between us and love. We all know what it's like to want something that the love of our life does not. We all understand how difficult relationships can be and the joy that comes with finally making them work.

If you think you have a story, ask yourself: Does it contain a five-second moment? A moment of true transformation? Your five-second moment may be difficult to find. You may have to dig for it. I was more than three years into my storytelling career when I finally told "This Is Going to Suck."

Why? It took me that long to realize that the story shouldn't end in the back of the ambulance. You might think that a story with a near-death experience should end with the near-death experience. For a long time I did. How could that not be the most important moment? It's hard to imagine that a person's death and return to life might not be the most compelling part of a story, but in my story, it's not.

It's merely a necessary detail to get me to the end. The real ending takes place in the emergency room.

Besides, with near-death experiences, you don't realize that you're dead or dying until after the fact. In both of my experiences, when my heart stopped beating and I stopped breathing, I had no idea that I had died. I was only told much later about how close I had come to death.

If you're not aware that you are dying, there is no moment of change or transformation. It's a simple matter of slipping from consciousness to unconsciousness to death. Thus no five-second moment.

Similarly, it took me more than five years to tell the story of my arrest and near-confession for a crime I didn't commit, because that story also lacked a five-second moment. When I finally told that story in a Moth GrandSLAM championship in 2016, my fellow storytellers came to me after the show and said, "You were arrested and tried for a crime you didn't commit, and it took you five years to tell the story?"

"Yes," I said. "Until this week, I didn't know how to tell it."

If possible, go listen to that story on the "Storyworthy the Book" YouTube channel before reading on.

In that story, it wasn't until I thought long and hard about that period of my life that I realized that the interrogations, the police intimidation, my near-decision to confess to the crime out of fear, my arrest, and my trial were not the most important parts of that story. In the end, it's a story about standing in a mop sink in a dark closet in the basement of a police station, trying to decide if I should confess to a crime I didn't commit. In a moment of desperation, I ask a God I don't believe in for help, and, a little like Indiana Jones, I somehow receive an answer. It's a story about a young man taking one step closer to a faith that has eluded him for so long.

It's a tiny moment in an enormous story filled with police officers, interrogation rooms, handcuffs, jail cells, and a courtroom trial, but what people rightly remember about that story is my five-second moment in a darkened closet when I was alone and calling out for help. And it took me five years to find it.

So dig. Search. Hunt. Fight for the five-second moment. Allow yourself to recall the entire event. Don't get hung up on the big moments, the unbelievable circumstances, or the hilarious details. Seek out the moments when you felt your heart move. When something changed forever, even if that moment seems minuscule compared to the rest of the story.

That will be your five-second moment. Until you have it, you don't have a story.

When you find it, you're ready to begin crafting your story.

## STORY BREAK

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### **This Book Is Going to Make Erin Barker Very Angry**

Sometime in the second year of my storytelling career, I’m sitting at the bar with Erin Barker, a two-time Moth GrandSLAM champion, one of the finest storytellers I know, and the host of the Story Collider, a storytelling show featuring scientists and science-related themes. I’m performing in her show tonight, telling a story about my high-school biology teacher.

“I heard you won the slam last night,” she says, referencing a Moth StorySLAM at The Bell House in Brooklyn the night before.

“I did,” I say. “But I almost lost to a stand-up. He was funny as hell but just didn’t have enough story. But he came close. If I had five or ten minutes with him, I could turn him into a really good storyteller.”

Erin grabs me by the wrist and pulls me in close. “Don’t you ever give away our secrets.”

I loved Erin’s reaction. When it comes to story slams, I am exceptionally competitive. I want to win every time. For a while, this made me feel like the biggest jerk in town. But it turns out that most of my favorite storytellers, Erin included, are just as competitive as I am when it comes to competitive storytelling. We want to win. We want to be recognized as the best.

For the first four years of my storytelling career, my sights were set on storyteller extraordinaire Adam Wade, who had won a then-record twenty Moth StorySLAMs before retiring from the slam circuit.

My win total at the time of this writing is thirty-four. I’m not sure if this is a record. The Moth now hosts StorySLAMs in more than two dozen cities, so there’s no telling if or where someone is racking up as many wins as me. But I like to think it’s a record.

In fairness, the winning has also helped me quite a bit. It was winning so often at The Moth that first got me recognized by producers, directors, and the people who wanted to learn this craft from me. It’s part of the reason that I am able to travel around the country and the world telling stories. It probably helped me land this book contract.

But unlike in many other competitions, storytellers root for their fellow storytellers to succeed. We never wish misfortune on other storytellers. We honestly want to see them perform well. Unlike baseball, where I hoped the opposing batter would strike out, or in football, where I would wish for a fumble, or even in poker, when I am pleased when an opponent draws a bad hand, I never want my fellow competitors to freeze up, fall apart, or tell something cringeworthy. I want them to do their best. I just want to do slightly better.

Erin let me know that night that I was not alone in my zeal to win. In fact, when she beat me in my first GrandSLAM, she was the only woman in the show. When she was named the winner, she turned to her nine male competitors and said, “Suck it, boys.” The perfect response.

I wonder what Erin will think of this book. I’m giving away our secrets — or at least mine — in a big way.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# Finding Your Beginning (I'm Also About to Forever Ruin Most Movies and Many Books for You)

So you've got yourself a five-second moment — a moment of transformation or revelation or realization. This is good. You're already a better storyteller than most people in the world.

Truly. Tell a story about a real moment of meaning from your life — a five-second moment — and people will want to hear more.

More good news. You've also found the end of your story. Your five-second moment is the most important thing that you will say. It is the purpose and pinnacle of your story. It's the reason you opened your mouth in the first place. Therefore it must come as close to the end of your story as possible. Sometimes it will be the very last thing you say.

Knowing your ending is a good thing. When I write fiction, I have no idea where my story is going to end. As odd as it may sound, I have never accurately predicted how any of my novels were going to conclude, and many novelists operate similarly. John Irving claims to always know his last sentence before beginning a novel, but I'm not sure if I believe him. Even if I do, he's John Irving. For us common folk, writing is often the means to the end. We discover the conclusions and resolutions through the process of writing the book.

But when telling true stories about our lives, we always start with the ending, because we're not making stuff up. We're not hoping to invent the perfect combination of action, description, and dialogue. We're telling the truth, so even if we're not entirely sure of how to tell our ending — which combination of action, dialogue, and description will best capture that five-second moment — we know what happened. We know the who, what, where, and when, and we probably know the why (though that can sometimes come later). We know what our five-second moment is, and therefore that is where we begin the process of crafting our story. We start at the end.

This is a beautiful thing, because knowing the ending will inform all the choices that we must make as we craft the rest of the story. Everything must serve our five-second moment, so knowing the ending — and starting the process of crafting the story with the ending — is helpful beyond measure. In fact the ending simply involves the choice of words you will use. How will you describe your five-second moment for the greatest emotional effect?

The hard part is finding the beginning, because it involves choosing the right

moments from your life, and there is often a multitude of choices.

So how do you choose the right place to start a story? Simple. Ask yourself where your story ends. What is the meaning of your five-second moment? Say it aloud.

In “Charity Thief,” I might say it like this: “I thought I was alone in this world, facing a lifetime of loneliness. Then I met a man who taught me that I knew very little about loneliness and never wanted to know loneliness the way that man knew it on that day and probably many, many days thereafter.”

That’s my five-second moment. That is what I’m trying to say to you as simply as possible. It’s not a good story on its own, but choose better words to describe the moment, prop it up with everything that comes before the moment, and you have yourself a story.

Once you’ve distilled your five-second moment down to its essence, ask yourself: What is the opposite of your five-second moment?

Simply put, the beginning of the story should be the opposite of the end. Find the opposite of your transformation, revelation, or realization, and this is where your story should start. This is what creates an arc in your story. This is how a story shows change over time.

*I was once this, but now I am this.*

*I once thought this, but now I think this.*

*I once felt this, but now I feel this.*

Stories must reflect change of some kind. It need not always be positive change, and the change need not be monumental. In fact, stories about failure, embarrassment, and shame are fantastic. Stories about trying desperately to achieve a goal and failing spectacularly are beloved. Even when progress is made, the best stories often reflect incremental change. Tiny steps forward. Glacial improvement. Audiences would much rather hear about incremental, tenuous growth than about overnight success.

Regardless of whether your change is infinitesimal or profound, positive or negative, your story must reflect change. You must begin and end your story in entirely different states of being.

Change is key.

The story of how you’re an amazing person who did an amazing thing and ended up in an amazing place is not a story. It’s a recipe for a douchebag.

The story of how you’re a pathetic person who did a pathetic thing and remained pathetic is also not a story. It’s a recipe for a sad sack.

You create the arc of a story through the change that your story ultimately describes. Starting in one place and landing in another. Think of it like air travel.

An airplane takes off, flies through the sky, and lands in a new place. Your story must do the same. The easiest, most effective way of doing this is by ensuring that the beginning and the ending of your stories are opposites or as close to opposites as possible. This is not the case in every story that I tell, but it's true for most.

*I was once hopeful, but now I am not.*

*I was once lost, but now I am found.*

*I was once happy, but now I am sad.*

*I was once uncertain, but now I know.*

*I was once angry, but now I am grateful.*

*I was once afraid, but now I am fearless.*

*I once believed, but now I don't.*

This change is what makes stories satisfying. It's how storytellers are able to move an audience emotionally. The same holds true for most movies. Imagine this setup for a romantic comedy:

We open on a young woman working in a cubicle at a large bank. She's typing away on her computer when the phone rings. It's her boyfriend. He works in the bank too, one floor above our protagonist.

“Listen,” he says. “Bad news. I’m breaking up with you. I’m moving to Tanzania today. And I’m taking your best friend, Jane, with me. We fell in love while buying you a birthday present last week. Have a great life. Bye.”

Our protagonist hangs up the phone and stares at her computer screen in disbelief. Her eyes well up with tears. Just then her boss appears over the top of the cubicle. “Listen,” she says. “We’re downsizing. Bad loans. I’m sorry. You’re fired.”

In the next scene, we see our protagonist standing on the sidewalk outside the bank, looking lost. She’s holding one of those brown boxes that we see in movies, though never in real life, filled with the trinkets from her desk and the contents of her drawers. She’s holding back tears.

We all know how this movie is going to end. Right?

Think of the opposite of what we just saw.

Our protagonist is going to have a new boyfriend at the end of the movie, and he’s not going to be a banker. He’s going to be the opposite of a banker:

*A kindergarten teacher*

*A sculptor*

*A mechanic*

*An artisanal-pickle pickler*

Our protagonist is also going to have a new job, and it's not going to be in a bank. She's not going to move from Morgan Stanley to Merrill Lynch. She's going to begin working at the opposite of a bank.

*She's going to open a cupcake shop.*

*She's going to write an advice column.*

*She's going to cultivate and sell bonsai trees.*

*She's going to teach yoga to cats.*

She's also going to find a new best friend, and her new friend won't be anything like Jane, her former best friend.

*It'll be the old Jewish man she meets on a park bench who teaches her about managing the harsh realities of the world.*

*The eight-year-old boy she's babysitting who teaches her to enjoy the little things in life.*

*The gay man who teaches her to finally live her authentic life.*

If you know anything about storytelling, you can't watch this opening scene and *not* know how this movie is going to end. Unless we're in the midst of an indie or art-house film, this story can only end one way. This doesn't mean you won't enjoy the movie. The path from beginning to end will hopefully make you laugh. Surprise you. Touch your heart. But the end should be clear. You might not know the specific details, but you should know the gist of things — the general direction.

Simply ask yourself what the opposite of the first fifteen minutes of a movie is, and you will almost always have your ending.

Remember the beginning of *Jurassic Park*? Alan Grant terrifies a small, round boy with a gruesome description of his death at the hands of a pack of velociraptors. The dialogue between Grant and his love interest, Ellie Sattler, then goes like this:

ELLIE Hey, Alan, if you wanted to scare the kid, you could've pulled a gun on him, you know.

GRANT Yeah, I know. Kids. You wanna have one of those?

ELLIE I don't want that kid. A breed of child, Dr. Grant, could be intriguing! I mean, what's so wrong with kids?

GRANT Ah, Ellie, look. They're noisy, they're messy, they're expensive.

ELLIE Cheap, cheap.

GRANT They smell.

ELLIE They do not smell!

GRANT

Some of them smell.

If you don't think Grant is going to fall in love with children by the end of the movie, you're not paying attention.

This is how movies work. Good ones, at least. Even the bad ones can be fairly predictable in this way.

My friend Bengi asked me to go to the most recent film in the Jurassic Park franchise, *Jurassic World*.

"I'll go," I said. "But listen. There are going to be two kids in the movie, and neither one will be eaten. There will be a male and female lead. They won't be romantically linked at the beginning, but they'll clearly be in love by the end of the movie. They also won't be eaten. The owner of whatever company owns the dinosaurs this time around is going to die. His or her assistant will die too. The guy who plans bad things for the dinosaurs — the corporate spy, military man, mad scientist — will also die. The man who carries a gun the most will die. And in the end, one dinosaur will kill the other dinosaur and save the day."

As we leave the theater later that afternoon, Bengi turns to me and asks, "Did you see that movie before today?"

I hadn't, but this is how Jurassic Park movies work. Even the bad ones, which don't involve Steven Spielberg. And if you watched the first fifteen minutes of the film with a storyteller's eye, you would have known how the movie was going to end too.

At one point during the film, the two aforementioned children — brothers — are trapped in a large glass ball as the big, bad dinosaur tries to bite down on it and break it open. The glass is cracking. The boys are screaming. I stopped watching the scene for a moment to look around the darkened theater. People were gripping their armrests in fear. Jaws were locked. Nerves were frayed. Even Bengi was leaning forward. He was tense. Frightened.

In that moment, I wanted to stand up and say, "We're watching a Jurassic Park movie, people! Do you really think those kids are going to get eaten?"

But this is the magic of storytelling. Even when the ending is all but certain, a good storyteller can grab the audience by the throat and make them temporarily forget that they know damn well how this movie will end.

So the beginning is important. Finding that five-second moment in your life is critical, of course, but in terms of actually crafting your story, where you start your story is the most important decision you will make. The right beginning creates a satisfying narrative arc that will cause people to connect to and remember your story. It will provide a clear, coherent path to the end. It will serve as an enormous arrow that will point both you and the audience in the right direction.

Sometimes the place to begin is convenient and easy to find. Sometimes not.

In “Charity Thief,” for example, my story ends with the realization that I know nothing about loneliness. Once I found that five-second moment, I asked myself, what is the opposite of knowing nothing about loneliness?

The opposite of knowing nothing about loneliness is the belief that you know something about loneliness. That you understand loneliness in some fundamental way. In the case of this story, the beginning was easy to find, because it happened on the same day as my five-second moment. Early in the story, when I find myself parked in the Citgo station, sitting behind the wheel, I say:

*I'm angry, but I'm also sad. I'm twenty years old. I'm a McDonald's manager. I make \$7.25 an hour, and I am the richest person I know. My mother is living on welfare with my pregnant teenage sister. My brother joined the army a year ago, and I haven't heard from him since. My father disappeared from my life ten years ago. The only person I know who can help me, who even has a credit card or a car that can make this hundred-mile trip to New Hampshire, is my friend Bengi, and he is off on some college weekend. I can't get in touch with him, because in 1991, when you want to call someone, you need to make a phone ring on a wall, and you need to make that phone ring at the moment the person you want to speak to is near that phone, and you need the number for the phone to make it ring, and all of that is impossible for me to get.*

*This was not the plan for my life. . . . I was not supposed to be this alone this early in my life. You're not supposed to be twenty years old and have absolutely no one in your life to call for help. As I sit there in my car, staring into that field of orange and yellow, I see my future ahead of me. An endless series of moments just like this one, when I need help but will have none.*

This is the opposite of my ending. This is me, sitting in my car, thinking about how alone I am in this world, doomed to a life of solitude. It's how I felt in that moment, as foolish as that may have been.

In reality I had a bunch of friends waiting at home for me. I had *The Simpsons*, beer, and laughter in my very near future. I was a long way from experiencing the loneliness of that man on that day. I just didn't know it at the time. I was sad and frightened and feeling sorry for myself.

Luckily, my beginning was already embedded within the narrative, less than an hour from my five-second moment.

If only every beginning were this easy to find. More often, the beginning is much harder to find because the opposite of your five-second moment does not happen on the same day or even in the same week as any possible beginning.

For example, think back on the story of my wife's discovery that I was hungry

as a child. Finding the beginning of that story was challenging. I knew the five-second moment of the story was the moment at the dining-room table when my wife reveals that she knows my secret — I was hungry as a boy — and probably knows me better than anyone ever in my life.

So I ask myself: What is the opposite of someone uncovering your secret?

The opposite of someone uncovering a secret, I decided, is the creation of that secret. The initial decision to keep something secret. For me, this meant dipping back into my childhood for moments of hunger and shame, so that I could show my audience how and why I decided to keep my childhood hunger a secret. I had plenty of moments to choose from. Too many, in fact. Herein lies the challenge:

Which moment works best? Which of the dozens of anecdotes from my childhood should I use? If you're a good storyteller, who believes that these choices matter a lot (and they do), it's not an easy decision. I want to choose the anecdotes that serve my story best. They need to show a variety of contexts in which hunger and shame ruled my life. Ideally, at least one will be funny and one will be heartrending. I'd like them to take place in a variety of settings. I'd love for at least one to echo something at the end of my story.

When we search our past for the beginnings of our stories — which storytellers do quite often — we have a mountain of material from which to choose. Less effective storytellers latch onto the first thing that comes to mind rather than making a list of anecdotes, analyzing them for content, tone, the potential for humor, and connectivity to the story before deciding.

I also believe that great storytellers know this: The first idea is rarely the best idea. It may be the most convenient idea. The easiest to remember. The one you personally like the most. But rarely is the first idea the one that I choose. First ideas are for the lazy. The complacent. The easily satisfied.

I fight for my beginnings. I struggle to find the correct entry point to a story, and I believe that every story has a perfect entry point. The ideal place to start. More than half of the time I spend crafting stories is spent searching for the right beginning. Once I've found it, the rest of the story often flows easily. The correct beginning makes the rest of the choices seem much more obvious.

I also try to start my story as close to the end as possible (a rule Kurt Vonnegut followed when writing short stories). I want my stories to be as temporally limited as possible. I strive for simplicity at all times. By starting as close to the end as possible, we shorten our stories. We avoid unnecessary setup. We eliminate superfluous details.

In "Charity Thief," I begin with the disintegration of my right front tire. It's the inciting incident that leads to all my trouble. But in an earlier, unfinished version of the story, I started the story with my booty call to New Hampshire because it was an amusing encounter. The girl with whom I spent the weekend lived in a two-

room loft above a garage and slept in a closet just large enough for a twin mattress. She called this space the Bat Cave and had decorated it with twinkle lights and silken scarves. There was a lot of humor to be wrung out of that arrangement.

The girl was also an interesting character. She was five years older than I and worldlier than I will ever be. I had met her a year earlier while on vacation. I waved to her car as she drove by. She pulled over and asked Bengi and me if we wanted to hang out with her and her friend.

We did. Bengi's date with the friend didn't go anywhere, but I ended up ditching my friends for the rest of the week and sleeping in the Bat Cave.

The stories that resulted from a simple wave of my hand are both surprising and hilarious, but in the end, they were all left on the cutting-room floor, both because they did not serve the story well and because I wanted to start as close to the end as possible.

The tire, I decided, was the closest possible starting point to the end. The audience needs to know why I am stuck in New Hampshire without any money. The tire is the reason.

This process is not uncommon for me. I often start my story in one place and end up working my way closer and closer to the end as I revise.

The best example of this is a story I tell about arriving in Boca Raton, Florida, with Elysha, who was my fiancée at the time. We realized upon arrival that neither one of us had a valid driver's license (both had expired the month before), so we couldn't rent a car from our prearranged rental company.

There were four other rental counters lining the wall, so we went from counter to counter, begging customer-service representatives at each to rent us a car. After three emphatic rejections, we came to our last chance, an Alamo counter manned by a young man in a Philadelphia Eagles jersey. I sensed an opportunity. Wanting to be the kind of guy who can take care of his woman, I told Elysha to hang back and let me handle this. "I'm getting you a car," I said with all the bravado that I could muster.

This was important to me, because I'm not a real man. I can't build or repair a thing. I can't assemble children's toys or construct one of my son's LEGO sets. IKEA directions might as well be in Swedish for me. I have a hard time hammering a nail into a wall.

But I have friends who built their own houses. Restored their own cars. Chop their own firewood. These are men who can lift their entire house off the foundation to repair the main beam. I can do none of these things. I don't even really know what a main beam is. My hands do not build or repair, they purchase and replace. As a result, I often feel like less than a man in many contexts.

This was my opportunity to step up and deliver. To show Elysha that I was a man who could get things done. That she was marrying someone who could take

care of her.

When I started crafting the story, I began in the airport in Connecticut, waiting to board the plane. It made sense. Begin the story at the start of our journey.

Then I moved the beginning of the story onto the plane just before takeoff. Why include the airport terminal in Connecticut? Fewer locations in a story always makes things simpler and easier to digest for an audience.

Then I moved the beginning of the story into the sky between Hartford and Boca Raton. Why include takeoff in the story when the actual plane ride is irrelevant?

Wait. If the actual plane ride is irrelevant, why not eliminate the plane altogether? Why not begin the story as we disembark the plane and enter the Boca Raton airport?

Wait again. Why not start my story while we were standing in line at Enterprise Rent-A-Car? Why not begin the story a few feet from where it will end? This is where the story really takes place.

Through this revision process, I managed to move the beginning of my story about twelve hundred miles in distance and five hours in time. I also eliminated two airport terminals and an airplane in the process. In the end, the story takes place in one place: the building adjacent to the Boca Raton airport where cars are rented to travelers.

I started as close to the end as possible.

Simplifying also helps storytellers tell their stories better. When time and space is limited, it's easier to remember your story. Easier to master your transitions, and easier to remember those favorite lines that you don't want to forget. But simplification is even more important because of the difference between oral storytelling and written storytelling.

A written story is like a lake. Readers can step in and out of the water at their leisure, and the water always remains the same. This stillness and permanence allow for pausing, rereading, contemplation, and the use of outside sources to help with meaning. It also allows the reader to control the speed at which the story is received.

An oral story is like a river. It is a constantly flowing torrent of words. When listeners need to step outside of the river to ponder a detail, wonder about something that confuses them, or attempt to make meaning, the river continues to flow. When the listener finally steps back into the river, he or she is behind. The water that has flowed by will never be seen again, and as a result, the listener is constantly chasing the story, trying to catch up.

To keep your listener from stepping out of your river of words to make meaning, simplification is essential. Starting as close to the end as possible helps to

make this happen. Sometimes the closest place to start is thirty years before your five-second moment. If that's the case, so be it. But when that beginning can be pushed closer to the five-second moment, your audience will be the better for it.

Movies operate similarly. Think about Steven Soderbergh's Ocean's Eleven franchise. In each of these movies, a group of likable thieves gather in Las Vegas to rob a world-class casino of hundreds of millions of dollars. In the real world, a heist like this would take months or even years to plan, but that would never make for a satisfying story. Instead, Soderbergh has these professional thieves plan their caper over the course of a few days. This is a ridiculous way to plan a robbery. But compressing the action into a smaller amount of time makes the story more exciting. It intensifies the action and emotion. It increases the likelihood of problems.

It also simplifies the story. Watching career criminals plan a heist over the course of six months would be tedious, complicated, and monotonous. It would be easy for Soderbergh to lose the attention and focus of his audience. But when he jams all of that action into a few days, the story is simplified to an enormous degree. Soderbergh starts his stories as close to the ending as possible. He gets it.

Standing in front of the Alamo counter, I turn to Elysha. "Wait here," I say with as much bravado as I can muster. "I'm renting us a car." As I approach the counter and the man standing behind it, the fact that this is an Alamo counter is not lost on me.

My own personal Alamo. My final stand. My last chance for glory.

As I approach, I consider pretending to be a Philadelphia Eagles fan. They have just played my beloved New England Patriots in the Super Bowl the month before (and lost), so I know enough about the Eagles to convince the man behind the counter that I support his team. Perhaps we can find common ground. I envision us bonding over our mutual love of a team that he obviously loves, and I am more than willing to love for the next ten minutes. I'll talk about my admiration for Brian Westbrook, a shifty running back who has hands as soft as clay, and I'll rail against the much-despised owner of the team and his inability to leave the football to the coaching staff.

I'm nearly set on this idea when he says, "Hi, can I help you?" and I instinctively revert to truthfulness and authenticity.

I had yet to stand on a stage and tell a story at that point in my life, but even back then, I thought that authenticity was the best way to appeal to people and to move them emotionally.

"Sorry about the Super Bowl," I say, pointing at his jersey. He's wearing number 5, of course. Donovan McNabb, the Eagles' quarterback. "I'm a Patriots fan, and I've got to tell you, we were terrified about facing McNabb. He was the last quarterback we wanted to see in the Super Bowl."

“Yeah,” Eagles Fan says, dejected. “That was a lousy day for Eagles fans.”

“If only they could give the guy a little help,” I say. “Sometimes that’s all a guy like McNabb needs is a little help. Someone to stand by him.”

“Exactly!” he says, suddenly perking up. “Why can’t they get him a no-drama receiver to catch the damn ball?”

“And maybe a couple more guys on the offensive line for some protection,” I add.

“Yes,” he says, almost pleading.

I understand his pain. I watched the Patriots lose the Super Bowl in both 1986 and 1997 before they finally broke through with their first Super Bowl victory in 2001.

I was a fourteen-year-old boy in ’86, watching the game in the living room of my childhood home. I wept as the Bears ran “Refrigerator” Perry into the end zone to make the score 44–3.

In ’97, I was watching the game in the home of close friends. When Green Bay wide receiver Desmond Howard ran back the second-half kickoff for a touchdown, I threw my shoe through their living-room wall — directly above the television — in a mindless act of rage. Watching your team lose the Super Bowl is the worst.

We talk some more about the game. Debate the effectiveness of the Eagles’ much-maligned head coach, Andy Reid. Commiserate over the impossibly talented yet equally annoying receiver Terrell Owens. A Patriots fan and an Eagles fan — bitter opponents just two weeks ago — find common ground by talking about the big game. “A little help might have changed everything,” I say.

Then we get down to business. I tell Eagles Fan that I need a car for the week, and as I start to complete the paperwork, he examines my driver’s license. “Oh,” he says, looking up. “I can’t rent a car to you. Your license is expired.”

I feign surprise. Then disbelief. Then disappointment. I try to channel the sadness and distress of the 1986 version of me following the Super Bowl. I drop my head. I sigh deeply.

Then I look up. I ask him to look over at Elysha. “See that girl over there? She’s my fiancée. She’s agreed to marry me, but I keep screwing up. I’m holding on by a thread. This might be my last chance.”

“Sorry, man,” Eagles Fan says, and he means it.

I wait a beat. My eyes return to my shoes. I sigh again. Then I look up. I look into Eagles Fan’s eyes and say, “Listen, I could use some help here. I can’t let this girl down. I’m always letting her down. You know, sometimes that’s all a guy needs is a little help. Someone to stand by him. A no-drama wide receiver.”

Eagles fan smiles. Nods. Then he rents me the car.

Elysha can't believe it. Neither can I. I'm not the kind of guy who makes things like this happen.

Here are a couple more practical tips for choosing an opening:

## 1. Try to start your story with forward movement whenever possible.

Establish yourself as a person who is physically moving through space. Opening with forward movement creates instant momentum in a story. It makes the audience feel that we're already on our way, immersed in the world you are moving us through. We're going somewhere important.

## 2. Don't start by setting expectations.

Listen to people in the world tell you stories. Often they start with a sentence like, "This is hilarious," or "You need to hear this," or "You're not going to believe this." This is always a mistake, for three reasons.

First, it establishes potentially unrealistic expectations. "Hilarious" is an exceptionally high bar. "You're not going to believe this" is probably an impossible mark to hit. Never start your story by setting expectations for it, realistic or otherwise. No one wants a rubric or an introduction at the beginning of a story. They simply want a story.

Second, starting your story with a thesis statement reduces your chances of surprising your audience. When you tell me that the story is hilarious, I'm already primed for humor. When you say, "You're not going to believe this," I am prepared for the improbable. Surprise is a beautiful thing in a story. Apart from vulnerability, it may be the most beautiful thing about stories. Letting your audience know that your story is hilarious or improbable hinders your ability to catch them off-guard and offer them a surprise later on.

Third, these are simply not interesting ways to start a story. A thesis statement, a prediction about the audience's response to the story, or a summary of its theme or mood does not immediately draw us into the story's time and place. We don't feel transported to a new and interesting locale. We don't get the sense that we are traveling back in time. We feel lectured to. We feel cheated.

Start with the story, not with a summary of the story. There is no need to describe the tone or tenor at the onset. Just start with story, and whenever possible, open with movement. Forward progress. It's a simple and effective way of grabbing the listeners' attention and focusing it somewhere specific. It makes them feel that we're already off and running.

In "Charity Thief," my opening sentences tell you that I am hurtling down a lonely stretch of New Hampshire highway, headed in the direction of home.

In "This Is Going to Suck," I'm walking out of a record store on a December

day, two days before Christmas, with a shopping bag in my hand.

Forward momentum. These stories are going somewhere. We are already on the move. Jump aboard for the ride.

Pay attention to the opening scenes of movies. So many of them use this strategy as well. We open on the protagonist or someone similarly important to the story. That person will be moving. Walking. Running. Driving. Flying. Climbing. Fleeing. Falling. Swimming. Crawling. Diving. Filmmakers want to immerse you into their world as quickly as possible. They want you to forget the theater and the popcorn and the jackass who is texting beside you. They want you to be absorbed by the story. They want you to forget that you even exist for the duration of the film.

*Star Wars: A New Hope* opens on two starships racing through space.

*Vertigo* opens with a man frantically climbing a ladder, pursued by a police officer.

*Raging Bull* opens with a figure shadowboxing in a boxing ring as flashbulbs pop off.

*The Dark Knight* begins with a bank robbery in progress.

*Apocalypse Now* opens with helicopters setting fire to a jungle.

*Raiders of the Lost Ark* opens on Indy and his team marching through the dark and forbidding jungle toward a mysterious mountain.

*Jurassic Park* opens with a cage containing a velociraptor moving through trees toward a group of armed men.

*Titanic* opens with a submarine's descent toward the wreckage of the doomed ship.

*Casablanca* opens with a narration and a visual of refugees escaping from France to Casablanca during World War II.

Many movies open with simple overhead views passing over an ocean, a cityscape, or a mountain pass. Many movies based in New York City open with an overhead approach of the island over water. This has nothing to do with the film but allows the director to open with momentum. Forward movement. We're headed somewhere important.

Here's the good news: If you stop reading right now, you're already a better storyteller than most. If you are telling a story about a five-second moment of your life — a moment of transformation, realization, or revelation — you're doing well.

If you've also found the right place to begin your story — a place that represents the opposite of your five-second moment, and one as close to the ending as possible — you've established a clear frame and arc in your story. You've identified the direction your story is headed in, and you and your audience

probably have a good sense of where that may be. You are already going to be well received by audiences big and small.

If you're careful about choosing that opening scene — not simply choosing the first thing that comes to mind but instead asking yourself what the opening scene needs — and you open your story *with story* and not any form of unnecessary or qualifying introduction, you are going to grab your audience's attention right off the bat.

Stop here and you'll be better than most. Truly.

But don't stop, because all you have now is the beginning and ending of your story. That middle part — the arc — needs to be filled. You have to carry your audience from beginning to end, holding their attention, captivating them, causing them to laugh and cry and wonder.

There are ways to do this too. Ways to keep your audience's attention firmly in place. Let me show you how.

## STORY BREAK

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### **Thirteen Rules for an Effective (and Perhaps Even Inspiring) Commencement Address**

1. Don't compliment yourself. Don't praise your accomplishments in any way. It is not your day. Even if you're delivering the valedictory speech, it's still not your day. It's a day for every person in your graduating class. Don't place your accomplishments ahead of theirs. You've already been recognized as valedictorian; that should be more than enough credit for one day. Make the speech about something other than the great things you have done.
2. Be self-deprecating, but only if it is real. Don't ever pretend to be self-deprecating. Your audience will see right through you. This is even worse than being self-congratulatory.
3. Don't ask rhetorical questions. These questions always break momentum and displace your authority as the speaker onto your audience. Also, audience members will sometimes answer these questions and interrupt you, which is never good.
4. Offer one granular bit of wisdom, something that is both applicable and memorable. Anyone can deliver a speech filled with sweeping generalities. Most people are capable of offering old chestnuts and choice proverbs. The great commencement speakers manage to lodge a small, original, useful, and memorable idea in the minds of the graduates. It's the offer of one final lesson — a bit of compelling wisdom and insight that the graduates will remember long after they have tossed their caps and moved into the greater world.
5. Don't cater any part of your speech to the parents of the graduates. As much as they may think otherwise, this is not their day either. This is a speech directed at the graduates.
6. Make your audience laugh.
7. Never mention the weather or the temperature. If it's a beautiful day, everyone knows it. If it's not, reminding your audience about the heat or rain is stupid. There is nothing more banal and meaningless than talking about the weather.
8. Speak as if you were speaking to friends. Be yourself. If your language sounds more formal than your normal speech, you have failed.
9. Emotion is good. Be enthusiastic. Excited. Hopeful. Even angry if needed. Anything but staid and somber. This is not a policy speech or a

lecture. It is an inspirational address.

10. If you plan on describing the world the graduates will be entering, don't. It's ridiculous to assume that the world as you see it resembles the world that this diverse group of people will be entering. Your prognostications will most assuredly prove to be wrong. These graduates' paths will be multifarious. Some will be moving on to higher levels of education. Others will be hired for jobs that may not even exist yet. Others will join family businesses, travel the world, launch their own companies, or return home to care for aging parents. Telling these people what the world will be like for them requires hubris on a monumental scale.
11. Don't define terms by quoting the dictionary. "Webster's Dictionary says" are three words that should be banned from all speeches and essays until the end of time.
12. Don't use a quote that you've heard someone use in a previous commencement speech. Don't use a quote at all, if possible. Instead, *be quotable*. Your job is not to recycle but to create something new.
13. End your speech in less than the allotted time.

A note on #4, which is probably the most important of the rules:

In 2016, humorist Mo Rocca delivered a commencement speech at Sarah Lawrence College and provided one granular bit of wisdom that is both applicable and memorable.

*Some perspective: Your great-grandparents — and some of you may be lucky enough to have known them — survived the Great Depression and defended freedom during World War II, defeating Hitler and the forces of darkness, ensuring that their progeny could also enjoy life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. There's a very good reason the women and men of that generation are known in history as the Greatest Generation.*

*Well, I did some research, and it turns out that the life expectancy of that generation was just 54. Your life expectancy is 76. That means that you can take a deep breath, chill out — catch up on House of Cards and Narcos — and spend the next twenty-two years figuring out what you want to do — and you could still end up matching the achievements of the Greatest Generation.*

This singular idea — that graduates today will live on average twenty-two years longer than those from the Greatest Generation — is a tremendous bit of wisdom. Rocca uses this fact to encourage graduates to relax and place less pressure on themselves to succeed immediately. He encourages them to take the time to explore the world. Try out many things. Consider all their options. Stumble into opportunities. Rocca says:

*Some of you may not know exactly what you want to do or who you want to be. Your brain may be whiting out from too much possibility. Or maybe you're simply drawing a blank. You haven't found your passion. Well there's no shame in that. Quite the opposite.*

Rocca's bit of wisdom will remain with me for a long time. I've already used it twice with people I serve as a life coach in order to remind them that it's never too late to start something new. We have more time than we think.

This is exactly what you want from a commencement speech: one final lesson that graduates (and commencement-speech stalkers like me) can use.

## CHAPTER NINE

# Stakes: Five Ways to Keep Your Story Compelling (and Why There Are Dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park*)

There is a good reason that hundreds of people attend Moth Story-SLAMs once a week in New York City (not to mention around the world), but only about fifteen or twenty of them put their names in the hat to tell a story:

Stakes.

Public speaking of any kind provides a lot of stakes. As you probably know, many people place public speaking ahead of death on their list of greatest fears. Standing before three hundred strangers and saying anything is incredibly difficult. Sharing a story from your life — something that expresses truth and vulnerability — is even more challenging.

But that's not the end of it. A Moth StorySLAM is a competition. Your story will be compared to nine other stories that night. You will be assigned a numerical score based on your performance — a score for everyone to see — and those scores will be posted on a sheet of paper that will hang all night long as a reminder of your failure or success.

When you tell a story at a Moth StorySLAM, there is a record of the event. It is neither ethereal nor forgettable. It is quantified and cataloged.

In other words, there are stakes, and for many people, those stakes are rather high. It's hard enough to speak in front of hundreds of strangers without notes. Add a layer of public evaluation, and the barrier is too great.

Speak Up, the show that my wife and I produce in Connecticut, is not competitive. It is a curated performance of stories, and storytellers are rarely in short supply. We have a stable of regulars always willing to take the stage, and rookie storytellers are taking our stage all the time.

Frankly, we often have more storytellers than we need. But if we added a layer of competition to our show, I suspect that this would not be the case. We would have far fewer storytellers volunteering to take the stage. The pressure to perform well in our show is not nearly as high as at a Moth StorySLAM. There is no score. There is no public accounting of a storyteller's performance. If you don't do well, we are on to the next story before you know it. Stories told at a Speak Up event are ethereal and impermanent.

Moth StorySLAMs are competitive because competition adds a layer of stakes to the show for the audience.

*Who will win?*

*Who will lose?*

*Will you agree with the judge's scores?*

*Will your favorite storyteller of the night be victorious?*

Even if every story in the show is a flop (and I've never seen that happen), there is a reason to stay to the end of a StorySLAM: you want to know who the winner will be.

Stakes.

I've only been nervous performing twice in my life. I told a story for a Moth Mainstage at the Wilbur Theatre in Boston in 2013. It's a big theater, and it was my first Mainstage with The Moth, but I wasn't nervous until I found out that tickets to the show were more than a hundred dollars each. Given the amount of money that each audience member had paid, I suddenly felt the pressure to perform exceptionally well.

Jimmy Fallon was also in the green room one floor below me, waiting to perform after The Moth was finished. His presence didn't help.

I was also nervous on the night I told my robbery story for The Moth's Mainstage at the Brooklyn Academy of Music two years later. But I will wait till chapter 22 to tell about that.

In both cases, I was feeling the high stakes of performance. Simply defined, stakes are the reason audiences listen and continue to listen to a story. Stakes answer questions like:

- What does the storyteller want or need?
- What is at peril?
- What is the storyteller fighting for or against?
- What will happen next?
- How is this story going to turn out?

Stakes are the reason an audience wants to hear your next sentence. They are the difference between a story that grabs the audience by the throat and holds on tight and one that an audience can take or leave. Stakes are the difference between someone telling you about their mother and someone telling you about the time they wanted to disown their mother.

Stakes are the reason we ride roller-coasters. They are why we climb trees and arm wrestle or race our friends across the backyard. Stakes are why sports dominate our culture and why asking a girl on a date can be so difficult.

Stakes are the Nazis and the snakes in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Darth Vader and his storm troopers in *Star Wars*. The iceberg in *Titanic*. The dinosaurs of *Jurassic*

*Park.*

Stakes are the reason we listen to stories when video games and pizza and sex exist in the world. We could be doing any one of these things, but we listen to stories because we want to know what happens next. In the best stories, we want to hear the next sentence. And the sentence after that. And the sentence after that.

Just imagine if I asked a friend, “Would you like to go to a movie where a man who does not believe in God ultimately finds the faith required to save himself and the woman he loves?”

The answer would probably be no. No, thank you. I don’t want to see that movie.

Instead I say, “Do you want to go see *Raiders of the Lost Ark*? It’s a movie about an archeologist-turned-hero who must battle Nazis, snakes, booby traps, and evil scientists in order to save the world?”

The answer is more likely to be yes.

The Nazis and snakes are the stakes. They are the things that keep our attention scene to scene. They are the reason we buy a ticket and popcorn and give up two hours of our life.

Boring stories lack stakes, or their stakes are not high enough. Stories that fail to hold your attention lack stakes. Stories that allow your mind to wander lack stakes.

There are many ways to add new stakes or increase the existing stakes in a story, but not all stories need to have stakes added or increased. Some stories are naturally infused with stakes. Their content alone is enough to grab an audience by the throat and never let go.

I tell a story about a time I was paid to be the stripper at the bachelorette party in the crew room of a McDonald’s, much to the dismay of the bride-to-be (and myself). This story does not require any additional stakes or heightening of the ones already there. No tricks are needed. I don’t need to craft ways of holding the audience’s attention, because the audience is constantly wondering what will happen next.

That story, entitled “Strip Club of My Own Making,” is available on the “Storyworthy the Book” YouTube channel.

But “Charity Thief” is a different kind of story. The ending of the story is admittedly compelling. Impersonating a charity worker to steal money from homeowners on behalf of the charitable organization is unusual and surprising (and perhaps appalling) and packed with stakes, and the resulting conversation with the man about his wife and his life is captivating.

But getting to that blue door isn’t terribly exciting.

*My tire deflates and disintegrates.*

*I purchase a new tire.*

*I have no money left over for gas.*

*I feel alone.*

*I beg for gas.*

*I'm refused.*

*Then I devise a new plan.*

Not exactly the makings of a great story, but with the use of a few cleverly deployed strategies, I make this introductory sequence far more entertaining and compelling than it really is.

Specifically, I use five different strategies to infuse this story with stakes. These strategies are both easy to apply and almost always effective.

I happen to use all five of the strategies in this story (one of the reasons I use it as a model for teaching), but you should know that this might be the only story where I make use of all five strategies. As I said, some stories, like “Strip Club of My Own Making,” are already loaded with stakes. But others need some help to raise the stakes at specific moments, and this is where these strategies can prove useful. I will explain each one here and show you where I use them.

## The Elephant

Every story must have an Elephant. The Elephant is the thing that everyone in the room can see. It is large and obvious. It is a clear statement of the need, the want, the problem, the peril, or the mystery. It signifies where the story is headed, and it makes it clear to your audience that this is in fact a story and not a simple musing on a subject.

Elephants are critical to the success of a story. Movies have trailers and summaries that you can read on websites like Rotten Tomatoes to inform you of the gist of the story. Your friend might see a movie and give you an idea of what the film is about. You’re likely both informed about the film and excited to see it when you enter the theater. Rarely do you go to a movie theater and not know what the movie is about. You almost always have a general sense of what is to come.

Storytellers don’t have the benefit of a trailer. When a storyteller begins speaking, whether in a theater or a dining room or a conference room, the audience often has no idea of what to expect. Are we in the midst of a comedy? A drama? An action adventure? A romance? Something in between? Is this story going to challenge our sensibilities? Make us cry? Offend us? Inspire us?

The audience doesn’t know why they are listening to the story or what is to come, so it’s easy to stop listening. If you don’t present a reason to listen very early

on, you risk losing their attention altogether.

The Elephant tells the audience what to expect. It gives them a reason to listen, a reason to wonder. It infuses the story with instantaneous stakes.

The Elephant should appear as early in the story as possible. Ideally, it should appear within the first minute, and if you can say it within the first thirty seconds, even better.

The Elephant is the difference between these two beginnings of a story:

## Version #1

My mother was the kind of woman whom everyone adored. The model of decorum and civility. She served as PTO president and treasurer of the ladies' auxiliary. She was the only female umpire in our town's Little League. She baked and knit and grew vegetables by the pound.

## Version #2

I don't care how perfect my mother was. When I was nine years old, I wanted to disown her. Leave home and never return. Forget she ever existed. My mother was the kind of woman whom everyone adored. The model of decorum and civility. She served as PTO president and treasurer of the ladies' auxiliary. She was the only female umpire in our town's Little League. She baked and knit and grew vegetables by the pound.

The first story offers a character sketch of the storyteller's mother. We have no idea what kind of story we are listening to, so it's easy for us to check out at this point. Nothing is at stake. There is no wonder. We don't need to hear the next sentence.

The second story starts with an Elephant. It contains exactly the same character description, but it opens with a clear explanation of what to expect.

*“When I was nine years old, I wanted to disown her. Leave home and never return. Forget she ever existed.”*

The audience has a good idea of the story being told, and it's likely that they will want to hear more. Now they have something to wonder about:

*Why did this woman want to disown her mother at such an early age?*

*Will things turn out okay in the end?*

*Was her mother to blame for these feelings of ill will, or will we discover that the storyteller was the real problem?*

Three simple sentences at the start of the story change our perception about everything that follows. The Elephant may strike you as a simple and obvious technique, but it's not. Pay attention to the way that people tell stories. More often

than not, you will find yourself two or three minutes into a story, unsure of where the story is going and why you should continue to listen.

Is this tactic simple? Yes. Obvious? Unfortunately not.

Elephants can also change color. That is, the need, want, problem, peril, or mystery stated in the beginning of the story can change along the way. You may be offered one expectation only to have it pulled away in favor of another.

Start with a gray Elephant. End with a pink one.

In “Charity Thief,” the Elephant that I present at the beginning of the story is a simple one:

I’m stuck in New Hampshire with a flat tire and no spare.

The audience knows this almost immediately. It all happens within the first two sentences of the story. At this point, the audience is probably thinking that this is an escape story: How will Matt escape from New Hampshire and return home without a spare tire or money?

Those are the stakes. The problem is clear. Now the audience has a chance to guess. To predict. To wonder. Hopefully the audience wants to know how it all turns out.

Eventually the Elephant in my story changes color. The story isn’t really about escaping New Hampshire at all. It’s really a story about understanding the nature of loneliness. I change the color of the Elephant halfway through this story. I present the audience with one Elephant, but then I paint it another color. I trick them. This is an excellent storytelling strategy: make your audience think they are on one path, and then when they least expect it, show them that they have been on a different path all along.

Note that I’m not actually changing the path that the audience is on. It’s the same path we’ve been walking since the start of the story. The audience just didn’t realize that it’s a much deeper, more interesting path than first expected.

Don’t switch Elephants. Simply change the color.

Changing the Elephant’s color provides an audience with one of the greatest surprises that a storyteller has to offer. My wife has often said that this is my preferred model for storytelling, and she’s right. I’m always most excited about a story when I can change the color of the Elephant.

“The laugh laugh laugh cry formula,” she calls it.

The audience thinks they are in the midst of a hilarious caper, and then they suddenly realize that this story is not what they expected.

This method of storytelling is especially effective when the end of your story is heavy, emotional, sorrowful, or heartrending. To keep an entire story from being filled with weight and emotion, I try to find a way to make the beginning light and

fun, hilarious and joyous. I present an Elephant that is happy, adventurous, and amusing to contrast with the weight, the sadness, and the solemnity at the end.

Start with a pink, polka-dotted Elephant and end with varying shades of blue.

My story “The Promise” is a perfect example of this. It’s a story about my lifelong relationship with my high-school sweetheart, Laura. The Elephant that I present at the beginning of the story is simple: “Matt must execute the perfect first kiss with his new girlfriend, who also happens to be his first love.” Then I proceed to tell the audience how I fail miserably at every attempt to kiss her. With each failed attempt, the audience becomes more convinced that the story will culminate with our first kiss. But in truth the story is about a promise I make to Laura when we begin dating. It’s a promise I describe at the beginning of the story. It’s a promise that I must keep almost twenty-five years later. That is what the story is really about.

Striving for that first kiss helps the audience understand our relationship better. It brings our love for each other into clear focus. But it’s a story about far more than a simple first kiss. The beginning is funny and joyous. The ending is sorrowful and tragic.

Another excellent example of this is “Lemonade Stand.” The Elephant that I present at the beginning of the story is “Matt wants to earn a hundred dollars at his roadside lemonade stand.”

The lemonade is quickly discarded in favor of more profitable items: my brother’s Star Wars collection, my sister’s Barbie doll wardrobe, and my grandfather’s barbecued chicken. The story starts out as a boy’s hilarious and possibly unethical attempt to earn some cash, but the truth of the story, and the truth about why I need a hundred dollars, is much more.

You can listen to both stories on the “Storyworthy the Book” YouTube channel. See if you can spot the moment when I change the Elephant’s color.

Filmmakers almost always present an Elephant at the beginning of their movies. Even a film like *Die Hard*, which one might describe as “terrorists take over a skyscraper in Los Angeles, and only Bruce Willis can save the day” is much more. It’s actually the story of a husband trying desperately to get back to his wife and save their marriage. He flies across the country to visit her for Christmas and convince her to return to New York and their former life together, but terrorists interrupt the reunion, forcing Willis’s character, John McClane, to fight a lot harder to get his wife back.

The filmmakers present us with this Elephant very early on. McClane is carrying an unwieldy stuffed animal on the plane for his daughter, the kind a parent only buys to make up for lost time. McClane’s wife asks her nanny to make up the spare bed, “just in case,” making it clear that this husband and wife are not together in the traditional sense of the word. McClane then explains his situation to Argyle,

the limo driver.

McCLANE	She had a good job. It turned into a great career.
ARGYLE	That meant she had to move here.
McCLANE	You're very fast, Argyle.
ARGYLE	So, why didn't you come? Well? Why didn't you come with her?
McCLANE	Because I'm a New York cop. I got a backlog of New York scumbags I'm still trying to put behind bars. I can't just go that easy.

That's it. The Elephant. Yes, there will be terrorists and explosions and lots and lots of glass, but in the end, it's a story about a disconnected husband and a wife. It's no surprise at the end of the film when McClane saves his wife's life by removing from her wrist the Rolex she had received earlier from her boss for a job well done.

The wife's new job in Los Angeles is the reason that the couple is divided. We learned that at the beginning of the story. At the end of the story, her new job is no longer an obstacle. Removing the watch symbolizes this unspoken reality.

And it all started with a stuffed animal, a spare room, and a conversation with a limo driver before a shot was ever fired. It started with an Elephant.

## Backpacks

A Backpack is a strategy that increases the stakes of the story by increasing the audience's anticipation about a coming event. It's when a storyteller loads up the audience with all the storyteller's hopes and fears in that moment before moving the story forward. It's an attempt to do two things:

1. Make the audience wonder what will happen next.
2. Make your audience experience the same emotion, or something like the same emotion, that the storyteller experienced in the moment about to be described.

The first goal is fairly easy to achieve if a Backpack is used properly. If you can accomplish the second goal, that is really something.

In "Charity Thief," I stick a Backpack on my audience when I describe my plan for begging for money before entering the gas station. I say:

*So I make a plan. I'm going to beg for gas, because it's 1991. Gas is eighty-five cents a gallon, so eight dollars is all I need to get me home. I'll offer my license, my wallet, everything in my car as collateral in exchange for eight dollars' worth of gas and the promise that I will return and repay the money and more. Whatever it takes.*

*So I rehearse my pitch, take a deep breath, and walk in.*

At this point the audience is loaded with my hopes and dreams. They know the plan, so when the kid behind the counter refuses to give me gas for my car, the audience experiences the same kind of disappointment that I felt that day. They knew the plan. They wanted it to succeed.

When I tell this story onstage, I watch my audience carefully at the moment when the kid behind the counter refuses my request. It's always the same. When the kid says no, shoulders slump. Chins dip to chests. The audience looks frustrated. Angry. Some audibly sigh. They were hoping, just as I was, that my problem would be solved. By putting a Backpack on them, I allowed my audience to enter the gas station with me, wondering what would happen next. I turned my plan into their plan. They're now invested in the outcome.

These are stakes. The audience must hear the next sentence.

This is why heist movies like the Ocean's Eleven franchise explain almost every part of the robbers' plan before they ever make a move. If you understand their plan to rob the casino, you can experience the same level of frustration, worry, fear, and suspense that the characters feel when their plans go awry. The filmmakers put the audience on Danny Ocean's team. They know the plan, so they feel as if they are a part of the heist themselves.

You'll see this in films constantly. A group of teens is trapped in a haunted house. They devise an escape plan. Their plan fails. One of their group disappears in the process. He is presumably dead. Then our heroes regroup to make a new plan. Each time characters in a movie regroup and make a new plan, the audience is given a new Backpack. This makes them wonder what will happen next. It allows the audience to become emotionally connected to the results of the characters' plan, or, in the case of storytelling, emotionally connected to you as the storyteller.

Backpacks are most effective when a plan does *not* work. If I had described my plan for begging for gas, and then the plan worked perfectly, there would have been no payoff for the Backpack. The scene would fall flat. If I go through all the trouble of explaining my plan beforehand, and then I say, "The kid agrees to lend me the gas," the audience is oddly unsatisfied. They are left wondering why I went through all of that explanation only to find out that things turned out fine.

Similarly, if Danny Ocean's complex and clever plan for robbing the casino goes off without a hitch, you have a terrible movie.

It's an odd thing: The audience wants characters (or storytellers) to succeed, but they don't really want characters to succeed. It's struggle and strife that make stories great. They want to see their characters ultimately triumph, but they want suffering first. They don't want anything to be easy.

Perfect plans executed perfectly never make good stories. They are the stories

told by narcissists, jackasses, and thin-skinned egotists.

## Breadcrumbs

Storytellers use Breadcrumbs when we hint at a future event but only reveal enough to keep the audience guessing.

In “Charity Thief,” I drop a Breadcrumb when I say:

*But as I climb back into the car, I see my crumpled McDonald’s uniform on the backseat, and I suddenly have an idea.*

During a workshop, sometimes I’ll stop the story right there and ask my students what they are thinking. Their responses are hilarious.

The most common response is “I thought you were going to find a McDonald’s and work at it for a few hours to earn the money you needed.”

“Yes,” I say. “Because this is how McDonald’s restaurants work. You can don a uniform and work in any restaurant at any time that you’d like, and you’ll be paid in cash at the end of your self-determined shift.”

The second most common response is “I thought you’d sell your uniform at a thrift shop.”

“Yes,” I say, “Thrift shops are always looking for used fast-food uniforms. Also, how was I supposed to locate a thrift store a hundred miles from home with almost no gas in my car?”

I know these guesses seem silly, but who can blame the respondents? The real answer is almost impossible to predict, and that’s why I love this Breadcrumb. All I care about is that my audience is wondering what will happen next. Even if they haven’t made an actual prediction in their mind, they are wondering: What will Matt do with that uniform? How is that going to help him get the gas he needs to escape New Hampshire?

Stakes. The audience needs to hear the next sentence.

The trick is to choose the Breadcrumbs that create the most wonder in the minds of your audience without giving them enough to guess correctly. Choose wisely. Breadcrumbs are particularly effective when the truly unexpected is coming. I am about to impersonate a charity worker in order to steal money from innocent homeowners. That is unexpected. The perfect moment to lay a Breadcrumb.

## Hourglasses

There comes a time in many stories when you reached a moment (or *the* moment) that the audience has been waiting for. Perhaps you have paved the way to the moment with Breadcrumbs and Backpacks, or maybe you’ve used none of these strategies because you’ve got yourself a stake-laden story, and now you’re

approaching the payoff. The sentence you've been waiting to say. The sentence your audience has been waiting to hear.

This is the moment to use an Hourglass. It's time to slow things down. Grind them to a halt when possible. When you know the audience is hanging on your every word, *let them hang*. Drag out the wait as long as possible.

In "Charity Thief," that moment occurs as I am knocking on that blue door. The audience knows that I'm about to do something to attempt to solve my problem. They know that a McDonald's uniform is involved (my Breadcrumb), but they probably can't imagine what my solution might be.

They want to know. They need to know. So what do I do?

I stop the story cold. I bring everything to a halt. I start by describing things that don't require a description. I say:

*An hour later, I'm standing on the porch of a small, red-brick house on a quiet, residential street. I'm knocking on a blue door.*

*I'm wearing my McDonald's manager's uniform.*

We all know what a McDonald's uniform looks like. Everyone has seen one, either in real life or on the multitude of McDonald's commercials that plaster the television screen daily. Even if an audience member has never seen one before, knowing what it looks like is irrelevant to the story. There is no need to describe this uniform in any detail, yet I choose to describe it anyway, in the greatest detail. It is the longest bit of description in the entire story, and I'm describing the last thing in the word that needs to be described. This is because I have my audience now. I own them. They cannot wait for that blue door to open so the unknown can become known.

What the hell is Matt planning to do?

Why is he wearing his McDonald's uniform?

I want this moment to last as long as possible. I want to milk it for every bit of suspense. I say:

*Blue shirt. Blue pants. Blue tie. Gold name badge. I'm holding a gray McDonald's briefcase with a big M engraved on the front like a shield.*

This story has come to a complete stop. Think about it: I say the word *blue* in this passage *three times*.

I also use the word *shield* intentionally. A shield is used in battle. I want to hint at the possibility of danger. Violence. War. More stakes. Then I say:

*I knock on that blue door again.*

*When the door opens, a man is standing in front of me. He looks about fifty, but he might as well be five hundred. He's one of these guys who looks*

*as if he has all the wisdom of the world wrapped up in him, and in that moment, I know that he knows that I'm about to do something terrible.*

That is a lot to say about a man whom I've seen for exactly three seconds. That's a lot of assumptions. But once again, I'm grinding this story to a halt. Making my audience wait for the sentence they want most.

I use the word *terrible* intentionally too. It was a word chosen carefully. I considered many alternatives. I wanted a word that would suggest many things. I wanted a word that would cause the greatest wonder in my audience's mind.

After much deliberation, I settled on *terrible*. I think it's perfect. Then I say:

*But it's two o'clock on a Sunday afternoon. I'm standing on his porch in a McDonald's uniform. It's one of those moments when you realize that the only way to get out of a terrible situation is to go through with it. So I take another deep breath and say . . .*

All I've done here is summarize what has just happened. It's unnecessary. It's redundant. Under any other circumstances, I would argue that this section needs to be cut. But this is not any other circumstance. I have my audience dying for the next sentence, and I know it. This unnecessary bit of summary slows things down and raises the tension even further. It's the final delay before the sentence that everyone is waiting for. The sentence that will cause people to either laugh or groan (and your reaction says a lot about you as a person).

*"Hi, I'm Matt, and I'm collecting money for Ronald McDonald Children's Charities."*

In addition to adding in superfluous detail and summary, I'll slow my pace as I approach this sentence. I will reduce my volume. I want the audience on the edge of their seats, desperately awaiting those twelve words.

It's the perfect time to use an Hourglass.

Stakes. The desire of an audience to hear the next sentence, made greater by the deliberate slowing down of action and pace.

Find the moment in your story that everyone has been waiting for, then flip that Hourglass and let the sand run.

## Crystal Balls

The Crystal Ball is the easiest of the strategies to deploy, because you already use Crystal Balls in everyday life. A Crystal Ball is a false prediction made by a storyteller to cause the audience to wonder if the prediction will prove to be true.

In "Charity Thief," I say:

*[The man] points his finger at me and says, "You stay right there." Then he walks back into his house, and I know what he's doing. He's calling the*

*police, and they will come and arrest me for stealing money from McDonald's.*

This does not happen, of course, but when I present this very real possibility, the audience wants to know if it will happen. By predicting my future arrest, I've established wonder in their minds about a future event.

We use Crystal Balls in everyday life because we, as human beings, are all prediction machines. We are constantly trying to anticipate the future, so when telling stories, recounting those in-the-moment predictions is critical.

You might tell your significant other, "The boss called me into her office this morning, and as I walked down the hall, I just knew I had done something wrong and was getting fired. This was it. The end of the road for me. It was the longest walk of my life. When I stepped into her office, she told me that I was being promoted."

Or "I was sure that my boyfriend forgot my birthday again, but when I got home, he had a surprise party waiting for me."

Or "For the first four decades of my life, I thought brie was disgusting simply because of the way it looked. But tonight I tried brie for the first time, and I can't believe what I've been missing."

That last one is real. It took me forty years to taste brie. I'm an idiot.

We spend our lives predicting our future. Anticipating what will come next. Often these predictions about future events are incorrect, and quite often they become part of the stories we tell. We want people to know what we were thinking as well as what we were saying and doing.

In storytelling, deploy Crystal Balls strategically: Only when your prediction seems possible. Only when your guess is reasonable. And only when your prediction presents an intriguing or exciting possibility.

The idea that the police might be coming to arrest me in "Charity Thief" meets these requirements well.

Remember, the best way to ensure that your story has stakes is to choose a story that has stakes. Elephants, Backpacks, Breadcrumbs, Hourglasses, and Crystal Balls will only get you so far. If your story is boring, it will always be boring. But if your story has some potentially boring parts — sections that need to be told but simply aren't compelling — these strategies will help a lot.

Every single one of the stories I have told onstage has an Elephant. They all begin with a clear sense of the want or need or peril or problem or mystery. Sometimes that Elephant changes color, sometimes not.

Many of my stories only use an Elephant. When you're taking your clothes off in the crew room of a McDonald's or donning cardboard armor to battle a vicious cat or riding your bike off a barn roof, you have all the stakes you'll ever need.

If you're not sure about the level of stakes in your story, simply ask yourself:

- Would the audience want to hear my next sentence?
- If I stopped speaking right now, would anyone care?
- Am I more compelling than video games and pizza and sex at this moment?

If the answer to any of these questions is no, you need to raise the stakes. Use these strategies to engage your audience and bring them to the edge of their seat.

There are certainly other ways to raise the stakes in a story, but these five strategies are easily learned and easily deployed. With a little practice, these will get you far. In addition to these five strategies, I want to mention one more way to keep your audience's attention.

## Humor

Humor doesn't actually add to or raise the stakes of a story. It doesn't give your audience a reason to listen for the next sentence. It doesn't increase the level of suspense or peril or mystery. But it's a way of keeping your audience's attention through a section of your story that you think might be less than compelling.

Chapter 16 will address the effective use of humor, but just know that in the absence of possible stakes, humor can substitute for a time. But also remember that the goal of a storyteller is not to tell a funny story. The goal is to tell a story that moves an audience emotionally. That means a story can contain humor, but if it's all funny, then the story operates on a single emotional plane and is ultimately forgettable.

Humor will keep your audience listening, but use it for this reason only when you're unable to raise the stakes in any other way.

Stakes are essential in a story. Stakes are the gears that make stories work. If your story lacks stakes or lacks meaningful stakes, there is nothing you can do to make that story great.

Humor is optional. Stakes are nonnegotiable.

## STORY BREAK

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### Zombie Brother

My brother, Jeremy, went missing back in 2007. He quit his job, changed his phone number, moved. Disappeared without telling a soul. After a long and extensive search, no sign of him could be found.

Jeremy frequently spent time in the South, photographing Civil War battlefields, often on his own. As the years rolled by and we heard nothing from him, I reached the conclusion that my brother was probably dead. Through accident or misdeed, something terrible had happened to him. He was gone forever.

I went from telling people that I didn't know where my brother was to telling them that he had disappeared to explaining that Jeremy was presumed dead.

In 2012, I was preparing to perform at the 92nd Street Y in New York City. I was sitting in the café, nibbling on a bagel alongside my father-in-law and my editor, when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

“Don’t I know you?”

I turned. It was Jeremy. Just minutes before I was to take the stage and perform for hundreds of people, my dead brother had come back to life.

Our reunion was made possible by a woman who had read my first novel and decided to learn more about me online. She found a blog post explaining the presumed fate of my brother.

She knew Jeremy. A year earlier, she had been working for him. She called Jeremy and told him that I’d been looking for him. During his disappearance, many things had changed in my life. I had published my first two novels and had begun performing onstage. My daughter, Clara, was born.

The woman knew that I was performing at the 92nd Street Y and convinced Jeremy to attend the show and reconnect with me.

He did. We spent about fifteen minutes in the café, catching up as quickly as possible.

Then I took the stage. Before telling my story, I explained to the audience what had just happened. I needed to say it aloud so I could move on to my story. They were as shocked as I was. My father-in-law says it was the only time in his life that he has seen me speechless.

I told a story onstage that night in which my brother played a role (of course). When I was finished, I found Jeremy standing in the back of the room. His first words to me were, “You messed up that story! You left out the best part!”

He was right. I can't remember everything.

My brother and I have been in frequent contact ever since.

About a month after meeting in New York, Jeremy invited us over for dinner at his apartment, about an hour from my home. We invited the woman who reconnected us as well. Jeremy cooked a meal identical to what my mother would have cooked when we were children. We ate and laughed and shared stories.

When Jeremy bent over to pick up Clara to hug her at the end of the evening, I warned him that she would cry. Clara cried whenever anyone except for Elysha or me picked her up.

She was silent as Jeremy held her in his arms. Smiling, even. It was a damn miracle.

When my son, Charlie, was born later that year, Jeremy was the first person I called from the delivery room.

You never know who you're going to meet at a storytelling show.

# CHAPTER TEN

## The Five Permissible Lies of True Storytelling

It's time for me to come clean: I lied to you.

“Charity Thief” is full of lies. You may argue by the end of this chapter that they aren’t really lies, but I like the word *lie* because it grabs people’s attention. I’m a storyteller. Words matter.

But yes, it’s true. They aren’t exactly lies, but rather slight manipulations of the truth. Alterations in the fabric of reality. Shifts in time and space.

But I’ll continue to call them lies throughout this chapter, because three-letter words are convenient to type, and again, lies get attention. *Alterations in the fabric of reality* is the kind of wonky phrase used by a president who is facing impeachment.

Three important caveats before we proceed with the five types of permissible lies in storytelling:

### Important Caveat #1

As storytellers, we only lie for the benefit of our audience. We never lie for our own personal gain. We don’t manipulate the truth, alter the fabric of reality, or shift time and space for our own benefit. We’re not in the business of making ourselves look better, appearing more noble, or mitigating our shame or failure. We lie in our stories only when our audience would want us to lie — only when the story is better for our doing so.

### Important Caveat #2

Memory is a slippery thing, and as storytellers, we must remember this. Research suggests that every time you tell a story, it becomes less true. Each time you remove a memory from the file cabinet of your mind and play with it for a while, you are unconsciously making changes, so when you return that folder to the file cabinet, the memory is permanently altered. We tell stories as well as we can remember them, but we must acknowledge that this is probably inaccurate in many ways.

I tell a story about the night that my first child was conceived entitled “Sex with Corn.” It’s a story about my secret desire to avoid becoming a parent because I grew up as the eldest of five, filling in the role of parent so often because my parents were never present. As a boy, I felt perpetually overwhelmed and forever alone. I never wanted to feel this way again.

But I loved my wife and agreed to at least one child so that she would marry me, and after two years of marriage, the time had come to finally make a baby. Thanks to the stupid internet and some baby-making website, Elysha knew the exact night when she was ovulating. Rather than a month-long carpet bombing of my wife's uterus, I was relegated to a single, surgical strike. Even the fun had been stolen from making a baby.

On that night when the internet told us to have sex, Elysha burned her hand terribly on a pan while making dinner. A blistering second-degree burn. As sympathetic as I was to her pain, I was also thinking, "Great. No sex tonight. Another month before I have to become a father." A one-month reprieve doesn't sound like much, but on that day, with fatherhood looming, twenty-eight days of freedom felt enormous.

Later that night Elysha came to bed clutching a bag of frozen corn.

"Honey," I said. "No."

"Yes," she said. "Just make it quick."

Not only had she given me an order that I was perfectly capable of following, but it was the moment I realized for the first time that I wasn't going to be overwhelmed and alone this time around. As a father, I would have Elysha standing beside me, a woman willing to have sex with me while clinging to frozen vegetables. If she could do that, she could do anything.

Why do I tell you this? When I was first preparing this story, I thought I was the one who had burned his hand. When Elysha overheard me preparing this story, her reaction was loud and immediate. "What did you say? You didn't burn your hand! I did!"

I thought she was crazy. I was certain that I was one with the blistering wound. We went back and forth for a while. Fortunately, I write a blog that basically documents my life, so we were able to go back to that evening's entry and discover that Elysha was right. She had burned her hand. This, of course, made sense, since I almost never cook, and when I do, it's eggs or macaroni and cheese.

I also distinctly remember the moment of realization in our bedroom. "I won't be alone when I'm a father. Elysha will be with me." That makes no sense if I was the one with the burned hand.

Still, I was sure that my hand had been burned. That is how I remembered it.

Memory is a slippery thing. Our stories are true as we remember them, but even someone like me, who remembers more of his life than most people, doesn't remember accurately. We must accept this.

One of the things I often do when working on a story is contact the people involved for pertinent details. My sister, Kelli, has a memory for our childhood that rivals my own. She can tell you what she wore on the first and last day of school

from kindergarten through her senior year of high school. She has been an enormous resource when recalling details, and others have been as well. After hearing me perform for the first time, my brother's first comment to me was "You forgot the best part of that story!"

It was true. I added the part he mentioned, and the story is much better for his reminder.

My point is this: We want to tell true stories of our lives, but no story is entirely true. Intentionally or otherwise, our stories contain mistakes, inaccuracies, slippages of memory. All I am asking you to do is to be strategic in some of your inaccuracies, and only when it's done for the benefit of the audience. Okay?

### Important Caveat #3

As storytellers, we never add something to a story that was not already there. We can manipulate the story in ways I will explain, but never, ever do we add something that did not already exist in the moment. We are not fiction tellers. We are truth tellers. We may not tell the whole truth, and we may manipulate that truth from time to time, but we start with a pile of facts and figures, and we never add to that pile. It's our job to take the raw content of a story and craft it into something entertaining, compelling, moving, and satisfying. Making something up is cheating, and great storytellers are not cheaters.

## The Five Permissible Lies of Storytelling

### Lie #1: Omission

Every story contains omissions. If you were to tell every single thing in the story, it would never end. We all omit elements from our stories, but great storytellers do this strategically and for a variety of reasons.

Here are a few of the strategic omissions in "Charity Thief," as well as the reason for each omission.

#### *Randy*

I pick up a hitchhiker that day. His name is Randy, and he might be the craziest person I've ever met. I pick him up in hopes he will trade gas money for a ride, but he has no money.

"Why would I be hitchhiking if I had money?" he asked.

Randy is with me for much of the story. When I am standing on the porch as that man tells me about his dead wife, Randy is standing across the street, hiding behind a tree, wondering what the hell is going in.

I remove Randy from the story because if you know that he is behind the tree as I speak to the man, then you are behind the tree with Randy instead of on the porch with me. Randy is hilarious and bizarre and would make my story funnier

and maybe even more entertaining, but he doesn't help me get my audience on the porch with me and the widower. Randy distracts. He does not serve my five-second moment, so he gets cut right out.

People are the most frequently omitted aspects to stories: third wheels and random strangers who distract audiences from the matter at hand. If a person doesn't fill a role in your story, simply pretend that person wasn't there.

My friend Tom tells the story about a girl named Liz whom he admired from afar in college for quite a while. One night he finally gets the courage to ask her to dance, and they end up dancing the night away.

At the end of the evening, he asks to drive Liz home. She smiles and agrees. On the way, they finally have a chance to talk. Liz asks Tom what he's doing at school.

"I'm a junior," Tom says. "Working on my education degree."

"A junior?" Liz says. She sounds confused. "How old are you?"

"Twenty," Tom says. "Why?"

It turns out that Liz is twenty-seven. She works at the school. She's just spent the evening dancing with a student in front of her colleagues. She's embarrassed. She feels that she's been tricked. She's in a rage. She yells at Tom for the remainder of the drive.

When they arrive at Liz's apartment, she throws open the car door and storms up the walk.

"Can I call you sometime?" Tom shouts.

"I think you're a little young for me!" Liz shouts back and marches to her door.

Tom then tells the audience, "And when people ask how I met my wife, that is the story I tell." Great. Right?

One problem. There's a third person in the car. Tom is driving another girl home too. She's in the backseat. When Tom first told me the story, he included the third wheel, and instead of a story about him and Liz, it unintentionally becomes a story of a girl in an incredibly awkward situation in the backseat of a car. You cannot help but sympathize with this poor girl. Instead of being in the front seat with Tom and Liz, the audience is in the backseat with the third wheel.

The third wheel needs to come out of the story so the audience can be where Tom needs them to be: in the front seat, right between him and Liz.

Eliminate people from stories when they serve no purpose. Pretend they aren't there. Ghost them.

### *The Other Houses*

That blue door is the third door I knock on that day. I knock on two doors

before that. At the first house, I'm given three dollars by a woman who looks as if she doesn't have two nickels to rub together. At the second home, I get another five dollars. If you remember the story, I needed about eight dollars to get home.

So why do I knock on the third door?

Randy. He thinks we've stumbled upon a new career. He talks me into knocking on one more door. "We'll buy candy and soda!" he says. "It'll be amazing!"

That's when I meet the widower.

Why do those other two houses come out of the story? They don't help me get my audience on that porch with me and the widower. They are superfluous and unnecessary. They only add unnecessary repetition to the story. They don't make you understand my five-second moment any better.

### *Winston*

Remember the half-naked mountain man named Winston? I would love to tell you about Winston. He's the owner of Winston's Garage. He's half naked because he's wearing cutoff overalls and no shirt, and his overalls are handmade. They are lined with pockets that are each sized and shaped for a different tool. Small, medium, and large pockets for each of his screwdrivers. A holster for his wrench. A Velcro strap for his hammer. He is plastered in tools like some bizarre suit of armor.

I buy the spare tire from Winston for \$110. Every penny to my name. But when I ask him to drive me back to my car, he says, "That'll be another \$10."

"But Winston," I say. "You know you just took all of my money."

He smiles. "Good thing tires are round."

Rolling that spare tire for five miles down a New Hampshire highway might be the hardest thing I've ever done. I'd love to tell you about Winston and that damn tire, but none of it helps the audience land in my five-second moment on a front porch with a widower.

Sadly, Winston must go. Someday I may tell a separate story about him and his haggling me out of all my money, but that story will be about a different five-second moment.

### *Redemption*

Storytellers are also allowed to end their stories wherever they want, thus omitting endings that are undesirable. In "Charity Thief," I end the story early. In truth, I return home from New Hampshire feeling terrible about what I have done. I've taken twenty-eight dollars from three homeowners, faked my mother's death, and lied to a man who deserved better.

So I make a deal with myself: Every time I receive a dollar bill in change as a

customer of McDonald's, I'll put that dollar into the collection container until I pay back my twenty-eight dollars.

I do this. I pay it back quickly, but I still feel awful about what I have done. In truth, a part of me still feels terrible to this day. So I continued to put dollar bills in the container every time I received one as change. I did this for years. It became a bit of a habit, until one day, I was standing beside Elysha at a McDonald's, and she watched me slide another dollar into the canister.

"Why do you always put a dollar in the canister every time you're here?" she asked.

I told her the story. At that point, I had paid back \$604. Ever since placing that first dollar in the canister, I had been keeping count, waiting for the dollar amount that would finally alleviate me of my guilt.

When I was finished with my story, Elysha put her hand on my shoulder and said, "It's okay, Matt. You can let it go." I did.

The real ending of that story — with my redemption — is terrible. It ruins the story. But I didn't realize this when I first took the stage at Housing Works in New York City to tell the story at a Moth StorySLAM. I told a version of the story that included the ending, and George Dawes Green, founder of The Moth and one of the judges that night, assigned me a decidedly lower score than the other judging teams. At that point, I knew who George was but had yet to meet him. I had wanted to impress, but apparently I had failed.

It cost me the victory. I finished one-tenth of one point out of first place.

As I left the bookstore that night, I stepped onto the wet cobblestones of Crosby Street and sighed. I was disappointed about how close I had come to winning. I thought I had told the best story that night.

Suddenly I felt hands on my shoulders. I was spun in place and found myself facing George Dawes Green for the first time in my life.

"You ruined that story!" he said.

"What?" I replied, suddenly frightened of the man whom I admired beyond measure.

"You ruined that story," he repeated. "Don't ever tell that ending again. No one wants redemption. Everyone wants the clown."

Then he released me from his grip, turned, and went back into the bookstore.

I stood there in the drizzle, my mind reeling.

I thought long and hard about what George had said on the three-hour drive home, and by the time I pulled into my driveway, I agreed with what he had said. The story is better without the redemption.

Here is what I think: A story is like a coat. When we tell a story, we put a coat on our audience. Our goal is to make that coat as difficult to remove as possible. I want that coat to be impossible to take off. Days after you've heard my story at the dinner table or the conference room or the golf course or the theater, I want you to be thinking about my story. I want that coat to cling to your body and mind.

The longer that story lingers in the hearts and minds of our audience, the better the story.

When I tell my audience about the \$604, I make it easy for the audience to remove the coat. "I did a terrible thing, but then I more than made up for my transgression. The world is back in order. All debts are paid."

If I don't tell my audience about my redemption, the world remains broken. I did a terrible thing, and it still weighs on my soul. It's a much more difficult coat to remove. Days later you'll find yourself thinking about what I did, because I will still be guilty of the crime in your mind. The world will still be broken.

George is right. Audiences don't want redemption. Redemption cleanses the palate. It ties up all loose ends. It makes the world whole again. It allows your audience to sleep well at night.

I want my audience tossing and turning over my story.

When I write novels, I try to end my story about ten pages before the reader would want the book to end. In that way, I'm also putting a coat on my audience. If the reader emails me with a question about the end of one of my books — what happened to Martin and Laura? Are they together? What did Emma say to Cassidy? Is Budo in heaven? Does Caroline ever reach out to the driver in the accident? — I know I've stuck them with a coat that they cannot shake. I am happy. They are curious about people who don't actually exist. My story remains alive in their hearts and minds long after they have finished reading the last sentence.

Storytellers end their stories in the most advantageous place possible. They omit the endings that offer neat little bows and happily-ever-afters. The best stories are a little messy at the end. They offer small steps, marginal progress, questionable results. The best stories give rise to unanswered questions.

I told "Charity Thief" again at a Moth StorySLAM in Boston a couple of years later. I was chosen to take the stage first that night, which is typically the kiss of death in a Moth StorySLAM. Score inflation makes it difficult to win a slam from the first few spots, and it makes it almost impossible to win from the very first spot of the night. I've only seen one person win a Moth Story-SLAM after having to take the stage first. It was me. That night.

I left out the redemption.

Storytellers tell the truth by not telling the whole truth.

## Lie #2: Compression

Compression is used when storytellers want to push time and space together in order to make the story easier to comprehend, visualize, and tell.

If the first scene of your story takes place on a Monday, for example, and the next scene happens on Friday, and you are concerned about the audience wondering about Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, you simply push time together and turn your Monday-through-Friday story into a Monday-through-Tuesday story.

Placing scenes closer together also heightens the drama and suspense of a story. It makes the world seem more visceral and cinematic.

I tell a story entitled “Bike off Roof,” which tells about the time I rode my bike off the barn roof as a child to get my mother’s attention. It doesn’t go well. My plan was to jump my bike off the roof and land on two wheels, but it turns out that physics doesn’t allow that to happen.

In the story, I talk about planning and executing the jump as a single continuous scene. The entire story takes place over the course of a single afternoon.

In reality, my sister and I planned the jump on one day and I executed it the next. But why stretch out a story over the course of two days when nothing of consequence happens between the planning and execution? It’s easier for an audience to see and understand my story if all the events take place within a single afternoon.

My Saturday-Sunday story becomes a Saturday-afternoon story. (You can also find this story on the “Storyworthy the Book” YouTube channel.)

Geography can also be compressed for the sake of comprehension and visualization. I tell a story entitled “The Basin” about damming a river in New Hampshire to drain the Basin, an enormous granite bowl carved into the hillside of a mountain by the river. The Basin is a minor tourist attraction, and after an encounter with an overconfident park ranger, who assures me that the water has been running through this granite formation for thousands of years without interruption, I decide to empty his precious Basin and prove him wrong.

The geography of the story is complicated. The flow of the river and the location of the highway and my campground upstream can make the story difficult to follow, so when I tell the story, I push the geography closer together and eliminate unnecessary locations and barriers completely. I paint the picture of a single river running from my campground to the Basin, when in reality it was far more convoluted and wide-ranging.

There is never room for needless complexity in a story. Remember that stories are like rivers (not unlike the river I dammed up to empty the Basin). They

continue to flow even as your audience struggles to understand a time line or attempts to construct a complicated mental map in their minds. For this reason, simplicity should be prized at all points. Compression can often be helpful in this regard.

### Lie #3: Assumption

Storytellers use assumption when there is a detail so important to the story that it must be stated with specificity, so the storyteller makes a reasonable assumption about what the specifics may be. This does not mean that a storyteller should assume all details. It is only when the forgotten detail is critical to the story that an assumption should be made.

I tell a story about the time my brother and I dropped our Batman and Robin action figures through the rusted-out hole in the floor of my mother's 1972 Chevy Chevette as she drove down the highway. We tied rope to the figures and let out the line until Batman and Robin were bouncing behind the car. Then we tied off the line on the gearshift and hopped into the way-back to watch them ricochet off the road and each other. It was the 1970s version of an iPad. Hours of entertainment on those long drives.

One day Batman ricocheted off Robin and bounced into the opposing lane and hit a car, setting off a chain of events that launches the story.

I can't remember the model or make of the car that Batman hit, but it's such a critical moment in the story that I want everyone in the audience to see the same thing at the same time, so I make an assumption. Since it's the 1970s, I declare that the car was a station wagon, because that was a common vehicle on the roads in the seventies.

I'd love to say it was a cherry-red Corvette instead of a station wagon, because it would make the story more interesting, but when I assume (and I don't very often), I always make the most reasonable and likely assumption.

### Lie #4: Progression

A lie of progression is when a storyteller changes the order of events in a story to make it more emotionally satisfying or comprehensible to the listener. In my experience, this is the least common lie told, and I have never done it myself, but I've recommended that other storytellers use it from time to time.

My favorite example is from a storyteller who was placed in charge of her brother's ashes following his death. Her brother was a Baltimore Orioles fan, so she hoped to spread his ashes on Camden Yards, the Orioles' ballpark.

This is impossible, of course. If ashes could be spread on professional baseball fields, stadiums would be heaped up with ashes and games could never be played.

Still, she went to Camden Yards three days after the season ended and spoke to

a groundskeeper outside the stadium. They shared an incredible, tear-filled moment, and then he let her spread her brother's ashes on the foot of the Orioles' dugout so that every time a player runs onto the field, he would carry a little bit of her brother with them.

Beautiful. Right? Then she went to Baltimore's inner harbor and spread more of her brother's ashes on the doorsteps of his favorite strip clubs, so every time a man entered a strip club, he would carry a little bit of her brother with him.

Then she ended her day at a tree where the family picnicked for years. Family members gathered for a brief ceremony, and the remaining ashes were buried there.

Beautiful story, but told in the wrong order. The Camden Yards moment is the centerpiece to the story, and it will make you cry, so it needs to happen at the end of the story. It's her true five-second moment. Nothing she says after that moment at the ballpark feels as important.

The strip-club moment should come just before that, because it's always better to make people laugh before they cry. It hurts more that way.

And she should open her story at the tree, where she can establish the family members and their relationship and set the scene for all that is to come.

She isn't adding anything to the story that doesn't already exist. She's simply reengineering the order of events for the benefit of the audience, who expect an emotional journey to follow a certain trajectory.

Change the order of the story if the real-life order did not adhere to narrative expectations. The world does not always bend to serve our stories best, so we must sometimes bend reality instead.

## Lie #5: Conflation

Storytellers use conflation to push all the emotion of an event into a single time frame, because stories are more entertaining this way. Rather than describing change over a long period, we compress all the intellectual and emotional transformation into a smaller bit of time, because this is what audiences expect from stories.

For example, I fell in love with a girl named Heather in sixth grade. I looked across Mrs. Schultz's classroom and saw Heather in a way I had never seen her before. It was the moment I went from a boy who thought nothing of girls to a boy who couldn't stop thinking about girls. Heather was beautiful, funny, athletic, and best of all, she didn't seem to give a damn about what others thought. I have often thought that confidence is the most attractive quality in a person.

I loved Heather throughout all of sixth grade but was too afraid to do anything about it. I watched her from afar and dreamed of the day we might be together.

In seventh grade, Heather and I went off to high school and joined the

marching band. I was a member of the drum corps, and she transitioned from flute player to drum major. I saw her a lot. I stared at her as she conducted the band, because I needed to in order to keep time and play well, but also because I wanted to stare at her as often as possible.

Later we both joined the track team and saw even more of each other. Still I did nothing.

In eighth and ninth grades, I tried to talk to Heather. Tried to make her laugh. Prayed that she would take notice of me. She started dating a guy named Greg, which was one of the universe's greatest tragedies.

What were you thinking, Heather?

Still I didn't care. I still tried like hell to get her attention. In tenth grade, Heather and I were in biology class together. Being a fifteen-year-old boy, I was convinced that the best way to get a girl's attention was to treat teachers terribly, disrupt class, and show as little interest in learning as possible. I honestly thought that acting like a criminal would finally make Heather realize all that she was missing. So I began treating Mrs. Murphy, our biology teacher, terribly.

I tell a story about it. At the end, after describing how I failed miserably to get the attention of anyone except Mrs. Murphy, I say, "That was the moment when I realized that Heather would never be mine."

This is not entirely true. If I'm being honest, I never really thought that Heather would be mine. As much as I dreamed about the two of us being together, I strongly suspected that I had a snowball's chance in hell of ever making it happen.

Besides, even after my biology-class failure, I still held out hope for our union, struggling to get her to see me at band camp the following summer. But it's a far more interesting story if I take all the emotional and intellectual transformation of the four previous years before biology class and the summer after biology class and squeeze it into that one class.

That is conflation. I conflate the emotions of the moment. I transform a moment into *the* moment.

Movies do this all the time. If you track the number of days that pass over the course of the average movie, the number is small. A lot of stuff is often jammed into one or two days of movie time, when in real life, no one ever has days so packed with action.

Think again about the Ocean's Eleven franchise. Danny Ocean and his gang plan their heist over the course of just a few days, struggling to complete the preparations for the robbery in time. In real life, the multimillion-dollar robbery of a casino might take years to plan, but years are boring. Days are thrilling.

Conflation will also help you to keep your stories shorter, which is always a good thing. Shorter stories, onstage and in real life, are always more entertaining.

Audiences would much rather hear about the moment I realized that Heather would never be my girlfriend than the process by which I slowly came to understand this.

Feel the difference?

One more caveat to all these permissible lies: using these lies strategically works great until someone who is directly involved in the story is standing beside you, listening.

If I were to tell “Bike off Roof” in the presence of my sister, Kelli, she might interject and remind me that we actually planned my infamous jump off the barn roof the day before.

This can be annoying beyond imagination. “Yeah,” I’d say. “I know, but it’s a better story if I just push those two days into a single day. Okay?”

“Why?” she might ask.

Now what? Do I try to explain to her that books are lakes and stories are rivers? Do I tell her that I want my stories to be easily visualized and understood? Do I lecture her on how Steven Soderbergh forces Danny Ocean’s crew to plan their casino heist in just a few days because that’s what an audience wants? Or should I just tell her that she’s not remembering it right? It’s never good.

Elysha does this to me a lot. As I’m telling a story to friends at a party or students in a workshop, she’ll interrupt and tell me that I’m getting it wrong. I’ve forgotten the third wheel. Squished together the days. Failed to tell the real end to the story.

Sometimes this is helpful, like when I mistakenly believed that I was the one who burned his hand on that frying pan. If I’m crafting a story, that’s a great time to help me get the story straight. Not when I’m in the middle of telling it.

While I was telling the story of our daughter’s birth, Elysha interrupted to remind me that there were two doctors with us behind the curtain during her C-section instead of just the one I mentioned.

I know there were two doctors back there. Both were anesthesiologists. But only one plays a role in the story. He looks over the curtain and says, “It’s a girl.”

I remove the third wheel from the story to eliminate some of the mental clutter. Fewer superfluous people make for a better story. It’s easier to visualize three instead of four. And that other doctor never did anything as far as I’m concerned. So like Randy and Winston and the girl in the back of Tom’s car, he is removed.

I understand Elysha’s intent. She doesn’t want the reality of her life altered by my telling of a story. She would prefer that her memories of that important day remain accurate.

I understand. I want my memories of that day to remain accurate too. Except when I’m telling stories.

## STORY BREAK

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### **Doubt Is the Enemy of Every Storyteller**

For me as a storyteller — and perhaps a human being — one of the worst things that can happen is to have someone doubt my story.

I have stood on stages all over the world and shared some of the most difficult and painful moments of my life. Embarrassing situations. Despicable decisions. Immoral acts. Heartbreaking, life-altering events. I've also shared the occasional triumph. Important revelations. Those tiny steps forward. I don't hold back. I always share the truth. The uglier, the better.

Nevertheless, five times in my life, someone has expressed doubt about one of my stories.

At a Moth StorySLAM at Housing Works in Manhattan in 2014, I told the story of cheating in my high-school science fair and placing third, propelling me on to the state finals at Worcester Polytechnic Institute. After leaving the stage, a man approached and said, "Good story, but I don't know if it's true."

After telling a story at Speak Up about the time I taught my students to lie so we could win a schoolwide penny drive, a man said, "Funny story, but I have a hard time believing it." On that night, my former principal — who played a key role in the story — was in the audience. I offered to bring the man to my former principal for verification, but he passed. Not surprising.

A magazine editor once rejected one of my stories, claiming that she doubted that my moment of revelation was as succinct and powerful as I made it out to be.

I won't go into details regarding the other two incidents (though one story involves my best friend, who remains annoyed to this day about anyone doubting our adventure), but all five expressions of doubt cut me to the bone. Not only did they hurt me in the moment, but they led me to wonder if they are just the tip of the iceberg.

How many more people out there doubt my stories?

People who take my storytelling workshops quickly understand how and why I have so many stories to tell. I teach strategies and exercises designed to find and develop stories from our lives. I've dedicated my life to finding these storyworthy moments, and as my wife is fond of saying, I am often able to turn many seemingly small moments into fully realized stories. I've also admittedly led a storyworthy life.

It's not the life I would have necessarily chosen, but it is mine. It's my truth. It's me.

To doubt my stories is to doubt my life. Doubting my stories means that the

struggle and pain and terror and embarrassment that I have suffered is called into question. It means that my scars — both physical and emotional — are irrelevant. It renders the vulnerability I am willing to brave onstage meaningless.

It hurts. It hurts more than you could imagine.

I have been to hundreds of storytelling shows and heard thousands of stories, and I have heard a few that I doubt. Perhaps more than a few. But I always listen with an open heart and mind, and if I doubt the veracity of a story, I keep my mouth shut, because I don't know for sure. I will never know for sure. And I know how much it hurts to have someone doubt a story that is true.

It requires courage to stand on a stage and share your most private and painful moments. It requires almost nothing to stab that storyteller in the heart with a dagger filled with doubt. It's only happened to me five times in more than six years of storytelling, and yet each one of those expressions of doubt still hurts me today. I remember them as if they were yesterday.

It's hard to live a hard life and be told that you are not believed. It's no fun to work on a story for days, weeks, months, and even years, only to be told by someone that they don't think it's true.

Words rarely hurt me anymore. A lifetime of fight and struggle have blunted most of their power over me. But these words of doubt — these small moments of skepticism — are piercing and permanent.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

# Cinema of the Mind (Also Known as “Where the Hell Are You?”)

I’ve talked about movies a lot so far. Perhaps you’ve noticed. There’s a good reason.

A great storyteller creates a movie in the minds of the audience. Whether your audience is a theater full of storytelling fans, a boardroom filled with potential clients, a classroom bursting with apathetic high-school students, or a group of friends around the dinner table, the goal of every storyteller should be to create a cinematic experience in the minds of every listener.

This is important. You may think it’s obvious, but if it were, storytellers would do this all the time. They would obsess about the idea of maintaining an unrelenting, uninterrupted movie in the minds of their listeners.

But they don’t. Often, instead of making the story the center of their performance, storytellers make themselves the center of the show. They crack jokes. Insert amusing or observational non sequiturs. Step outside the story’s time line. Ask rhetorical questions of the audience.

These are all terrible ways to start stories. Rather than presenting a fully realized cinematic experience, they present bits of the movie. They give a scene here or a scene there, intersected by unnecessary or poorly formatted exposition that ruins the flow.

Even worse, they open stories by pontificating and proselytizing:

*Love is a beautiful thing when it isn’t killing you.*

*There are two kinds of toddlers in this world: those who raise your hopes for humanity and those who belong in a cage.*

*I used to think that I understood my mother better than anyone in the world, but now I know that mothers are like oceans: deep, dark, and full of secrets.*

These are not the beginnings to stories. These are sentences that supposedly state some universal truth that the story will then illustrate. But this is not how stories work. Stories are not supposed to start with thesis statements or overwrought aphorisms.

Let me say it again, because it’s that important: A great storyteller creates a movie in the mind of the audience. Listeners should be able to see the story in their mind’s eye at all times. At no point should the story become visually obscured or impossible to see. As the title of this chapter suggests, effective storytelling is

cinema of the mind.

In order to achieve this lofty goal, storytellers must do one thing, and happily for you, it's exceedingly simple:

*Always provide a physical location for every moment of your story.*

That's it. If the audience knows where you are at all times within your story, the movie is running in their minds. The film is cycling from reel to reel. If your audience can picture the location of the action at all times, you have created a movie in the mind of your listeners. Hopefully it's a good one.

If the audience can't see your story in their minds, the film is no longer running. You have failed to achieve cinema of the mind. Instead of visualizing the past, perhaps even forgetting where and when they even are for a moment, your audience is now staring at you in the present. Their imagination has been disengaged. The movie has stopped.

This is no longer storytelling; it's lecturing. If you're making the audience laugh, it might be more akin to stand-up comedy. You may even sound as if you're reciting an essay. Whatever you are doing, if the movie has stopped in the mind of your audience, it's no longer a story. Let me give you an example. Here are two versions of the first few lines of a story that I tell about my fraternal grandmother.

## Version #1

My grandmother's name is Odelie Dicks, which probably explains why she is who she is. She's a crooked old lady in both body and mind. She wears only dark colors and likes to serve food that has stewed in pots for days. I like to imagine that there was a time in her life when she smiled — or at least didn't scowl — but if that time existed, it was long before me.

## Version #2

I'm standing at the edge of my grandmother's garden, watching her relentlessly pull weeds from the unforgiving soil. My grandmother's name is Odelie Dicks, which probably explains why she is who she is. She's a crooked old lady in both body and mind. She wears only dark colors and likes to serve food that has stewed in pots for days. I like to imagine that there was a time in her life when she smiled — or at least didn't scowl — but if that time existed, it was long before me.

One of these versions is the beginning of a story. The other sounds more like the beginning of an essay. Can you see the difference? Can you feel it?

If a director were filming the first version of my story, the movie would probably open on black. The description of my grandmother would be conveyed via voice-over. There's nothing for the audience to see, because no location is ever identified. It's almost impossible to imagine my grandmother, because there is no place to imagine her *in*. At best you might picture an ethereal image of her floating

in space. More than likely, you're not picturing anything at all. You're probably staring at the storyteller, waiting for him or her to engage your imagination more fully. There is no movie running in your mind. It's merely a series of anecdotal descriptors.

In the second version, an image is instantly formed in your mind. A director would know exactly where to point the camera.

Can you see it? The lens pans across a garden on a summer day. You see me standing on the edge of the garden, staring at an old woman who is crouching somewhere between rows of vegetable plants. As I describe her, you see her bending over, pulling a weed, bending again. There is action. Specificity. Setting. You don't know what my grandmother's garden looks like, but that's okay. Your mind instantly fills in those blanks for me. You place your own idea of a garden into the scene, and because the dimensions and size and general appearance of my grandmother's garden are not relevant to the story, I allow this to happen. I allow you to populate my story with your details. With very little effort, your mind formulates a fully realized scene, with depth, color, and texture, and all I did was give the moment a specific location.

One extra sentence has changed the story entirely. Actually, it made it a story.

In truth, this moment in the garden has nothing to do with the actual story, which is about the cruel way that my grandmother would pull my loose teeth when I was a little boy, and as a result, I wasn't sad when she died. I'm not even sure if she was working in the garden on the day or week or month that she pulled the particular tooth in question. It doesn't matter. I need you to get to know my grandmother before I can launch into the story, and the garden is a good place to start. It's where my grandmother spent a great deal of her time, and I can use the way she pulled the weeds to foreshadow the way she would eventually pull my teeth.

Rather than describing my grandmother in essay form or cracking a series of jokes about her, I set the moment in a location, and therefore I create a scene. I start to make a movie in your mind.

One version is a story. The other version is an essay. The only difference is that I provided a location for one but not the other.

That's it. That's how you maintain a cinema in the mind of your audience. You give every scene a location, just as you would in a movie. Do this, and your stories will instantly improve. In fact they will be transformed. They will become captivating and memorable and visceral for your audiences simply because you set every moment in a specific location.

It sounds easy, and in many ways it is, but it can also get tricky at times. Look back at "Charity Thief" in chapter 6. There's a moment in that story when I have to provide a great deal of backstory for my audience. Before I get to the point where I

formulate my plan to beg from the gas-station employee, I need my audience to know that:

1. My mother is living on welfare with my pregnant teenage sister.
2. My brother has joined the army and has been out of touch with us for a year.
3. I haven't seen my father in ten years.
4. I'm making \$7.25 an hour as a McDonald's manager, and I'm the richest person I know.
5. None of my friends has a car that can make the round-trip journey to pick me up. None of them have credit cards or even checking accounts.
6. My only hope is Bengi, my roommate and best friend, and he is away at a college retreat, unreachable by telephone.
7. Telephones in the precellular era were inefficient means of communication.
8. I feel alone.
9. I fear that I will be alone for the rest of my life.
10. I find my situation terribly unfair.

It's a lot of information to dump on an audience. A whole bunch of backstory, which can often derail a story if it is not told well.

But did you notice what I did just before I started explaining my backstory? I tell the audience that I'm parked in the lot of a Citgo gas station in New Hampshire, sitting behind the wheel of my car, hands still gripping the steering wheel. I give this moment of backstory a place. I make it a scene.

Even though I'm covering an enormous amount of terrain, including information about my family, friends, and my own internal struggle, the audience can still picture me behind the wheel of my car as these thoughts race through my mind. I position my body clearly in a space that my audience can imagine. They can see me sitting in the front seat of a 1976 Chevy Malibu. They can see the parking lot. The red-and-white Citgo sign. The gas pumps. The highway. Since I identify the state as New Hampshire, they are probably picturing trees and maybe even mountains in the distance or a hardscrabble road.

Halfway through this bit of backstory, I intentionally reset my location. I mention it again, just in case the audience has forgotten where I am. Still behind the wheel, still looking out at a field of yellows and reds and oranges.

No real action is taking place as I provide this backstory, but that's okay. There is something to look at because you know exactly where I am. You can see me. I'm a young man sitting behind the wheel of a motionless vehicle, staring into a future

that is bleak at best. The story never goes off the rails. The film never stops. You never wonder where I am.

In the movie version of this moment, the camera would cut between interior and exterior shots of the car. It would focus on my hands, still clutching the steering wheel in desperation. There might be a slow pan of the Citgo station to create an establishing shot. A close-up on my Massachusetts license plate in order to accentuate my distance from home. A long shot of the gas pumps to suggest the distance between me and the gas I need to get home. A still shot of the two large numbers indicating that gas is eighty-five cents a gallon. You'd see mountains in the distance and cars filled with gas zooming by on the nearby highway.

Even with all that relatively inactive backstory, it's still a movie. You can see it. It has place and sound and detail.

Many storytellers introduce backstory like this with sentences such as these:

*You have to understand what was going on in my life at the time . . .*

*Let me tell you about my finances in 1991 . . .*

*There were many reasons why I couldn't call home for help that day.*

*It would have been nice to be able to call friends and family for help that day, but I couldn't. Here's why.*

I hear setups for backstory like this all the time, but none of these approaches are effective. This is not how movies work. Narrators do not appear on-screen to fill in backstories or provide pertinent details in the midst of a scene. Instead movies use flashbacks. Purposeful dialogue. Voice-over. Awful dream sequences.

Regardless of the method, it's still a movie. The camera is still pointed at a specific place. The audience can still see the movie. By placing this backstory in a specific location, I am able to convey this information from the perspective of my 1991 self rather than my present-day self. I stay within the context of the story. The place and time frame remain constant. It's the twenty-year-old version of myself explaining the backstory rather than the modern-day version standing on the stage.

This process allows the movie to continue rolling in the audience's mind. They are still listening to the version of me from the past, so they remain in the past with me.

A similar problem occurs when a storyteller needs to provide historical or technical information that the audience may not possess. I once worked with a storyteller who needed to ensure that his audience understood photosynthesis in order for the rest of his story to make sense. His original plan was to say something like, "Okay, before I continue, I need to give you a quick refresher on photosynthesis. If you remember your freshman biology class . . ." and then proceed to explain the process to his audience.

At that moment, his story stopped being a story. It became a science lecture

within a story. The only thing the audience could see during that explanation was the storyteller, standing on the stage, discussing a scientific principle. The movie had stopped running. The filmstrip had snapped in two.

I advised the storyteller against this approach. I explained why it wasn't working. I told him that his science lecture was not entertaining and destroyed the flow of his story. It cut off the cinema of the mind.

"Then how am I supposed to teach them about photosynthesis?" he asked.

"Why not tell the story of the first time you learned about photosynthesis?" I said. "Or a time when you taught photosynthesis? Instead of stopping the story completely to explain the process, why not offer a scene in the form of a flashback that also explains photosynthesis? Just keep telling a story."

If I had to explain photosynthesis, I told him, I would probably insert an anecdote from my tenth-grade biology class. I would describe Mrs. Murphy, my biology teacher, standing at the chalkboard, explaining with crude drawings and hastily scribbled labels how plants took in sunlight and carbon dioxide and produced oxygen. Mrs. Murphy was so excited about the way photosynthesis worked that she could barely contain her enthusiasm. She admired the efficiency and symbiotic nature of the process, and she couldn't wait for us to understand it.

At the time I was less excited about photosynthesis than I was about Heather, the girl who sat across from me. You'll remember that Heather was the girl whose love I tried to win in Mrs. Murphy's class back in chapter 10.

In many ways, I might explain, Heather was the sun and carbon dioxide to my oxygen. She was what I needed to be happy. If only she could provide me with these essential ingredients. Sadly, that never happened. Heather started dating Greg, and the couple remained together throughout much of high school.

See what I mean? Rather than stopping the story to explain a scientific principle, I allow the story to continue with a little bit of anecdotal backstory. I provide the necessary scientific information while also providing an amusing scene that reveals something about my character.

Depending on the needs of the story, I could easily have replaced the Heather part of the story with Sean, a redhead boy who was also in my biology class that year. Sean was a bully who made my life hell for several years before we finally found a grudging respect for each other. I might explain that Sean was the opposite of photosynthesis. Lacking any hint of symbiosis.

I also could have replaced Heather with Jennifer Glose, a girl in that same biology class. I once tortured her by adding a new element to the large periodic table of elements that hung in the front of Mrs. Murphy's classroom: GloseGrossium.

I did such a precise job adding the element to the table — making it look exactly like the other boxes on the chart — that when Mrs. Murphy pulled the chart

down, it took her fifteen minutes to notice the addition.

I might tell my audience that I spent more time crafting that new element for Mrs. Murphy's periodic table than I did studying photosynthesis.

All of these anecdotes reveal something about my character and also allow me to explain photosynthesis to anyone in the audience who doesn't understand it already. Most importantly, they all allow for the movie to continue in the minds of the audience. I provide setting and action and character rather than lecture.

That's the trick. A simple one: Make sure that every moment in your story has a location attached. Every moment should be a scene, and every scene needs a setting.

It's the simplest, most-bang-for-your-buck strategy that I have to offer.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### The Principle of *But* and *Therefore*

Every Monday morning, I invite my fifth-grade students to share their One-Sentence Weekends. This is their opportunity to tell me the most important or momentous moment from their weekend.

I do this for a few reasons:

1. Kids can't wait to tell me about their weekends, but I just don't have the time to hear all their stories, nor do I want to. As much as I love them, even I have limits on how many cousin's birthday parties and early-morning soccer games that I can hear about on a given day. One-Sentence Weekends give everyone a chance to share one thing from their weekend and feel marginally satisfied without threatening my sanity.
2. I'm teaching my students to find their five-second moments. I don't use this language in class — at least not initially — but we talk about what is interesting to other people and what is not. My school psychologist actually supports the idea of teaching students about what topics other people might find interesting and what they might consider less so, though she questions the ruthless nature of my assessment at times. Shouting "Boring!" or "Yawn City!" at a student is apparently not the best teaching strategy, at least in her professional opinion. Still, it works. "Don't tell us everything about your weekend," I say. "Find the most interesting or compelling moment, and just share that."
3. I'm also reinforcing grammar. Students are forced to compose their thoughts in a single sentence and must avoid run-on sentences.
4. I'm teaching and encouraging active listening.

When a student tells us something that is genuinely interesting, I often ask follow-up questions. Sometimes I allow the student to expound upon the moment. Occasionally a student will even tell a story.

It was while I was listening to one of these stories that it finally occurred to me why I despise so many of them: the word *and*.

My students tend to connect sentences, paragraphs, and scenes together with the word *and* more than with any other conjunction. This results in terrible stories.

Here is a word-for-word account of one of my students' stories:

*My cousin Lisa came over for a sleepover, and we went to bed on time and we didn't sleep. When everyone was asleep we snuck downstairs and*

*watched TV. And my parents heard us, and they thought the voices on the TV were burglars robbing the house and they called the police. They didn't wake us up because they didn't want us to be scared and they didn't check my room. My dad waited upstairs with a baseball bat. The police came to the house and saw us watching TV through the window. They called my parents and told them that it was us downstairs, and we got in so much trouble.*

This is a story with a lot of potential. It at least has the makings of a solid, amusing anecdote, but it is told poorly. In the monotonous storytelling voice of a child, even an amusing anecdote can become agony.

Once I realized the mistake that my students were making, I started listening to adults, and I quickly realized that even experienced storytellers onstage do the same thing. A clear majority of human beings tend to connect their sentences, paragraphs, and scenes together with the word *and*.

This is a mistake. The ideal connective tissue in any story are the words *but* and *therefore*, along with all their glorious synonyms. These buts and不锈res can be either explicit or implied.

“And” stories have no movement or momentum. They are equivalent to running on a treadmill. Sentences and scenes appear, one after another, but the movement is straightforward and unsurprising. The momentum is unchanged.

*But* and *therefore* are words that signal change. The story was heading in one direction, but now it's heading in another. We started out zigging, but now we are zagging. We did this, and therefore this new thing happened.

I think of it as continually cutting against the grain of the story. Rather than stretching a flat line from beginning to end, the storyteller should seek to create a serrated line cutting back and forth, up and down, along the path of the story. We are still headed in the same direction, but the best storytellers don't take a straight line to get there.

Look at my student's story rewritten with this but-and-therefore principle. I've bolded all the *but*s and *therefore*s and all their synonyms, and I've added the implied equivalents in parentheses as well.

*My cousin Lisa came over for a sleepover, **but** we had no intention of sleeping. We went to bed on time, **but** we didn't close our eyes. **Instead** we snuck downstairs when everyone was asleep to watch TV. **But** my parents heard us, **except** it wasn't us they heard. It was the TV. They heard the strange voices of our television program. **Instead of** investigating the voices, they (**therefore**) assumed that burglars were robbing the house, so they called the police. **But** they didn't wake us up **because** they didn't want us to be scared, **so** Dad waited upstairs with a baseball bat. The police came to the house, **but instead** of finding burglars stealing our few precious*

*belongs, they found us watching TV. (**Therefore**) they called my parents and told them that it was us downstairs, watching television. (**As a result**), we got in so much trouble.*

Better. Right? Can we see how the sentences constantly cut against each other to add momentum, change, and action?

Let's look at the first few paragraphs of "Charity Thief." I'll make the same notations of the *but*s and *therefore*s, along with their synonyms.

*It's the fall of 1991. I'm twenty years old. I'm driving down a lonely stretch of New Hampshire highway. I'm driving home from the very first booty call of my entire life, and I'm excited **because** (**but**) I don't know that this is also going to be the very last booty call of my entire life.*

*It's in this moment of excitement that the right front tire of my 1976 Chevy Malibu blows out, **but** it doesn't just deflate. It disintegrates. It throws rubber and wire across the road in a way I didn't think was possible, and (**therefore**) it takes everything I have to get the car over to the shoulder and to a stop.*

*And it's 1991. (**Therefore**) I don't have a cell phone. I don't have a spare tire. I haven't seen a car on this stretch of road for a long time. So (**therefore**) I do the only thing I can think of doing: I start hiking back up the road to search for help.*

*Seven hours later, after having given all my money to a half-naked mountain man named Winston in exchange for a balding spare tire, I'm (**therefore**) back on the road, heading home, a hundred miles between me and my apartment in Attleboro, Massachusetts, when I look at the instrument panel and (**therefore**) see that I have no gas.*

*All the money I had — every penny to my name — is in the hands of a half-naked mountain man. I don't have a credit card. I don't have an ATM card. I don't even have a checking account.*

*So I take the next exit and roll my car into a Citgo station, and as I park the car on the edge of the lot, facing a field of fall foliage, I grip the steering wheel in anger. I'm angry, **but** I'm also sad. I'm twenty years old. I'm a McDonald's manager. I make \$7.25 an hour, and (**but**) I am the richest person I know. My mother is living on welfare with my pregnant teenage sister. My brother joined the army a year ago, and I haven't heard from him since. My father disappeared from my life ten years ago. (**Therefore**) the only person I know who can help me, who even has a credit card or a car that can make this hundred-mile trip to New Hampshire, is my friend Bengi, and he is off on some college weekend. (**Therefore**) I can't get in touch with him, **because** in 1991, when you want to call someone, you need to make a phone ring on a wall, and (**but**) you need to make that*

*phone ring at the moment the person you want to speak to is near that phone, and (but) you need the number for the phone to make it ring, and (therefore) all of that is impossible for me to get.*

*This was not the plan for my life. I'm sitting behind the wheel, staring into a field of bright colors, yet I feel anything but bright. I was not supposed to be this alone this early in my life. You're not supposed to be twenty years old and have absolutely no one in your life to call for help. As I sit there in my car, staring into that field of orange and yellow, I (therefore) see my future ahead of me. An endless series of moments just like this one, when I need help but will have none.*

*So I make a plan. I'm going to beg for gas, because it's 1991. Gas is eighty-five cents a gallon, so eight dollars is all I need to get me home. I'll offer my license, my wallet, everything in my car as collateral in exchange for eight dollars' worth of gas and the promise that I will return and repay the money and more. Whatever it takes.*

*So I rehearse my pitch, take a deep breath, and walk in. There's a kid behind the counter, probably about my age. I tell him my problem. I ask him to help. I make my offer. (But) the kid refuses. He doesn't want to risk his job.*

Do you see the way the sentences, paragraphs, and scene work against each other? They either oppose the previous sentence (it was this, but now it's this) or they compile the previous sentences into a new idea (this plus this equal this).

This is effective storytelling. It's a way of making a story feel as if it's constantly going someplace new, even if the events are linear and predictable.

It's the difference between these two statements:

*I loved Heather since sixth grade, but as much as I loved her, she was never mine.*

*I loved Heather since sixth grade. She was never my girlfriend.*

One feels better than the other, doesn't it?

The first example has a single sentence that accomplishes much more than the two sentences in the second example. That single sentence:

1. Climbs to the summit of a hill (I loved Heather since sixth grade . . .).
2. Rests at the top for a moment (. . . but as much as I loved her . . .).
3. Falls down the backside of that hill (. . . she was never mine).

It zigs and then zags. It says this and then that. The two clauses work against each other, creating a sense of action and movement.

The second example consists of two independent sentences. They are related,

for sure, but they're not working in concert with each other. They are not connected by opposition or culmination. The second example is flatter and less interesting than the first. It contains the same information, but it does not move. It doesn't cut against the grain of the flat line of the story. It hugs the line. There is less unexpectedness and surprise. Less movement. Less delight.

Once I noticed this truth about storytelling, I went back and listened to my own stories and found myself “butting” and “thereforeing” my way through all of them. It’s a natural tendency that I seem to have developed somewhere along the way, probably thanks to the writing that I’ve been doing all my life.

I discovered that I had unconsciously embraced this but-and-therefore principle long ago, even though I could certainly be butting and thereforeing more strategically and consistently.

I started teaching this technique in workshops, and my students adopted it quickly. As my students’ *ands* became *buts* and *therefores*, their stories improved almost immediately. Performances that felt flat and lukewarm suddenly had an energy and spirit to them that had previously been unrealized.

Students reported that using this technique also helped them craft their stories. They suddenly had a better sense of direction. They could better determine how the next scene should open. One student said, “I feel like I know where to go next in my stories. When I’m stuck, I just look for the *but* and the *therefore*.”

About a year after I stumbled upon this principle, a student directed me to an online video of Trey Parker and Matt Stone, the creators and writers of *South Park*. They had joined a college writing class at NYU and described stumbling upon this principle as well.

Parker and Stone explained that as they storyboard each scene in their show, they have found that they must be able to connect the scenes (they refer to them as *beats*) with a *but* or a *therefore* for the next scene to work. If the words *and then* can be placed between any two scenes, Parker says, “You’re fucked.”

Matt Stone says it’s this “causation between each scene that makes a story.” This happens, therefore that happens, but then this happens, therefore that happens.

Apparently I wasn’t the only one to discover this principle. At least I’m in good company.

Stone is right. It’s the causation, or the causal links between sentences, paragraphs, and scenes that make a story. It’s the interconnectedness of moments that brings meaning to an otherwise linear collection of events connected only by time and space.

Just listen to someone tell you about their vacation to Europe or their weekend at the beach. It’s almost never a good story. It’s almost never something you want to hear. Why?

“First we went here, and it was amazing, and then we went here, and it was also amazing, and then we saw this, which was so amazing.”

Kill me.

But this is how people often tell stories of their vacations. Instead of talking about a moment of great meaning they have had, they instead recite the itinerary, adding in descriptions and food choices for each place they visited. This is not a story. It’s a boring, meaningless stroll down memory lane.

Stories are not a simple recounting of events. They are not a thorough reporting of moments over a given period of time. Stories are the crafted representation of events that are related in such a way to demonstrate change over time in the life of the teller. Applying the but-and-therefore principle to your stories, both formal and anecdotal, will make you the kind of person people want to listen to.

One other aspect to the but-and-therefore principle: the power of the negative.

Oddly, the negative is almost always better than the positive when it comes to storytelling. Saying what something or someone is *not* is almost always better than saying what something or someone *is*. For example:

*I am dumb, ugly, and unpopular.*

*I'm not smart, I'm not at all good-looking, and no one likes me.*

The second sentence is better, isn’t it? Here’s why: it contains a hidden *but*. It presents both possibilities. Unlike the first sentence, which only offers single descriptors, the second sentence offers a binary. It presents the potential of being smart and not smart, good-looking and not good-looking, popular and unpopular.

The second sentence really says this: I could be smart, but I’m dumb. I could be good-looking, but I’m ugly. I could be popular, but no one likes me.

By saying what I am *not*, I am also saying what I could have been, and that is a hidden *but*.

This probably sounds a little wonky and overspecific, but it makes a real difference when speaking to people.

“I was lost” is just not as good as “I could not find my way home.”

“Heather is my ex-girlfriend” is not as good as “Heather is no longer my girlfriend.”

“I was penniless” is not as good as “I didn’t have a penny to my name.”

This isn’t always true, of course. A short, positive statement at the end of a paragraph of description can often serve as an amusing button to a scene.

*Heather laughed at me when I wasn't trying to be funny. She refused my offer of a birthday cupcake, claiming she'd already had a cupcake that day, even though it was only 9:30 AM. She chose to walk five miles home from*

*school, even though I offered her a ride and she lived next door to me. Heather despised me.*

That short, positive statement at the end of the paragraph serves to summarize all that came before. Inflection and timing can make that simple sentence amusing. It might even get a laugh.

But did you notice the three sentences before that last one? Each one of them contained an implied hidden *but*.

*Heather laughed at me when (**but**) I wasn't trying to be funny.*

*She refused my offer of a birthday cupcake, claiming she'd already had a cupcake that day, even though (**but**) it was only 9:30 AM.*

*She chose to walk five miles home from school, even though (**but**) I offered her a ride and she lived next door to me.*

Three sentences embracing the power of the negative, followed by a single, positive statement to summarize.

Simple, positive statements are also preferred when answering questions. In answer to the question, “Who is Heather?” a statement like “my ex-girlfriend” is more effective than “She was once my girlfriend.” Short answers to simple questions should never feel dramatic or crafted.

“She was once my girlfriend” does not pass the Dinner Test.

But when telling a story, these negative statements often serve the storyteller better. By presenting a binary option, they provide depth and potential to a story. They infuse a story with movement, momentum, and action. The audience feels as if they’re going places as they climb and descend the hills of possibility.

## STORY BREAK

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### **Storytelling Makes You Just Like Family**

I flew into Chicago on a stormy day in December 2016 to perform for the Champaign-Urbana Mass Transit District holiday party. I was supposed to catch a connecting flight to the Champaign airport, but a snowstorm had canceled the flight. Karl, the CEO, picked me up at the airport. It was about a two-hour drive through cornfields from Chicago to Champaign.

When Karl picked me up, he informed me that he had just left his family's holiday party, which was a short drive from the airport. He needed to return to pick up his wife and kids before we all headed to Champaign together.

"Would you mind coming in for a few minutes?" he asked. "The family sort of knows who you are. They'd like to meet you."

I agreed, of course.

I was greeted by a raucous group of partygoers who knew more about me than I had expected. It felt as if they had spent the entire day watching my YouTube channel. They hugged me like a long-lost friend. Clapped me on the back like a neighborhood pal. It was sweet.

This is a truth about storytelling: You develop an inverse relationship with your audience. The more you tell, the better the audience knows you, particularly given the nature of the stories we tell. It's common for me to meet someone who knows a great deal of my personal history while I don't know the person's first name.

It also means that you can find yourself celebrating Christmas with a family in Illinois, who welcome you in like one of their own, while you struggle to keep track of who is who.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### “This Is Going to Suck”

I’m going to tell you another story now. I mentioned it in a previous chapter, so you may have already listened to it on the “Storyworthy the Book” YouTube channel. If you haven’t, you should, if possible. It’s always better to listen to a story told live.

I’m placing the story here because it serves as an excellent model for the next couple of chapters. I first told this story at a Moth GrandSLAM in New York City. I finished in first place that night, then I expanded the story and told it at a Moth Mainstage in Pittsburgh. It’s since aired on *The Moth Radio Hour*.

It’s December 23, 1988. I’m seventeen years old. I’m coming out of a record store. As I hit the sidewalk, my friend Pat sees me. He asks me what’s in the shopping bag I’m holding. I tell him it’s a concert T-shirt. It’s a Christmas present for Bengi, our friend, and my best friend. A surprise Christmas present.

Pat looks at me a little funny. He’s only fourteen, but he’s already cooler than I will ever be in my entire life. So when he looks at me like that, I always pay attention. Pat tells me that guys don’t buy Christmas presents for other guys. Especially surprise Christmas presents. He tells me that he’s had girlfriends for six months and never bought them a thing. So for me to buy Bengi a Christmas present is a little odd.

I’m suddenly feeling very self-conscious about the betta fish in the backseat of my car — the one that I bought at the pet store for Pat an hour ago — and the comic books for Coog, and the sweatshirt for Tom, and all the presents I bought for my friends on this day. I know that Pat is right. It’s strange that I’ve done this, but it’s been a long time since I’ve had a good Christmas, and I want this one to be special.

The combination of my unending childhood poverty, my absentee mother and my evil stepfather, and their now failing marriage, has made every Christmas for years a misery. But for the first time in my life, I have money in my pocket. I’m a manager at McDonald’s making \$5.75 an hour. I’m working full-time while I’m in high school, and I am the richest person I know. I am going to use this money to buy myself a great Christmas.

I’m heading home now. I need to get my uniform, because I have a shift at McDonald’s later and I need to get these presents into the house. I need to get the betta fish out of the cold. It’s starting to snow out. It’s kind of lovely. I’m driving my mother’s 1976 Datsun B210, a car about the size of a box of Pop-Tarts, through the town of Mendon, Massachusetts. The lawns of each home are turning white. It’s the first snowfall of the year. As I drive by each house, it’s as if I’m passing a

picture postcard of Christmas. I feel this might be a good Christmas after all.

I'm coming around a corner and I'm heading down a hill when my car starts sliding to the opposite lane on the snowy road. I look up, and I see a white Mercedes-Benz coming right at me.

They say that in moments like this, time will slow down or even freeze, and it is absolutely true. In the three seconds it takes before our two cars hit head-on, I have exactly three thoughts.

The first is: I'm not wearing my seat belt. I always wear my seat belt, but in the excitement of buying Christmas presents and the rush to get home, I've forgotten to put it on, on the worst day of my life to forget.

My second thought is: in moments like this, I've been told to steer into the skid, but it occurs to me now that I don't know what the hell that really means. (I still don't know to this day.)

My third thought is just one sentence, it's five words long, and I say it aloud: "This is going to suck."

And it does. When our cars collide, I'm thrown forward, and my head crashes through the windshield. My chin catches the steering wheel on the way, and the entire bottom row of my teeth comes flying out and into the back of my mouth in one large chunk. At the same moment, my legs come forward, and my right leg becomes embedded down to the bone in the air-conditioning unit. My left leg hits the emergency release brake, knocking the handle off and skewering my left leg. My chest crashes into the steering wheel, breaking ribs and knocking all the air from my lungs. It's all over in a second. Then shock descends upon me, and I feel no pain or fear.

I climb out of the car. I'm sort of crumpled next to the car, half standing, half crouching, when I see the woman in the Mercedes get out. She's completely unharmed. Her seat belt and the size of her car have protected her completely. Then she sees me, vomits, and passes out.

The first to arrive at the scene is a pickup truck full of teenagers. A kid about my age gets to me first. He lies me down in the mud and the snow on the side of the road. He gives me a look over, and then he crouches close to my ear and whispers, "Dude, you're fucked."

It is the most accurate medical assessment that I will receive that day.

A police officer arrives and puts a coat on me to keep me warm. I've got broken ribs, so it feels like a thousand pounds. I'm looking up at a white sky, and the snow is really starting to fall now, so I close my eyes.

When I open my eyes again, I'm in an ambulance. A young woman is straddling my hips and she is pounding on my chest, which is now on fire. There's a man trying to shove a clear tube down my throat, and the woman starts

screaming, "He's back! He's back!" And I'm wondering, "Who the hell is back?"

It's me. I'm back. I'll find out later that my heart stopped beating and I stopped breathing for about a minute.

No white light.

Now I'm in the emergency room, and the doctors get to work on me right away. They're picking out glass from my forehead with tweezers. They're getting my legs ready for surgery. Dental surgeons wire that chunk of teeth back down into my jaw. It's the most painful thing I've ever felt.

A nurse comes over and asks me for my phone number. My clothes were cut off at the scene, so I have no ID. I give her my parents' number, and then I give her the number for McDonald's because I'm supposed to be working that night. She sort of scoffs at this and looks at me as if I'm crazy, which I kind of am. I was dead twenty minutes ago and now I'm worried about work, but that drive-through does not run well without me, and they're going to have to get someone in.

Bless her heart. She makes the call.

As the doctors and nurses work on me, I notice that their expressions begin to change. I see it, because I am thinking the same thing they are: Where the hell are my parents?

I'll find out later that when they heard I was in stable condition, they went to check the car out first. I won't see them before surgery.

I'm waiting for a surgeon, because it's December 23, and they're hard to find. I'm waiting and waiting and waiting, and I'm feeling as alone as I've ever felt.

But I'm not alone, because when the nurse called McDonald's to tell them about the accident, the manager on duty told my friends, and those friends started calling other friends. An old-fashioned phone tree begins, with friends calling friends calling friends, and the waiting room is now filling up with sixteen- and seventeen- and eighteen-year-old kids in ripped jeans and concert T-shirts, and one fourteen-year-old boy who is cooler than all of them. And my friend Bengi is the first one to arrive.

They can't come into the emergency room to see me, because they're not family, but when the nurses realize that my parents won't be arriving in time, they roll my gurney to the other side of the emergency room, and they open a door. One by one, each of my friends stands in the doorway. And they wave. And they give me the thumbs-up. The boys say incredibly inappropriate things to make me laugh, and the girls tell me that they love me, and I can hear them chanting my name as I am rolled into the operating room.

None of the presents ever make it into my friend's hands. Bengi never gets his concert T-shirt and Coog never gets his comic books, and the betta fish is the only fatality in the accident that day.

But it turns out that Pat is wrong. You *can* give your friends surprise Christmas presents, because they give me the best one I've ever received. They give me family, and until I meet my wife fifteen years later, they are the only family that I have. And it turns out they're the only family that I need.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

# The Secret to the Big Story: Make It Little

“This Is Going to Suck” is what I call a big story. When you are brought back to life in the back of an ambulance, that’s big.

Here’s the surprising thing: despite what most people think, these are the hardest stories to tell. You’d think that a head-on collision, dying, and coming back to life would be easy to tell about, full of high stakes, drama, and excitement, but remember:

The goal of storytelling is to connect with your audience, whether it’s one person at the dinner table or two thousand people in a theater. Storytelling is not about a roller-coaster ride of excitement. It’s about bridging the gap between you and another person by creating a space of authenticity, vulnerability, and universal truth.

If this is the goal (and it should be), then the big stories can get in the way of connecting. I cannot connect with most people on the level of a near-death experience. Audiences don’t listen to me describe my head crashing through a windshield and think, “Yes, I remember the time my head went through a windshield, and yes, I also subsequently died on the side of the road. I feel for you, Matt.”

Big stories are hard stories to tell, because the big parts of these stories are often singular in nature. Unusual. Unique. Hardly relatable. This holds true for all my big stories.

When I’m twelve years old, I’m stung by a bee. When the paramedics find me in my dining room, my heart is not beating, and I’m not breathing.

When I’m fourteen years old, firefighters awaken me in the middle of the night and carry me from our burning home.

When I’m twenty-two years old, I’m interrogated, arrested, jailed, and tried for a crime I did not commit.

That same year, a gun is pressed to my head and the trigger is pulled multiple times in order to get me to open a safe in the back of a McDonald’s.

When I’m thirty-six years old, an anonymous person or persons excerpts ten years of my blog posts, using out-of-context and seemingly inflammatory comments to create a thirty-seven-page packet that argues that I am not fit to teach children and compares me to the Virginia Tech killer. It’s sent to the mayor, town council, school board, and more than three hundred families in my school district,

demanding my immediate termination, as well as the termination of my wife and my principal, and threatens that the packet will go to the press if action is not taken.

These experiences sound like amazing (and unfortunate) stories, and yet each story took a long time for me to finally tell. Ultimately none of them are about what they appear to be.

The story of my beesting is really the story of the death of my mother, and of my hope that we might still be connected, even though she is no longer alive.

The story of firefighters rescuing me from my home is really about the greatest “I told you so” of my life.

The story of my arrest is really the story of my struggle with faith and of an unexpected plea to the Almighty, and the story of my subsequent jailing is really about missing a second date with a girl I liked a lot.

The story of the robbery is really the story of my ongoing, persistent existential crisis and its impact on my relationship to my children.

The story of the attempt to destroy my reputation and get me fired is really the story of the power of the anonymous assailant but the greater power of public support.

And the story of my car accident and near-death experience, as I’m sure you know by now, is not about the accident or my experience at all. I’ve received hundreds of emails from people all over the country about that story, which The Moth has aired on their Radio Hour more than once. Never has a person written, “I love the story of your car accident” or “I love the story of your near-death experience.”

Instead it’s always “I loved the story of the emergency room” or “I love the story of your friends in the waiting room.”

I die in my story, and yet that momentary brush with death is neither the most important nor the most interesting thing that happens. It’s almost forgotten by the end. The accident is simply the means by which I get my audience into the emergency room. It’s the equivalent of the disintegrated tire in “Charity Thief.” It’s the thing that happens that gets me to where the story really takes place.

In fact, now that you know how stories work, you should realize that “This Is Going to Suck” could never be about my near-death experience, because I never experienced it. I closed my eyes on the side of a road because the snow was falling, and sometime after that I became unconscious and died.

But I had no idea that I was going to stop breathing. I had no idea that my heart would stop beating. How could I possibly experience a five-second moment of transformation or realization if I didn’t know it was happening?

The same thing had happened five years earlier, when I stopped breathing and

my heart stopped beating on my dining-room floor following the beesting. I closed my eyes, drifted into unconsciousness, and died. But I never saw it coming.

Even if I had seen them coming, I still wouldn't have made either story about my near-death experience, because it's incredibly hard to connect to people through death. Most of us have never experienced it before. Most of us have never awokened in the midst of someone administering CPR on us.

This is the trick to telling a big story: it cannot be about anything big. Instead we must find the small, relatable, comprehensible moments in our larger stories. We must find the piece of the story that people can connect to, relate to, and understand.

You need to find the story of the man who learns to love children among the man-eating dinosaurs so he can be with the woman he loves.

You need to find the story of the scientist who finds faith in a higher power among the Nazis and snakes and enormous rolling boulders.

You may never understand what it's like to crash your head through a windshield, but you've probably been let down or ignored or forgotten by a loved one, as I was in that emergency room.

You probably understand what it feels like to be alone at a moment of need.

You've probably experienced the fear of hospitals and surgery.

You probably know what it's like to be picked up off the ground and saved at the most unlikely moment by the most unexpected figure.

My story isn't about a car accident or a near-death experience. It's about my friends standing in the place of my family when I need them most. That's it.

When I tell "This Is Going to Suck" in theaters or workshops or even at the dinner table, audience members cry almost every time, but no one has ever cried at my description of the accident. Despite the brutality and horror of that collision, audience members have never shed tears at the pain and violence that I suffered. They wince. They groan. They shake their heads in pity. But never tears.

They cry, of course, when they hear that my friends are filling the waiting room outside the emergency room, and when those doors open and my friends are standing there, cheering me on, even I have a hard time not crying.

Honestly, there are tears in my eyes as I write these words.

Little moments hidden inside big moments. That's what we need to find to tell a big story well.

Big stories need not contain as much violence, death, or drama as mine do. Hopefully they don't. Remember: my friends told me that I've lived the worst life ever. Not true, of course, but I hope your life hasn't been as chaotic or violent as mine.

Your big stories could be about a vacation to exotic locales or the birth of a child or your wedding day or the untimely death of a loved one. Any of these could be told well if you find a way to make the story smaller than it seems. This is hard to do. Rarely are stories of birth or death or weddings or vacations good. They are more often ordinary, expected, and boring. Cliché. But this need not be the case.

I tell a story about the birth of my son, Charlie. It's a humorous story about how the supposed beauty of childbirth is anything but beautiful. It's ugly, harrowing, bloody, and in the case of Charlie's birth, dangerous. A placental abruption had raised the stakes considerably.

Still, that's not what the story was about, because few people can connect with a potentially life-threatening birth. Most people (including me) don't really know what a placental abruption is.

Instead it's a story about expectations. It's about what parents and doctors and society tell you to expect from childbirth (beauty and light and joy) versus the reality.

It's also a story about how this belief — that childbirth is not pretty — was upended by my daughter. Clara, who was three years old at the time and was convinced that we were having a girl. For nine months, she made plans for tea parties, dance recitals, and dress-up parties. She wanted a sister so badly. Despite our constant reminders that the baby might be a boy, she refused to accept this possibility.

When I told Clara that Charlie was a boy shortly after his birth, she collapsed in wails of genuine agony and sadness. Just as it was for me, this birth was anything but expected for her. But I scooped her up, carried her over to the bed where Elysha was holding Charlie, and I introduced her to her brother. Clara looked down on Charlie, and without warning, this ball of rage and anger melted in my arms, and she fell instantly in love with him.

It was the first and only time in my life that I witnessed love at first sight. I will never forget it. It was the beauty of childbirth that I never expected to see.

That is what the story is about. Not a step-by-step accounting of Charlie's birth or the harrowing potential of a placental abruption, but a look into the horror and the beauty of the unexpected. A little moment hiding within a big event.

A friend and fellow storyteller named Monica Cleveland tells the story about a plane crash that she experienced a few years ago. She was in a seaplane that landed exceedingly hard on water, damaging the plane, rapidly flooding it, and sending it to the bottom of the lake. Even after they escape the plane, they are in the mountains, swimming through an exceptionally cold lake, wondering how long it will be before anyone realizes that they are missing and mounts a search and rescue.

It's a plane crash, on water no less, but it's really a story about Monica's

anxiety-plagued daughter. Monica realized that if she told her daughter the truth about the crash, her daughter might never fly again. So instead of a harrowing tale of near death in the air and on the water, Monica tells the story of a mother trying to frame her own near-death experience into something less frightening for the benefit of her child. She turns it into an adventure story so that her daughter isn't paralyzed by fear for the rest of her life.

It's a story of a mother's worry and love instead of a plane crash. The plane crash is like my car accident or the blown-out tire on my Chevy Malibu: simply a means to getting to what really matters.

The best thing about big stories is that most people don't have many of them. This is good, because they really are hard to tell.

I have yet to tell the story of my trial for the crime I did not commit.

I have yet to tell the story of the fellow drummer at band camp who had his leg blown open by the backfiring of a school bus.

I haven't told the story of my pet raccoon, Racket, or the time I agreed to a \$15,000 surgery for my dog while sleepwalking, or the time I escaped the police in an exceedingly brief but very real high-speed chase. I haven't told the story of my brother's return from what we thought was the dead after he had disappeared for more than five years.

All big stories. Why haven't I told them?

They are hard to tell.

It's taken almost two years for Monica to finally tell her airplane-crash story. Instead she's told stories about an incredibly awkward second date and a Christmas morning when she felt like the worst mother in the world.

Why? Plane-crash stories are hard to tell. Long, silent, awkward dates and parental missteps are stories that audiences connect to more easily. They are easier to tell.

I'd much rather tell you the story of the time I danced with Clara to the Ramones in the dying light of a summer day and learned something about regret. Or the time I swallowed a penny as a little boy and couldn't tell my parents. Or the time Elysha said to me (at least a month *before* we started dating), "If we start dating, we'll never break up. We'll get married and be together forever."

Smaller moments, to be sure. Tiny, even. Moments no one would have recognized had they witnessed them firsthand. But they are easier to tell and just as good as the big moments. Maybe better.

## STORY BREAK

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### **Brevity Is the Soul of Wit**

One of my favorite church signs that I've ever seen says: "Come hear our pastor. He's not very good, but he's quick."

In storytelling, you should always try to say less. Shorter is better. Fewer words rule. The twenty-minute commencement address is almost always better than the forty-minute address. The thirty-minute meeting is almost always more effective than the sixty-minute meeting. The six-minute story is almost always better than the ten-minute story. And yes, the shorter sermon is always better than the longer sermon.

As Blaise Pascal first said, "If I had more time, I would have written you a shorter letter." Brevity takes time, because brevity is always better.

The longer you speak, the more engaging, amusing, and captivating you must be. That's a tall order. Those are high expectations. Most people are not engaging, amusing, or captivating by nature.

But that's okay. As the sign says, you don't have to be nearly as good if you can be quick. Shorter is also harder. I often tell storytellers that it's easy to tell an eight- to ten-minute story. Almost anyone can find a way to get from beginning to end in ten minutes.

But it's hard to tell a five- to six-minute story. It means making difficult choices about what will stay and what will go. It requires careful crafting and clever construction. Words and phrases must be expertly manipulated. Your choices must be spot-on. But the results are often superior.

One of the most popular stories that I tell is about four minutes long. Although the story is good and actually won a Moth StorySLAM, I remain convinced that audiences like it because it's short. I pack a ton of suspense and humor and heart into four minutes, making the story seem exceedingly satisfying.

I could easily turn that four-minute gem into a longer, more complex story, and I nearly did when The Moth asked me to tell it on their Mainstage. I began expanding the story, finding areas to explore in more depth, and while the results would have been excellent, I think the pace and hilarity of the story might have suffered greatly.

Ultimately, we decided on a different story for that show, so I never had the chance to see the results of the longer story. But here is what I know:

The longer you speak, the more perfect and precise you must be. The longer you stand in front of an audience — whether it be a theater or a boardroom — the more entertaining and engaging your words must be.

So speak less. Make time your ally.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# There Is Only One Way to Make Someone Cry

I've made my wife cry twice in my life.

On December 28, 2004, Elysha and I ascended the stairs in Grand Central Station, her self-described favorite room in the world. When we reached the top of the staircase, I pulled her to a stop. A police officer appeared almost instantly and told us to keep moving. "You're blocking the stairs," she said.

I dropped to one knee.

"Oh," the officer said. She smiled and stepped back.

I was holding a book that I had been reading on the train. Wanting to take Elysha's hands in my own, I turned and handed the book to the police officer. "Hold this," I whispered. The officer nodded and smiled.

I turned back to Elysha. Tears were already filling her eyes. "Elysha Green," I said. "Will you marry me?"

Tears ran down her cheeks as I removed the jewelry box from my coat pocket and lifted the lid, presenting her with an engagement ring. She wept as I put it on her finger.

A second later, shouts erupted from the bottom of the stairs. About twenty-five of our friends, hiding in the holiday crowd, had witnessed the proposal firsthand. When they burst into cheers, they were immediately surrounded by National Guard soldiers. The country was on alert level extra-super-ultra-orange, and the soldiers were on high alert. One of my friends, a police officer, quickly defused the situation, and our principal and friend Plato, who would serve as the minister at our wedding two years later, charged up the stairs first, taking two and three steps at a time. He was pumping his fist in the air and cheering.

Elysha saw him first. Still weeping, she said, "Plato? What are you doing here?"

Soon we were surrounded by friends and family congratulating us. We all went to lunch and then walked to Rockefeller Center as snow began to fall so we could pose for photos underneath the Christmas tree.

For the record, Elysha never said yes to my proposal of marriage. She only cried. To this day, I'm still waiting for an answer.

The second time I made Elysha cry was about two years later. I was sitting at my desk, correcting papers alongside a student-teacher when my phone rang. I

rarely receive calls during the school day, but since my students were in art class, I picked up the phone to see who was calling. A California number.

“That’s weird,” I said to my student-teacher. “Who lives in California?”

I answered the call. It was my literary agent, calling to tell me that Doubleday had made an offer on my first novel, *Something Missing*. I didn’t even know that she had sent the book to publishers.

It was an offer for more money than I had ever seen in my life. More money than I could ever have imagined for a story that I had made up in my head. She explained the specifics of a deal. Negotiations were still ongoing. She wanted to retain international rights. But the basics of the deal were in place. The book was sold. I listened in disbelief. When I finally hung up the phone, I was shaking.

“What?” my student-teacher asked.

“I can’t tell you,” I told her. “Elysha has to be first.”

I ran to Elysha’s classroom, only one door down from my own, but the room was empty. Her students were in music class. She was somewhere in the building. So began my frantic search through the school for my wife.

As I ran past the office, Plato saw me. “What’s wrong?” he asked, looking worried.

“Can’t say,” I said. “Elysha first.”

I ran into Cindy and Justine, two women who had served as bridesmaids in our wedding the previous year. “What’s your deal?” Cindy asked as I charged past them.

“Not now,” I said.

I checked the lunchroom. The copy room. The music room. I finally found Elysha in a hallway behind the auditorium. “What’s up, honey?” she asked.

“Stop,” I said. I took her by the shoulders. “Just listen.” I told her the news. I had spoken about two sentences when she collapsed to the floor in tears. The money wasn’t going to make us rich by any stretch of the imagination, but it was enough to clear our wedding debts and enable us to put a down payment on a home. She cried and cried and cried.

Word quickly spread throughout the school that I had broken up with Elysha in the back hall of the school. After setting the record straight, we celebrated.

That’s it. I’ve made her cry a total of two times in our almost fifteen years together. This is not to say that she hasn’t cried at other times over the course of our relationship. She cried throughout most of our wedding ceremony. She wept at the birth of both of our children. She cried upon the death of each of our two cats, Jack and Owen. She often gets teary-eyed while watching movies and television. Commercials can make her cry. José Saramago’s novel *Blindness* made her weep

almost constantly.

But when it comes to me, I've only made her cry twice. Why? And more importantly, how?

The answer is simple: surprise.

With my marriage proposal and the publication of my first novel, I surprised Elysha with unexpected information. Joyous information, but completely unanticipated.

When it comes to storytelling, I believe that surprise is the only way to elicit an emotional reaction from your audience. Whether it's laughter, tears, anger, sadness, outrage, or any other emotional response, the key is surprise.

This is unlike real life, where many things can give rise to an emotional reaction, and surprise is not always required.

Like Elysha, I cried at the birth of each of our children, not because of surprise (though we waited to be surprised about the sex of each child) but because I was overwhelmed by the instantaneous love I felt for these two new human beings.

Like Elysha, I cried at the death of our cats. I was overcome with grief and sadness for these two beautiful boys who gave us so much love and affection for so many years.

I frequently leap into the arms of total strangers in Gillette Stadium when the Patriots win a close game or score an especially awe-inspiring touchdown. This is almost always the result of a prolonged period of hope, anticipation, nervousness, and excitement.

I wept throughout much of my mother's funeral. I was overcome by the personal loss as well as by the knowledge that she would never read one of my books or meet any of my children.

Elysha doesn't know this, but I recently wept in pain over a wisdom tooth that had cracked wide open. The nerve was exposed, but because of bad timing, I had to wait five days for surgery. In the middle of the night, the pain became so unbearable (even with the Vicodin) that I crept downstairs to cry. I didn't want to worry her.

In real life, there are many reasons to experience an emotional response. But in storytelling, we don't have the ability to overwhelm an audience with grief. We can't create prolonged periods of nervousness or excitement. We can't cause physical pain. We can't recreate these depths of experience. All we have is words. We must use our words strategically to create and enhance surprise for our audience.

Think about the moments of emotional response in "This Is Going to Suck." All of them are generated through surprise.

Audiences react with shock and sympathy when my car collides head-on with the Mercedes, mostly because, as terrible as they suspect a head-on collision can be, they don't expect to discover that my entire bottom row of teeth would be knocked to the back of my mouth or that my head would crash through the windshield. They don't think my legs would be as ravaged as they are. It's a surprise. As bad as they may have predicted the accident to be, it's rare for someone to expect this level of violence and gore.

I enhance this surprise through contrast. I paint a very different picture of the world right before the collision. I talk about my hopes for a perfect Christmas. I describe the picture postcard-like appearance of the homes that I pass. I turn the snow, which will prove to be the cause of my downfall, into something beautiful, blanketing the lawns in white. All of this is done specifically to enhance the surprise of the collision. I'm creating contrast between the moment just before the collision and the moment immediately after. I'm establishing expectations so I can quickly upend them.

Audiences become emotional and often cry upon learning that my friends have filled the waiting room outside the emergency room, because this is also a surprise. They never see it coming. Part of the reason is that I hide important information in the story (more on this in a moment), but it's also because I accentuate the surprise by stressing the idea that I am alone. I paint the picture of a boy who is badly hurt and completely alone in a place where no one even knows his name. I've primed the audience for an emotional response by playing upon their sympathy, empathy, and outrage.

My parents decide to check on the car before checking on me.

The nurses don't know my name.

It's two days before Christmas.

I feel utterly alone.

When I say the words, "But I'm not alone, because . . ." audience members will sometimes start crying even before they hear the reason. I've primed the pump for surprise.

Audiences also laugh several times during "This Is Going to Suck," even though it's not a funny story at all, and in each of these cases, the laughter is an emotional response resulting from a surprise. I'll explain each of these moments in the next chapter on humor.

## How to Ruin Surprise

For you as a storyteller, this means that you need to build surprise into your stories. There must be moments of unexpectedness so that your audience can experience an emotional response to your story.

You may argue that I was able to surprise my audience in "This Is Going to

Suck” because my story had surprises already built in. Head-on collision. Death. Friends suddenly appearing in the waiting room.

But this is not true. I will grant that the story contains moments of potential surprise, but almost every story ever told has this kind of potential. It’s up to the storyteller to ensure that these moments are as surprising as possible.

Storytellers often mitigate or even ruin surprise by making some simple mistakes or failing to accentuate or enhance the potential surprise of the moment.

Common mistakes that storytellers make that ruin surprise include:

### Presenting a thesis statement prior to the surprise.

This often takes the form of an opening sentence that gives away all that is surprising about the story.

“This is a story about a time in my life when my friends became my family.”

“This is a story about a car accident so serious that it took my life, if only for a moment.”

“This is the story of a waiting room full of surprise guests.”

It sounds ridiculous, I know, but this is done all the time, both onstage and in less formal situations. People feel the need to open their stories with thesis statements, either in an effort to grab the audience’s attention with a loaded statement or (more likely) because this is how they were taught to write in school: thesis statement, followed by supporting evidence and details.

But storytelling is the reverse of the five-paragraph essay. Instead of opening with a thesis statement and then supporting it with evidence, storytellers provide the evidence first and then sometimes offer the thesis statement later only when necessary. This is how we allow for surprise.

The same holds true for smaller moments of surprise within stories. For example, in describing the way my grandmother pulled my teeth, I have two choices:

#### *Option #1*

My grandmother tied a length of string around my loose tooth. She leaned in close so our two faces were just inches apart. She told me to look her straight in the eyes. “Don’t blink,” she warned. Then she wrapped the other end of the string around her fist, raised it between our noses, smiled, and pulled down. Hard.

My grandmother was a sadist.

#### *Option #2*

My grandmother was a sadist.

She tied a length of string around my loose tooth. She leaned in close so our

two faces were just inches apart. She told me to look her straight in the eyes. “Don’t blink,” she warned. Then she wrapped the other end of the string around her fist, raised it between our noses, smiled, and pulled down. Hard.

See the difference? In option #1, the thesis statement comes at the end of the paragraph, allowing for my grandmother’s method of pulling my teeth to be as surprising as possible. That thesis statement “My grandmother was a sadist” also probably adds a laugh at the end to punctuate the moment.

Referring to any grandmother as a sadist is surprising. These two words are rarely pushed together, and therefore the statement, if delivered well, is probably funny.

Option #2 strips the moment of its potential surprise. It alerts the audience to the horror that is coming. “My grandmother was a sadist.” The audience knows that whatever follows will not be pretty. The actual method of tooth removal may still be surprising, but not nearly as much as in option #1.

Thesis statements ruin the surprise every time. In storytelling, our job is to describe action, dialogue, and thought. It is never our job to summarize these things.

## Failing to take advantage of the power of stakes to enhance and accentuate surprise.

Remember in “Charity Thief” when I put a Backpack on my audience before I enter that gas station? I describe my plan for begging for gas in great detail. It sounds like a plausible idea. Probable, even. My audience is rooting for me. They expect me to get the gas I need. I know this because when I tell this story in workshops, I see the same reaction every time I say, “But the kid won’t give me the gas.”

Shoulders slump. Faces contort in anger. People groan. They shake their heads in disgust. They experience an emotional reaction very similar to the one I experienced that day.

Why? They are surprised. They wanted my plan to work. They expected it to work. It sounds like something that should have worked.

If I don’t explain my plan before I enter the gas station, no one is surprised if the kid says no. He should say no. Who gives away free gas? It’s only when I load up my audience with a complete description of my plan, as well as all my hopes and dreams, that they experience the surprise of the refusal.

The same thing happens later in that story, when I say, “Hi, I’m Matt, and I’m collecting money for Ronald McDonald Children’s Charities.” It’s the most surprising moment of the story. People either gasp or laugh when they hear me say those words. If you’ll remember, I accentuate this surprise with a Breadcrumb and an Hourglass. I give a hint about what is to come (a crumpled McDonald’s

uniform), and I make the audience wait forever to hear it by slowing my speech and adding enormous amounts of unnecessary description and repetition.

Can you imagine how less surprising the moment would be if I had climbed into my car, spotted the crumpled McDonald's uniform, and said, "I know. I'm going to go door-to-door pretending to be a charity worker." Still surprising, perhaps, but not nearly so.

Yet this is what many storytellers do. Rather than seeking ways to make the surprise even more surprising, they kill the surprise through a failure to accentuate it. They fail to take advantage of the power of stakes to make something that is potentially surprising truly surprising.

### **Failing to hide critical information in a story.**

As storytellers, we must hide pertinent information from our audiences to allow the surprise to pay off later. I often refer to this as planting a bomb in a story that will explode when the time is right.

In "This Is Going to Suck," the bomb that I plant is the moment that I ask the nurse to call McDonald's to tell my manager that I can't make it to work. This is important. It's critical to the story. It's the reason why my friends know about the accident and make their way to the emergency room. But I don't want my audience to foresee these events, so I hide this important moment in two ways:

#### *Hiding the Bomb in the Clutter*

We hide these important moments by making them seem unimportant. We do this by hiding critical information among other details. We make the important information seem no more important than the rest of the information by pushing it all together.

In the case of "This Is Going to Suck," I turn my all-important request for the nurse to call McDonald's into just another detail by placing it amid a series of doctors' and nurses' interactions with me. Rather than highlighting the encounter, I add it to a long list:

*Nurses picking glass from my forehead*

*Dental surgeons wiring teeth*

*Doctors prepping my knees for surgery*

*A nurse asking for contact information*

See what I did? It's a critical moment in the story, essential to all that is to come, but I portray the nurse as just another medical professional doing another job. Oftentimes I will load a portion of a story with superfluous information simply to hide the one important bit of information that I need the audience to know but not yet recognize as important. I clutter the landscape so that the audience can't tell what is important and what is not.

## *Camouflage*

I also camouflage the bomb within a laugh. Laughter is the best camouflage, because it is also an emotional response, and audience members assume that the laugh is the result of the storyteller's wanting to be funny.

This is never the case. Comedians want to be funny. Great storytellers want to be remembered. For this reason, they deploy laughter strategically. I'll talk more about this in the next chapter, but when it comes to preserving surprise, laughter is an excellent way to hide something important that needs to surprise the audience later on.

In "This Is Going to Suck," I ask the nurse to call McDonald's (a fact I want to hide), so then I say, "[The nurse] looks at me as if I'm crazy, which I kind of am. I was dead twenty minutes ago and now I'm worried about work, but that drive-through does not run well without me, and they're going to have to get someone in."

That laugh line draws attention away from the importance and relevance of this moment. It makes the moment feel like a storyteller's attempt at a joke instead of the conveying of a critical bit of information.

This is an exceptionally important concept in storytelling. If you can't hide critical details and preserve the surprise, the audience sees it coming a mile away. In that case, you may as well not even tell your story.

A couple of examples:

I tell a story about the time my girlfriend's father surprised me by serving me my pet rabbit on Thanksgiving.

When I'm twenty years old, Bengi and I decide to buy a pair of rabbits and keep them in the house as pets in hopes that girls would think this sweet and like us more.

It kind of works. Girls come over to see the rabbits and hang out for the rest of the day. I don't know if they like me more, but they hang around our apartment longer and more often, which is great for me. My primary means of attracting girls has always been proximity. I stand as close to a girl as possible as long as possible, hoping to wear her down. I crack jokes and tell stories, and eventually the girl might turn my way.

Sounds silly, I know, but remember this: Elysha fell in love with me while our classrooms were separated by about twenty-five feet of hallway. Proximity. It's genius.

Bengi and I train the rabbits to use a litter box, feed them rabbit food in cereal bowls, and basically give them the run of the house.

A few months later, the rabbits begin chewing incessantly through the electrical cords on the TV and lamps, so we decide it's time for them to move on. My

girlfriend's father keeps rabbits in a large hutch behind his house, so when he hears about my problem, he offers to take them off our hands. I'm thrilled.

Then he feeds the rabbit to me at Thanksgiving dinner. I didn't know it at the time, but my girlfriend's father is Portuguese, and the Portuguese eat rabbit the same way I eat chicken. Nor did I realize that my girlfriend's father raised rabbits to sell to local restaurants. To him, a rabbit is nothing more than a food source.

Still, he knew the rabbit was my pet. He understood the difference. He thought he was being funny. It was a terrible thing to do.

The trick of the story is to not allow the audience to foresee me eating my rabbit until the moment I take my first bite of the stew. I need it to be a surprise. It's not easy.

I maintain the surprise in the story by hiding the rabbit in a laundry list of things I do to try to impress my girlfriend's father, who is manlier than I will ever be. Bonding over his adoption of my rabbit is just one of many ways that I try to earn this man's respect and admiration and perhaps become the kind of man I've always wanted to be.

I hide the rabbit in the clutter of the story. I make my rabbit just one of the details (and an amusing one, using laughter as camouflage) instead of the most important element of the story, which it truly is. So when my girlfriend's father asks, "What do you think about the stew?" the audience still doesn't know that I'm eating my rabbit, because it doesn't feel like a story about a rabbit.

"It's good," I say. "I like it."

My girlfriend's father smiles and says, "You should like it because . . ." That is the moment when the audience realizes that I am eating my rabbit, just one second before I realized it back in 1991. When I told the story for the first time, the audience gasped in horror. One of them shouted, "No! No!"

By hiding the rabbit in the story, and by making it no less obvious than any other detail, I was able to maintain the surprise and give my audience the emotional reaction that the story demanded.

In another animal-related story, a couple whose wedding I DJed decided to name their dog after me because I was "the most fun person they had ever met."

I'm not kidding. It was one of the best days of my life.

By the way, keep in mind that my DJ partner's name is Bengi. The couple could have named their dog after the guy who is named after a dog, but instead they named their dog after me. I am an objectively fun person.

At the end of the story, Matty the dog unbelievably moves into the apartment below mine. Matty the man ends up living above Matty the dog. What are the odds?

I want my audience to be as surprised as I am when I discover this. Therefore, like the rabbit, the story can't be about Matty the dog, and it's not. It's really a story about my pending divorce from my first wife and my belief that my life is probably over.

When, at the end of the story, Matty the dog arrives at the apartment below mine, his leash isn't being held by the bride's husband. The groom is nowhere to be found. Instead she is standing beside the best man from the wedding.

Yes. She left her husband for the best man, and she took the dog with her.

It's a story about realizing that perhaps I didn't have it so bad after all. Somewhere in the world, there is a man who has lost his wife, his best friend, and his dog. Despite my pending divorce, I still had my best friend, Bengi, and I still had my dog, and maybe, just maybe, I still had a future.

But the story doesn't work without surprise. When the dog appears (along with the bride and best man), you need to be surprised that it's Matty the dog. You need to be surprised that it's the bride. You need to be surprised that it's the best man. You can't see any of this coming.

So, as with the rabbits, I hide the dog early in the story as an example of why I am an objectively fun person even though my ex-wife is complaining that I am boring. "How can I be boring when a couple named their dog after me because I am the most fun person they know?"

Just like that, the dog becomes a detail rather than a major plot point. I tuck the dog in between other details about the problems in our marriage, to obscure it even further.

I also place the dog early in the story, as far away from the payoff as possible, and I use that line "The couple could have named the dog after the guy who is named after a dog, but instead they named the dog after me" to punctuate the moment with a laugh, further obscuring the importance that the dog will play later.

Just a funny detail. Not the most important detail in the whole damn story.

When I tell the story, the audience realizes that it's Matty the dog at the last possible second, only after I've identified the woman who is moving into the apartment as the bride. The dog appears, and the audience smiles, realizing what's happening. Matty the dog is moving in below Matty the man. This moment usually gets a laugh.

But the surprises aren't over yet, though the audience thinks so. It's not until I fail to see the groom but rather spot the best man that the audience puts two and two together and the laughter quickly transitions into audible groans. Emotional response achieved by preserving the surprise in the story and maximizing it to its greatest effect.

To review, the strategies for preserving and enhancing surprise in a story:

1. Avoid thesis statements in storytelling.
2. Heighten the contrast between the surprise and the moment just before the surprise.
3. Use stakes to increase surprise.
4. Avoid giving away the surprise in your story by hiding important information that will pay off later (planting bombs). This is done by:
  - Obscuring them in a list of other details or examples.
  - Placing them as far away from the surprise as possible.
  - When possible, building a laugh around them to further camouflage their importance.

## STORY BREAK

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### The Return of Mathieu

When you stand on a stage in front of hundreds of people and tell a story, strange connections can be made.

It's June 2013. I'm competing in a Moth StorySLAM at The Bitter End. I'm telling a story about my time student-teaching in Mrs. Rothstein's first-grade class in Berlin, Connecticut. There was a boy in the class named Mathieu who refused to listen to a word I was saying. I was working in the class for about a week, and he had already made me feel stupid. I was embarrassed about my inability to get a six-year-old boy to obey me. I was starting to wonder if I was meant to be a teacher.

I was running our morning meeting for the first time, and Mathieu was once again causing trouble. I finally decided to lay down the law. "If you don't stop it, I'm going to call your mother!" I told him.

Mathieu's mother was dead. She had died earlier that year. I knew this, but in my fit of anger and embarrassment, I'd forgotten.

I finish telling that story at The Bitter End and return to my seat. During intermission, a young man approaches me and says, "I know the Mathieu in your story!"

"Not possible," I say.

"No," he says. "It's true." He cites the unusual spelling of the first name (which was mentioned in the story) and other similarities between his friend and the Mathieu in my story.

They both lost their mothers in the first grade. They both grew up in Connecticut. They both behaved badly in elementary school.

"It can't be," I say. "It's not possible. What are the odds?"

But it was true. A week later, I am exchanging emails with the boy I had taught fourteen years earlier. I apologize for my stupid and callous remark. I hope that he didn't harbor anger or resentment toward me.

His response: "I don't remember it at all. I don't really remember you. I know some man came into our class in first grade for a little while, but then he left."

So much for leaving an indelible mark on those kids. Still, my fear that I had somehow scarred Mathieu for life was gone. That burden had been lifted.

I lost the slam that night to an exceptional storyteller named Kate Greathead, but for once in my life, winning didn't matter. Or almost didn't matter. I lost by a tenth of a point, which always stings. But I had won something much greater that night.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

# Milk Cans and Baseballs, Babies and Blenders: Simple, Effective Ways to Be Funny in Storytelling (Even If You're Not Funny at All)

First, some hard truth: I can't make you a funny person. Many people (always men) have taken my workshops in the hope that I could teach them to be funny. I can't. I'm not sure if anyone can. But here's some good news:

- Stories need not be funny. Though many of my stories have funny moments, and some are funny throughout much of the story, they are not all funny.
- Even if you're not a funny person, you can still craft a story that contains funny moments.
- Some of your stories will likely be funny even if you're not funny at all. I tell the story entitled "Strip Club of My Own Making" about the time I stripped for a bachelorette party in the crew room of a McDonald's. This is situationally funny, no matter what I do. The least funny person on the planet can't make this story unfunny.
- Stories should never *only* be funny. The best ones are those that use humor strategically. Ideally you want your audience to experience a range of emotions over the course of your story. You can't achieve this if your audience is laughing for the entire time.

This is the difference between storytelling and stand-up comedy.

Imagine: You attend a fantastic night of stand-up comedy. The next day your coworker says, "Tell me some of the jokes you heard." Oftentimes you can't.

Maybe you remember bits and pieces of a few, but unless you saw a comic like Louis C.K., who bases his comedy in storytelling (and was honored by The Moth for his promotion of it), you can't reproduce many jokes, and probably none at all. The comic makes you feel good. You laugh all night. But the content doesn't stick. A week later, you probably won't remember a single thing from the show.

A story, however, can stay with you for the rest of your life. There are books, movies, television programs, and hopefully oral stories that you will remember until the day you die. There are lots of reasons for this, but one is that great storytelling isn't a single thing. Stories aren't *only* funny. The best ones take you on an emotional journey, always landing somewhere in the heart, and that leaves

an indelible mark that stand-up comedy cannot.

Stand-ups want the audience to laugh at all times. Storytellers want the audience to laugh at the *right* times. Humor is an enormous asset in most stories, but it is not required and should be used strategically whenever possible.

Let's consider the humor in "This Is Going to Suck." The story of my near-fatal car accident is not funny. No one would ever characterize it as funny, and yet I use humor four times in the story, in four very strategic ways, for four very different reasons:

## 1. Start with a laugh.

The first time I try to make the audience laugh is at the start of the story. Audiences usually laugh when Pat tells me that "Guys don't buy Christmas presents for other guys. Especially surprise Christmas presents." But even if they don't laugh there, they will almost always laugh at the disclosure that I have also bought a surprise Christmas present for Pat.

I try to make the audience laugh here, because it's always good to get your audience to laugh in the first thirty seconds of a story. A laugh at the beginning does these three things:

1. It signals to the audience: "I'm a good storyteller. I know what I'm doing. You can relax."
2. In a small, less formal situation, this early laugh will serve as a stop sign for potential interruptions. It serves as an unspoken signal that you have the floor. In fact, whenever faced with a person who cannot stop interrupting, I will often try to make the people around us laugh (never at the expense of the interrupter) to reassert my control over the space. "I made them laugh. I've got the floor. Let me finish, damn it."
3. An early laugh lets the audience know that regardless of how serious, intense, or disturbing the story I am telling may be, I'm okay now. "I made you laugh. Everything is fine. Whatever horror I'm about to tell you about, it's in the past."

This last thing is important when you're telling an especially difficult story. The story of the armed robbery in a McDonald's ("The Robbery") is the most difficult story for me to tell, and it's probably the most difficult story to hear. A gun is pressed to the side of my head and the trigger is pulled in an effort to get me to open a portion of the safe that is locked.

But I open this story with my children's ridiculous, hilarious magic show. The disappearing-dime trick, for example, features my daughter telling me and my wife to close our eyes while she makes the dime disappear. Then, without warning, she violently jams the coin into my ear.

It's a sweet, funny moment that is relevant (the robbery affects the way I see

my children to this day), but it's also intentionally light and joyous. In a couple of minutes, I'll be describing how my face is pressed into a greasy tile floor as I listen to a man slowly count down to what I think is my death. The experience will result in two decades of untreated PTSD and an ongoing existential crisis. It's my darkest story by far. But opening with something light invites my audience in and lets them know that, as violent and disturbing as events are about to become, I have a beautiful, little girl in my life who jams dimes into my ears as a part of her magic show. It's all good.

An early laugh also provides the storyteller with an all-important auditory signal of approval: "Oh, good. My audience likes me. They're on my side." It's a fine way to feel as you begin.

In a larger theater, where I often can't see my audience because of the glare of the spotlight, that auditory response is especially reassuring. "Oh, good. The audience is still there. They didn't quietly leave while I was adjusting the microphone."

Early laughter puts everyone at ease and makes the next few minutes supremely easier.

## 2. Make 'em laugh before you make 'em cry.

The second time I make the audience laugh is just before the actual accident.

Describing my mother's car as the size of a box of Pop-Tarts often generates a giggle, but the real laugh comes a few seconds later, when I tell the audience that I've always been told to steer into the skid in situations like this, but I don't know what that means.

I want my audience to laugh here because we are seconds away from the collision. The contrast between their laughter and the approaching horror heightens the shocking and visceral nature of what is about to happen. I often say that I like to make people laugh before making them cry, because it hurts more that way.

That is my goal here: Make them laugh so the collision and the resulting violence hurt more. Contrast is king in storytelling, and laughter can provide a fantastic contrast to something authentically awful.

## 3. Take a breath.

The third time I make the audience laugh is immediately following the accident. One of the kids from the pickup truck looks me over, leans in, and whispers, "Dude, you're fucked." This almost always causes the audience to laugh, but I tag the boy's dialogue with "It is the most accurate medical assessment that I will receive that day." Big laugh.

I want my audience to laugh here because they have just endured the details of a horrific car accident, and I need to break the tension. The audience needs to take

a breath. Whenever a story has become exceptionally tense and the audience needs to reset, a laugh is the best way to do this.

This laugh may seem organic rather than planned. The kid shows up at the right moment and says the perfect thing to cause a laugh. True, but a lot of kids show up that day. Another boy places my head on his lap and prays, telling me not to worry, I'll see God and Jesus soon, and all will be okay. Another boy screams uncontrollably upon seeing my legs and needs to be moved away. A girl weeps beside me. A lot more happens than is described, but I strategically choose the one line that has the most potential to be funny, and it's made funny through timing, tonality, and that tag on the end.

That's the job of a storyteller. Make good, strategic choices, and then make the most of those choices.

#### 4. Stop crying so you can feel something else.

The last time I make the audience laugh is near the end of the story, when I say that the betta fish is the only fatality of the accident. This laugh is another opportunity for the audience to take a breath and reset. Many begin crying upon learning that my friends are piling up in the waiting room. I sometimes do too.

I need the audience to collect themselves for the final few lines, because I know they might cry again. Rather than weeping through the end of the story, I want them to cry twice, because each time it's for a slightly different reason. They first cry upon realizing that my friends are piling into the waiting room, filling in for parents who should be there. Then they cry again when I explain, "Pat is wrong. You *can* give your friends surprise Christmas presents, because they give me the best one I've ever received."

The audience cries the first time because my friends have arrived when I needed them most. They cry because they are back in 1988, witnessing events firsthand.

They cry the second time because I'm reflecting on fifteen years of having friends fill in for the family I've always wanted, and hopefully, stating something larger and more universal: People can pick you up when you're down. They will fill in the gaps left by others, however large those gaps may be. Just because your family lets you down doesn't mean you're alone.

When your audience can feel those two separate and distinct feelings, separated by a laugh, the potential depth and meaning of the story increases considerably.

Also, you don't want your audience weeping for long periods of time. It's not pretty.

That's it. A story that isn't funny in any way has four moments of laughter, all placed in specific ways for strategic reasons.

This is not to say that these are the only reasons for a story to be funny. Humor

is a fantastic tool that can be used to increase the enjoyment of a story. It can keep an audience engaged. As you learned in the previous chapter on surprise, humor can serve as camouflage for something important that must pay off later. Humor can make a storyteller more likable. Humor is how I managed to get girls to like me for most of my life.

Some stories can't help but be funny. I tell the story of providing a semen sample as part of genetic testing entitled "Genetic Flaws." Going to a "collection center" in a former-elementary-school-turned-medical-facility to "make a deposit" is funny no matter how it's framed. I couldn't make it unfunny if I tried.

I tell the story of stealing left-footed children's shoes from a shoe store during a less-than-daring late-night raid entitled "Shoe Thief." This is also unavoidably funny. Stupidity is always hilarious.

But each of these stories also have heart, because that is what stories must have no matter what. There is more to each of these stories than simply the laugh. Each one lands on something real.

You must end your story on heart. Far too often I hear storytellers attempt to end their story on a laugh. A pun. A joke. A play on words. This is not why we listen to stories. We like to laugh; we want to laugh. But we listen to stories to be moved.

We love stories that contain moments of humor and hilarity. Sometimes an entire story can be funny. But those last few precious sentences — the space where you will land your story — should end with heart. Close with meaning. Stories must conclude with something greater than a laugh.

If you want your story to linger with your audience (and that should be your goal), you should end in a place that is moving, vulnerable, or revealing, or establishes connection with the audience.

Save your laughs for the middle, when you want to keep your audience engaged. Allow them to carry your audience to the end. But end your story with something bigger than a laugh.

As I said, I can't make people funny, no matter how often I am asked to try. I have yet to figure out that trick, and I may never figure it out. Humor is a combination of wit, speed, tonality, confidence, daring, nonconformity, flexibility with the language, understanding of your audience, and more. In a lot of ways, it's all about the way you say something. Delivery is critical. It can make the unfunny incredibly funny. Not exactly a bucket of skills that are easily taught.

But I can help a storyteller add humor to the story. You can at least be funny within the confines of your story. After that, all bets are off.

Like all other emotional responses (see the previous chapter), humor is based entirely on surprise. A combination of specific words spoken in a specific way at a specific moment initiates a surprise that sparks a smile, a giggle, or actual laughter.

Like every other emotional response, laughter is simply a well-cultivated surprise.

The two easiest ways to achieve these humorous surprises are through Milk Cans and a Baseball, and Babies and Blenders.

## Milk Cans and a Baseball

Milk Cans and a Baseball refers to the carnival game where metallic milk cans are stacked in a triangular formation and the player attempts to knock them down with a ball. In comedy, this is called *setup* and *punch line*. The milk cans represent the setup, and the ball is the punch line. The more milk cans in your tower, the greater potential laugh. The better you deliver the ball, the more of that potential will be realized. The trick is to work to the laugh by using language that carefully builds your tower while saving the funniest thing for last. Sadly, the instinct of most people is to say the funniest thing first. They can't wait to get to the funny part, and in doing so, they ruin it.

For example, in a story entitled "Homeless and the Goat," I tell the story about the period of my life when I was homeless. Near the end I say, "I was rescued from the streets by a family of Jehovah's Witnesses. I sleep in a pantry off their kitchen that they've converted into a tiny bedroom. I share this room with a Jehovah's Witness named Rick, a guy who speaks in tongues in his sleep, and the family's indoor pet goat."

*Goat* is the funniest word in that paragraph, because it is the most unexpected of all the words. It's the biggest surprise. Therefore it must be said last. It is the ball that I use to knock down my tower of milk cans. Can you see the tower I built before getting there?

Saved by Jehovah's Witnesses, pantry, tiny bedroom, Rick, speaks in tongues, in his sleep, indoor pet goat.

That's a lot of milk cans. Look at those last two words: *indoor* and *pet*. I chose them with care. I say them slowly, with a definite pause between the two. I use these words to enhance the surprise. When I say *indoor* and *pet*, my audience is thinking, Dog? Cat? Parakeet? Hamster? Even potbellied pig is an option. But *goat*?

*Goat* is funny, but it's only funny when said properly. When my friends tell this story on my behalf, they say things like, "Matt once slept with a goat. And a guy who talked in his sleep. The guy actually spoke in tongues when he was sleeping. They slept in this tiny room off the kitchen of this family of Jehovah's Witnesses."

They kill the humor. They kill it because they can't wait to say the word *goat*. They kill it because they make no effort to make the goat more than situationally funny. They kill it by not using the but-and-therefore principle; the way they tell it is essentially with an awful series of *ands*. I take a situationally funny moment (I

once shared a room with a goat) and make it into a bigger laugh by manipulating the language around it.

This is the art of Milk Cans and a Baseball. Taking moments of potential humor and making them as funny as possible. The stack of milk cans need not be large to generate a laugh. “A car about the size of a box of Pop-Tarts” also gets a reaction. It’s only a giggle, because the tower of milk cans isn’t that tall, but it’s still a surprise.

“Car about the size of . . .” is my milk can. It establishes an expectation that whatever is about to follow will be approximately car-size.

Riding lawn mower. Horse. King-size bed. Dining-room table.

All possibly funny, but not as funny as “box of Pop-Tarts” because “box of Pop-Tarts” is the biggest surprise. I’m comparing a car not to another vehicle and not to another large item, but to a small container for a food-like item.

*Pop-Tart* is also a funny word, which only adds to the humor. Some words are just funny. It’s well known that words with the *K* sound are funny. Words like *cattywampus*, *cankles*, *kuku*, *caca*, and *pickle* are funny just because of that hard *K* sound (though I think *pickle* is funny even without the *K* sound).

Oddly specific words are also funny. It’s funnier for me to say, “I’m pouring water over Raisin Bran because I am too stupid and lazy to buy milk” than it is to say, “I’m pouring water over a bowl of cereal.”

Why? Specificity is funny.

## Babies and Blenders

Babies and Blenders is the idea that when two things that rarely or never go together are pushed together, humor often results.

In the story about Elysha discovering that I was hungry as a boy, I describe Charlie like this:

*Except for Charlie’s obsession with biting his mother’s ass — an obsession I can understand quite well — he is the sweetest boy you’ve ever met. His first complete sentence was “Thank you, Mama.” When he needs a diaper change, he shouts, “Poop is here!” When I arrive home at the end of a long workday, Charlie is the first and often the only person to greet me at the door. Charlie oozes love. But when it comes to food, my sweet, angelic, three-year-old boy is a little asshole.*

This always gets a laugh, because three-year-old boys are rarely described as assholes, especially after being described as sweet, angelic, and little.

In the story about the way that my grandmother pulled my loose teeth, I refer to her as a sadist. *Grandmother* and *sadist* are rarely seen together, so it’s funny.

In a story that I tell about swallowing a penny as a boy, I describe the fireplace that I am sitting in front of when the swallowing happens. It's a full-size plastic, plug-in fireplace ordered by my parents through the Sears catalog. Plastic brick. Plastic wooden mantle. On that faux mantle are picture frames, and inside those frames are the pictures that were in the frames when my mother first bought them. A family of white, blond, smiling people, far better-looking than our own family.

This description always gets a laugh, even though I'm simply describing the truth. It's funny because fireplaces are not supposed to be plastic and plug-in and ordered through mail-order catalogs, and picture frames shouldn't be filled with magazine models. All of these incongruities are jammed together and generate laughs.

Would I describe the fireplace in such detail if it didn't generate a laugh? Probably not. But the description comes at the beginning of the story, and you know how valuable a laugh can be at the beginning of a story.

My favorite example of Babies and Blenders is an old Sesame Street game called "One of These Things Is Not Like the Other." Storytellers play this game in their stories all the time by creating a list of three descriptors, with the third being nothing like the other two. My favorite storyteller in the world — Steve Zimmer — does this in a story entitled "Neighborhood Watch." After Steve's family is not invited to the neighborhood Hawaiian luau, they decide to host the Zimmer family barbecue, which features "Zimmers, pineapple-flavored ham, and despair."

One of those things is not like the others, and the result is a big laugh.

These are not the only two ways to create humor in a story. There are others, of course. But I would argue that almost all humor boils down to one of these two strategies, and really down to surprise.

Exaggeration is another form of Babies and Blenders. We push an unreasonable description against something that doesn't normally fit that description, and a laugh is the result. But this only works when everyone agrees that you're exaggerating. If I'm falsely exaggerating in the attempt to make my audience believe that my exaggeration is accurate, that is not an exaggeration. It is a lie — an unacceptable one in my book.

When I tell my audience that my Jewish wife picked out her first Christmas tree, and it was "seven feet wide and three feet tall," everyone knows this is an exaggeration. No one believes that the tree was really seven feet wide and three feet tall. Therefore they laugh.

Although exaggeration is easy, it must still be executed well. The "seven feet wide by three feet tall" Christmas-tree dimensions were chosen carefully after many other dimensions were cast aside. For reasons that I don't entirely understand, seven by three feet is funnier than nine by four feet or five by two.

I tried them all. I didn't grab the first exaggeration that came to mind. I

acknowledged that the words are important and the choices should be made with care.

Humor can be an enormous and essential asset to storytelling. Most people want to tell a funny story, and with some strategic crafting and execution, most can. But remember that humor is not necessary. There are many great stories that are entirely humorless but are still highly effective and beloved.

Humor is optional. Heart is nonnegotiable.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

# Finding the Frayed Ending of Your Story (or, What the Hell Did That Mean?)

I was a member of the Blackstone Millville Regional Junior Senior High School marching band. I marched with the band from 1984 to 1989 as a member of the drum corps, playing the bass drum and various percussion instruments in the pit.

This was serious business. We were a competition marching band, performing elaborate halftime shows, even though the school had neither a football team nor a football field. We practiced in a school parking lot painted with yard markers. We worked like hell. We were Massachusetts champions for all the five years that I played in the band, and New England champions in two of those years. I marched in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, the Rose Parade, and down Main Street in both Disneyland and Disney World. Serious business.

Every summer I spent a week at band camp preparing for the coming season. Band directors would bring us to a college campus or a vacant military base to plan and practice our music and marching routines for the coming year.

For the first few years of band camp, until Massachusetts law changed, this also meant hazing. Lots and lots of hazing. Hazing rituals included being forced to carry the upperclassmen's drums, enduring shaving-cream bombs, withstanding blasts of CO<sub>2</sub> from fire extinguishers, and in some cases, serious violence. It wasn't uncommon for my scalp to be split open by the class ring of an upperclassman, turned stone down to pummel my skull. The 1980s were a different time in America. John Hughes got it right. These were not times of unity and acceptance in public high schools.

The worst of the hazing (other than the actual physical assaults) was "doughboying." In this case, an upperclassman (or a team of upperclassmen) tossed a lowerclassman into a bathtub and covered him in a combination of ingredients: flour, sugar, cornstarch, and yeast. Warm water was then run over the victim until the mixture congealed into a sticky substance that adhered to the skin. This was usually done just before a three-hour practice in the hot August sun, thus allowing the mixture to bake on the victim.

When you had been doughboyed, everyone knew you had been doughboyed. It was sticky, uncomfortable, but most of all embarrassing.

During lunch one day, I realized that I had forgotten my sheet music in my

dorm room and went to retrieve it. Unbeknownst to me, three seniors followed, including Eddie, the most violent person I had ever met. Eddie had split my head open with his ring more than any other senior. He was the person in my life that I feared most.

Eddie and his partners caught me running for the exit from the dorm and dragged me down the hall, through their room, and into their bathroom.

I never had a chance. I was a fourteen-year-old noodle-shaped boy who weighed no more than a hundred pounds. I'd yet to grow any facial hair or any chest hair. Two in Eddie's posse had full mustaches, including Eddie. One of the seniors worked a full-time job. They were men, and I was a boy.

Eddie and his gang tossed me into the bathtub and began the doughboy process by pulling off my shirt and pouring the mix on my body. Once I was in the bathtub, I stopped struggling. No sense fighting the inevitable. Instead I used the only weapon I had available to me: my mouth.

I called them cowards. Punks. Future Losers of America. "Three against one? What are you? A bunch of chickens? You're twice my size, and it took three of you to take me down? You suck!"

Eddie's face darkened. I thought this was something that only happened in Stephen King novels, but no, I was witnessing it in real life. He clenched his fists. He was seething. I looked to the other two guys, who were standing just behind Eddie. Our eyes met. They knew what was about to happen. They turned and walked out into the dorm hallway.

Eddie beat the hell out of me in that bathtub. He hurt me in a way I'd never been hurt before. It took everything I had to stop myself from crying.

In my workshops, I allow students to choose a random story idea from my list of untold stories in my spreadsheet. As of this writing, there are more than five hundred possible story ideas on that spreadsheet (moments from the past and moments from my Homework for Life that have proven storyworthy). This seems like a ridiculous number to many, but only because they haven't been doing Homework for Life for the last six years like me.

After the students choose a number, I demonstrate out loud how to craft a story from that idea. It's the most highly rated part of my workshops: Students have the opportunity to watch me work on a brand-new story, just as I do in real life. They listen and watch as I speak about the meaning of my five-second moment, as I locate the right beginning, apply my strategies, make decisions, and often stop and start several times. It's like peeking into my brain as I'm thinking, processing, and adjusting. It's a way to watch my process unfold in real time.

It's also my least favorite part of any workshop that I teach, because it leaves me feeling naked, exposed, and ineffective. A process that normally happens in the privacy of my shower, while walking my dog, or while driving alone is on full

display. Students listen to my unpolished, poorly told, shitty first drafts, which they, as it turns out, like watching and hearing a lot. It's easy to listen to a well-crafted story from a professional storyteller and assume that these things spring forth from our brains like tulips in the spring. I wish. It's a messy process. Ugly and halting and imperfect. Knowing this makes my students feel better about their own messy process.

In a workshop three years ago, the class chose number 81 off my spreadsheet, which corresponded to the story of my beating at band camp. It read, "Eddie in a Bathtub."

I groaned as my eyes settled on number 81. It was a bad choice. Even worse than "First Introduction to Dry Sex," which a class had chosen a year earlier.

"Eddie in a Bathtub" was a five-second moment of my life, to be sure, but I really had no idea why. We have moments like this in our lives, when something happens to us and we know it's important, but can't explain exactly why. It's a memory that lingers in our consciousness, a moment that remains locked in our heart; maybe it's a time in our life that we frequently revisit in dreams. This was one of those moments. "Eddie in a Bathtub" was an important moment in my life, but I had no idea why.

In these cases, my advice to storytellers is always the same:

Tell your story. Speak it aloud. Don't worry about stakes or lies or anything else. Don't fret over where to start or finish. Just tell the story as honestly and completely as possible. Spill out all the details. Tell the overly detailed version of your story. Through this process, you will often discover (or rediscover) its meaning. You'll come to understand the importance of your five-second moment.

That's what happened to me on that day. I told the story — without any thoughts of craft or polish — and when I reached the end, I knew. Through the process of telling the story, I had managed to put myself back into that bathtub, and instantly I understood why this moment had stuck with me for two decades. I realized that the story had two important meanings for me:

1. It was the first time I realized that people will turn their backs in the face of evil and walk away rather than taking a stand.
2. It was the first time I felt that the world was a fundamentally unsafe place, that people will hurt you for no better reasons than traditions and payback.

It wasn't an easy moment to confront in front of an audience of thirty students. That bathtub was a terrible place for me, and when I found myself in it again twenty years later, it was no better. I became emotional. I rushed to the end, leaving out the brutality and specificity of the beating. I wasn't ready to share it all with an audience, but I had found the meaning. Two meanings, really.

And that is no good.

Stories can never be about two things. I explained to my students that even though that moment in the bathtub came to mean two different things to me, the story that I tell onstage someday about that moment can only be about one of those things.

This is because of what you already know:

The ending of the story — your five-second moment — will tell you what the beginning of your story should be. The beginning will be the opposite of the end.

If my story is about my realization that the world (and especially people) are fundamentally unsafe and willing to hurt you for the pettiest of reasons, the beginning of my story needs to present my previous belief that people are basically good and the world is generally safe.

The arc of the story will trace my path from innocence to cynicism. From optimism to pessimism.

If my story is about how people will turn their backs on you in moments of crisis, the beginning of my story needs to be about my belief that people can be depended upon in times of need. The arc of the story will go from faith in my fellow man to a loss of that faith.

This is why your story can never be about two things.

This does not mean that I can't tell both versions of this story. In fact, as a storyteller, I'm thrilled to have two stories that center on the same moment. Those two stories, which have yet to be fully crafted, will start entirely differently but will ultimately converge on the same moment in the bathtub.

If I'm telling about my newfound understanding of violence in this world, I will include all the details of my experience in the bathtub. I will allow my audience to experience the beating that I received at the hands of Eddie that day. Since the story is centered on my newfound understanding of this violent world, it should reflect that violence.

If I'm telling the story of my newfound understanding that people will turn their backs in times of need, I might not include all the details of the beating. I might move time forward and simply detail the injuries I suffered, leaving the gory details to my audience's imagination.

The same moment, told two different ways depending upon what I want to say.

This is not the only time I have discovered the meaning of a story simply by telling it. It's happened many times. Reimmersing myself in the moment and telling as much of the story as possible, and ignoring all my storytelling strategies in favor of telling everything that I remember, has been exceptionally useful in finding the meaning behind those nagging moments from my life. I've also watched many people discover the meaning of their stories in my workshops through the same process. I've watched people break down into tears upon

realizing why a moment has stuck with them for so long.

Just tell your story. All of it. Forget the strategies. Start in the wrong place and end in the long place. Ramble. The goal is to return to that moment as best as possible in order to find its meaning.

The other way of discovering the meaning of a moment is to ask yourself why you do the things you do.

As I mentioned in a previous chapter, my father and I write letters to each other. This is our primary form of communication. Since he disappeared for most of my childhood and for much of my adult life, it has been difficult for us to maintain an ongoing relationship.

*We are miserable on the phone.*

*My father has never been on the internet.*

*He won't leave his hometown.*

Eventually we settled on letters. It turns out that he's an excellent writer. He's an even better storyteller. I just wish he would write faster, but these letters have allowed me to get to know my father better than ever before.

Just a couple of weeks ago, my wife asked what my father's most recent letter contained. My answer: "I'll let you read it."

I said this because I had not read it myself. What I've never told my wife (or anyone else) is that I don't open any of my father's letters until I receive another one from him. Sometimes this means I hang on to an unopened letter for months. I always keep one unopened letter from my father on hand at all times.

It was true that for the first letter, I was afraid of what he may or may not have written, and that's why I brought it to the movie theater to read. But even today, I don't open one of my father's letters until another one arrives.

Why?

In the spirit of "Ask yourself why you do the things you do," I did exactly that: "Why do you do this? Why do you keep an unopened letter from your father in your bag?"

I thought about my father. Our relationship. Our personal history. I told myself the story of our history, starting with his disappearance from my life following the divorce of my parents up until present day. I spoke the words aloud, leaving nothing out. It took some time.

When I finished, I suddenly knew. The answer came to me as clear as day. I keep an unopened letter from my father because ever since I was a boy, I have waited for him to return to my life, and every time he has made an appearance, I am afraid it will be his last. I have lived in fear that my father will leave me again and never come back.

If I keep an unopened letter from my father, he can never leave me again. I'm holding on to this unexplored piece of him, and as long as I have the promise of reading his letter someday, he can never disappear again.

Just like that, I have a story. It'll be a good one too, I think. The kind of story that will connect with many people on many levels.

Even better, I understand myself a little better now. I often ask myself why I do the things I do. Sometimes the answer is simple:

*You're pedantic.*

*You're neurotic.*

*You're a jerk.*

*You're selfish.*

*You like ice cream way too much.*

*You think "No Right on Red" signs are bullshit.*

*You despise the way neckties are nothing but decorative nooses.*

But sometimes the answer to the question reveals something much deeper — a hidden truth that often makes for a great story.

Bruce Springsteen once said in an interview: "Most people's stage personas are created out of the flotsam and jetsam of their internal geography and they're trying to create something that solves a series of very complex problems inside of them or in their history."

I heard that and thought, "Yes." It was the kind of yes that filled every cell of my body.

Not yes. Yes.

Storytellers seek to constantly make meaning from their lives. We contextualize events, find satisfying endings to periods of our lives, and struggle to explain how our lives make sense and fit into a larger story.

Sometimes we see this meaning immediately. My wife says, "I know that when you were a little boy, you didn't always have enough food to eat," and I know instantly what this means: Elysha knows me better than anyone has ever known me. She might know me better than myself. And damn, she must really love me.

But "Eddie in a Bathtub"? I needed to tell that one. I needed to get back into that bathtub with Eddie to understand why this beating — more than any of the other beatings I experienced that year at the hands of upperclassmen — stayed with me for so long.

"Eddie in a Bathtub" was part of the flotsam and jetsam of my internal geography. I needed to solve the complex problem of my history in order to tell the story.

The unopened letter from my father, still sitting on my desk?

I needed to tell that one too. It wasn't until Elysha asked me what was in my father's letter that it occurred to me that my ritual with his letters was odd. Something that I was unwilling to tell her about. Something that I didn't understand.

Those are the moments when I know that it's time to tell myself a story so I can understand my behavior and solve the complex problem of my personal history. The solutions often make for great stories and provide us with opportunities to more fully understand ourselves. To make meaning out of who we are from the stories we have lived.

## STORY BREAK

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### Reconnecting with My Mean Old Elementary School Principal

In 2016, I told a story at a Moth GrandSLAM at the Music Hall of Williamsburg in Brooklyn about a time when I had to face down the principal as a third grader. After stealing a classmate's stamp catalog, I was forced to admit to the theft or risk allowing my entire class to be punished for my crime.

Walking into the principal's office and telling him the truth that day remains one of the hardest things I have ever done in my life. I can still remember the moment as if it were yesterday, and I think about it often when faced with the need to speak a difficult truth or admit to a mistake. It was a lesson for a lifetime.

It wasn't a typical story for me. It was too long for a Moth slam, so I stripped it down to its bones and retained more humor than heart. Not my usual strategy, especially in competitive storytelling, but I enjoyed telling it just the same. I don't often go for the laugh as often as I did that night, and I probably swore more on the stage that night than all the stages I've ever stood on combined. It was a different side of me as a storyteller. Not my most effective side, but a fun alternative.

The principal's name was Fred Hartnett. I had not seen or spoken to him since elementary school, although a few years ago I discovered that the new middle school in my hometown — built on the street where I grew up — bears his name. I thought it was the perfect choice of name given how much that man still lives in my heart and mind almost four decades later.

Because Mr. Hartnett was my principal back in 1979 and seemed old even then, I assumed that he had probably passed away years before, but when I mentioned the story on Facebook, a former classmate sent me a message informing me that Mr. Hartnett is alive and well and passed along his email address.

Since then Mr. Hartnett and I have exchanged several emails. I can't believe it.

In addition to the message I sent him, I attached a recording of the story made at a Speak Up event, where I had first told the more complete version of the story. He replied:

*I certainly do remember you as well as other members of the Dicks family. I must admit, however, I do not recall the incident you referenced. Not surprising. It was a long career. That having been said, I thoroughly enjoyed your presentation.*

He went on to expound on the fates of several people in the story, including my teacher and a classmate who plays a significant role in the tale.

Regarding the new school bearing his name, he wrote:

*As for the middle school at BMRSD, it was my responsibility as superintendent to construct it. The school committee announced the dedication at graduation in 2003, the year I retired. I was, and sometimes remain, uncomfortable about it, though relieved it's not posthumously! On occasion, when I drive in I reflect it's similar to seeing one's name on a tombstone.*

The man still has it.

Remarkable how the power of The Moth has once again brought someone back into my life and reestablished a connection that means so much to me. Mr. Hartnett and I continue to exchange emails. A man who once lived only in my heart and mind has come to life once again for me. We have discussed teaching, writing, and the course of our lives. It's been remarkable.

Tell your stories. On stages or in living rooms or at dinner tables. Share them with friends and family and people willing to listen. You never know what might happen.

## **Part III**

# **Telling Your Story**

I hope I didn't bore you too much with my life story.

— *Elvis Presley*

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

# The Present Tense Is King (but the Queen Can Play a Role Too)

I'm writing this chapter on an Amtrak train from Washington, DC, to Hartford, Connecticut. I'm not sitting in the quiet car, but it's quiet nonetheless. The train rocks back and forth on the rails, dramatically increasing the frequency of typos. Elysha is sitting beside me. She's listening to music through earbuds and struggling with a crossword puzzle on her phone.

It's late afternoon. The sun hangs low in the sky. Sunlight is streaming in through the windows on the other side of the train car, brightening my daughter's face. She's leaning against the window. Her legs are scooched up underneath her blue and pink skirt. She's sitting quietly, reading. She's eight years old, but today it seems as if she's twice that. She looks so mature, so together.

Her younger brother, Charlie, is sitting beside her in the aisle seat, just an arm's length away from me. He's listening to music on an iPad through a pair of blue headphones. He's fidgeting.

I turn back to the laptop on the tray in front of me. I should be thinking about the best way to convey the idea of this chapter. I should be hunting for the perfect story to illustrate my point. I want to bang out this chapter before we hit New York City.

But I'm not thinking about this chapter at all. My mind is focused on Charlie and his fidgeting. He needs to pee. He's needed to pee since Aberdeen, New Jersey, but he's afraid of the restrooms on the train. In his words, "They are yuck."

The situation is becoming precarious. I need this boy to pee, but it turns out that you can't make a human being pee, even if you're forty years older, 150 pounds heavier, and his father. There are just some things that can't be done without consent. Peeing is one of these things.

Charlie's refusal to pee in the train's restroom worries me. We're still more than three hours from our home in Connecticut. The boy can't hold it for three hours, so there are only two possible conclusions to this predicament: he has an accident, or I convince him to use the restroom.

It's amazing how a five-year-old boy's bladder is consuming so much of my mental energy. I cannot stop thinking about his need to pee. It's like a blazing road sign in my mind.

He's also occupying enormous amounts of my time. He's signaling me again to stop typing. He's climbing out of his seat. We're off again, walking to the end of

our train car and then crossing over into the café car. This is his fourth attempt to pee. He hopes that the restrooms in the café car are somehow more palatable and less frightening.

They are not. This restroom is the same as the ones we've seen already, and we've seen a lot of them. "Porta-potty," Charlie declares as I slide open the door. He shakes his head. "No, thank you."

"It's a toilet," I say. "Everyone uses it."

"Not me," he says.

We turn around. As we wait for the conductor to clear the aisle so we can pass, Charlie looks up at me and says, "I'm not proud of myself. If I could pee in that potty, I would be proud, but I'm not." Then his head drops. He stares at his shoes.

My heart breaks. The train rocks, the conductor punches a ticket, and a little part of me dies. My son's inability to pee in a less-than-ideal location is affecting his sense of self. He feels bad about himself because he can't pee. This petty biological annoyance has blossomed into something more serious.

We commence our walk of shame through the café car and toward our seats. A simple bodily function that I mastered long ago has now become the bane of my existence. "This too shall pass," I whisper as we step back into our car. I know it's true, but in this moment, I don't believe it.

Elysha looks at me hopefully. I shake my head in defeat.

Charlie sits. He's already wriggling again. This poor boy is suffering. So am I. Do you feel as if you're on the train with me? I'm trying like hell to put you here, because I am still on the train, writing these words.

I want you to be here with me. I'm loading you up with sensory information. The sounds and sights and feel of the train. I want you to feel that you're occupying my space, experiencing time in the way I am experiencing it now. I want you to feel the weight of my son's reluctant bladder.

Another strategy that I'm using to put you on this train with me is the use of the present tense. These events are happening right now for me, literally as I write this sentence, and, I hope, you feel as if they are happening in the space and time that you are occupying as you read these words.

This is the magic of the present tense. It creates a sense of immediacy. Even though you are reading these words in bed or by the light of a roaring fire or perhaps naked in your bathtub, a part of you, maybe, is on this train with me, staring at a little boy who desperately needs to pee. The present tense acts like a temporal magnet, sucking you into whatever time I want you to occupy. It allows me to put you on an Amtrak train somewhere in central New Jersey in the summer of 2017 or in my 1976 Chevy Malibu on a lonely highway in New Hampshire in the fall of 1991 or in a chaotic emergency room on December 23, 1988.

The present tense will bring you a little closer to these moments in time. It may even trick you into believing that you have time traveled back in time to these moments.

Charlie wants to try to pee again. I thought he might ask Elysha this time, but no. It's me. It's back to the restroom in the café car for us. "It's the best one," he says.

I want to remind him that he's already dismissed it as a porta-potty, but I'm holding on to hope. He's five and fairly illogical. Maybe this time will be different.

Two years ago, Charlie, Clara, and I were playing at a school playground on a hot summer day when Charlie announced that he had to pee. The playground had no bathrooms, so I told Charlie that he would need to pee on a tree or we'd have to go home. He had never peed while standing up before, let alone on a tree, so he was skeptical. I coaxed him. Cajoled him. Modeled the process for him. Cheered him on.

After a couple of minutes, Charlie peed on that tree. One of the proudest moments of my life.

"I wish I could pee on a tree," Clara said as I high-fived Charlie's unwashed hand.

I was glad that Clara expressed disappointment. I worry about Charlie. His sister is three years older than he and is one of those kids who reads exceptionally well, speaks in complete sentences at all times, and seems to remember everything she sees or hears. She possesses a vast storehouse of information in her brain that she accesses with great ease and fluidity.

I worry that Charlie will compare himself unfavorably to his big sister and think less of himself because of it. I've seen this happen to students, especially when the sister is older than the brother. The combination of the age disparity and a boy's propensity to mature much later in life often leaves younger brothers feeling dumb. I don't want this for Charlie, so I celebrate his accomplishments whenever I can. He peed on that tree, and damn it, was I proud.

Clara couldn't. It was about time she couldn't do something that Charlie could.

But now he can't pee in an actual toilet, and I sense his confidence waning. He sighs this little-boy sigh. It's tiny but terrible. "I will be proud of myself, or I will be mad," he says as we head back down the aisle again.

I open the door to the restroom. He shakes his head. Sighs again. Another failure.

A woman with two young boys smiles at me as we pass. She's watching us march down this aisle for the fifth time. She seems to get it.

I don't.

Did you see what I did there? I opened that section in the present tense again,

trying like hell to suck you back into the time and space of the train, but then I shifted to the past tense when I slipped into backstory about the day I taught Charlie how to pee on the tree. I did this deliberately, for two reasons:

1. I didn't want to compromise the immediacy of the train part by bringing in a second present tense to my story. If I spoke about Charlie's tree-peeing lesson in the present tense as well, then I would risk diluting the visceral, present-tense nature of the train. Stories cannot have two or more events that took place at different times happen in the present time of the story. It's like putting a hat on a hat.
2. The use of the past tense in backstory makes sense. It's in the past. It should be presented as such. This is not always the case, but it's often the case. When in doubt, tell backstory using the past tense.

Following the tree-peeing backstory, I end that last section by returning you to the present tense. I placed you back on the train, walking down the aisle, passing the woman with the knowing glance after another failed attempt. I want you with me on that train again, if you left at all.

There are other reasons to shift tenses when telling a story. Sometimes I want to push an audience back before bringing them forward again. I do this in "This Is Going to Suck" when I reveal that my friends are filling the waiting room outside the emergency room. Look how often I shift tenses in this paragraph:

*But I'm not alone, because when the nurse called McDonald's to tell them about the accident, the manager on duty told my friends, and those friends started calling other friends. An old-fashioned phone tree begins, with friends calling friends calling friends, and the waiting room is now filling up with sixteen- and seventeen- and eighteen-year-old kids in ripped jeans and concert T-shirts, and one fourteen-year-old boy who is cooler than all of them. And my friend Bengi is the first one to arrive.*

I start in the present tense ("But I'm not alone"), but then shift to the past tense to something you already know happened ("when the nurse called McDonald's"). Then I shift back to the present tense ("An old-fashioned phone tree begins, with friends calling friends calling friends"), even though I'm still relating information from the past. This phone tree already happened. The waiting room is already full of kids. I'm about to tell you this, but I still want this past event told in the present tense.

I do this because the disclosure that "an old-fashioned phone tree begins" is a powerful moment in the story. It means a lot to me, and I hope it will mean a lot to my audience. I want them to feel as if it's happening in the present. I want them to see teenagers calling teenagers, rushing to my assistance while my parents go to check on the car first.

I can't tell you about this phone tree when it's actually happening, because it

would ruin the surprise of my friends in the waiting room, so I tell you about it after it has happened — but in the present tense.

While these time shifts were admittedly intentional, many are not. As you begin to tell stories in the present tense, the shift from present to past to present will become instinctual as you learn to sense when you want your audience in the present moment as opposed to the past. I hit a moment of heightened emotion or increased gravity, so I instinctually shift to the present tense if I'm not already there, because this is when I want my audience "in the now." Similarly, when I launch into backstory, I almost always instinctually shift into the past tense. It just makes sense.

When she was editing *The Moth*'s collection of stories, Catherine Burns told me that she discovered that storytellers shift tenses constantly, but it's not something you would notice unless you're trying to put these stories on the page. These constant tense shifts are nearly undetectable in their oral versions. But on the page, they become obvious and challenging. They can stick out like a sore thumb.

"I really need to pee," Charlie says. He's standing in the aisle again, tugging on my sleeve.

"I know you need to pee," I say. "But will you actually pee this time?"

"Yes," he says, grabbing hold of my arm for balance as the train rocks back and forth. I look out my window. The skyline of Manhattan is on the edge of the horizon, on the other side of the river.

"Fine," I say, a little too annoyed for my liking. He's five years old and frightened. Now I feel like a jerk.

I hand my laptop to Elysha, stuff my phone into my pocket, and stand.

"Good luck," she says.

I'm not sure if she's speaking to me or Charlie.

"Let's go to the café car," Charlie says. "I think it's the best one."

"Okay, buddy," I say. I reach down and take his hand. I squeeze it. "I love you."

"C'mon, Dad!" he says.

There's one more benefit to the present tense: It helps you see your story.

Some storytellers are able to see their stories. As they tell it, they almost relive the moments. Rather than staring into the eyes of their audience, their minds recreate a vision of the events as they unfold.

I see my stories. When the Mercedes is barreling down on me and the double doors are opening on the emergency room and my friends are standing there, I see them in my mind's eye. I can see the events again as if a movie is playing in my

eyes.

Seeing your story as you tell it is a great thing. It will help you connect to it more effectively. Your emotional state will more closely match your actual emotions from the time and place that you are describing. When you can see your story, it is more likely that your audience will see your story too.

Charlie peed. On our sixth attempt, as we entered Penn Station, he agreed to sit on the toilet after I assured him for the 119th time that it was just a toilet.

“I did it, Dad,” he said as he hopped off the toilet.

“I’m so proud of you, Charlie.”

“No,” he said. “*I’m* so proud of me.”

Even better. My eyes fill with tears in the restroom of a train heading north to Connecticut. Crisis averted. Pride intact. A moment I will never forget.

Did you notice that I told much of that last bit in the past tense? Do you know why?

If you were thinking that I used the past tense because I didn’t write this last section on the train, you would be correct. I’m sitting in the dining area at Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health in the Massachusetts Berkshires, three days removed from our train ride.

But this is not why. I chose the past tense because I was writing about Charlie peeing on the train. I didn’t feel I needed to bring you into that tiny restroom with me while my son was sitting bare-assed on the toilet.

Some things are told better from a distance. Urination, I think, is one of them.

But then I switched to the present tense when I admitted to crying in the restroom, because in that moment, I wanted you as close to me as possible.

But the important part is this: I made the choice. I weighed my options. I didn’t simply default to one tense. I chose what I thought was the correct tense for that particular moment.

That said, not every person can tell stories in the present tense. I meet many people who have been telling stories exclusively in the past tense for years. Shifting to the present tense occupies so much of their mental bandwidth that it does more harm than good.

There is nothing wrong with telling a story from the past — even five minutes in the past — using the past tense. You will not be a terrible storyteller if you do. In a lot of ways, this is the most intuitive, logical, and expected way to talk about the past. It makes a lot of sense.

But try the present tense. See if it’s something you can fall into naturally. If you can, great. You’ll have a much better chance of drawing your audience into

your story and perhaps seeing your story as well. You'll have more choices to make in crafting your story, and they will give you an additional strategy for your toolbox.

If you can't do it, I've loaded that toolbox up already with plenty of strategies, more than you can probably manage at this point. Better to tell your story well from the past tense than poorly (or unnaturally, or stressfully) from the present tense.

## If You Practice Storytelling or Public Speaking in a Mirror, Read This. If You Don't, Skip It.

In all the time I have been coaching storytellers, one thing comes up again and again that makes no sense to me: people tell me that they rehearse their stories and speeches in front of a mirror.

I am always baffled by this strategy. Why a mirror? When you're performing onstage or speaking in a conference room or interviewing in an office or presenting in a classroom, you're never looking at yourself. You're looking at other people. In fact, the only person in the room you can't see and will never see is you.

The only place in the world where you *shouldn't* rehearse is in front of a mirror. It's the only time that you are guaranteed to be seeing something that you will never see while speaking.

Not only will practicing in front of a mirror not help, but I suspect that it might hurt your performance. The very last thing you should be worried about while speaking is what you look like. It's your words, your inflection, your tonality, your ease of speech, and your choice of vocabulary that matter. The tilt of your head, the twinkle in your eyes, and the angle of your smile are all irrelevant. If you're thinking about your appearance while speaking, you're not dedicating all your concentration to the one thing that matters.

Storytellers often ask me what to do with their hands when performing. My answer:

Nothing. Let them be. Allow them to do what they will do. If you're thinking about your hands, you're thinking about the wrong thing.

Mirror practice only encourages attention on your physical appearance. Don't do it. Practice in front of anything but a mirror. You have a greater chance of seeing a Canada goose or a shambling corpse than you have of seeing yourself while you're speaking.

Instead of a mirror, practice in front of other people. Or in front of pictures of other people. Or a wall. Anything, really. Anything but you.

Why would you practice doing something in a way that will never happen in real life?

## STORY BREAK

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### A Storyteller and a Magician

Elysha and I are dancing at The Moth Ball in 2015 when a Moth staffer approaches and asks for me to follow her. A donor would like to meet me. Elysha ditches me for the restroom, and I follow the staffer into the dining room, where I am introduced to a man named David.

“I’d like you to tell your story again,” he says. “So I can record it into my phone.”

I agree, even though the request is odd. While we wait for the Moth staffer to secure us a quiet spot, I ask the man if he’s ever told a story before.

“I did a TED Talk once about how I held my breath for seventeen minutes.”

I stare at him. “Are you David Blaine?” I asked. “The world-famous magician?”

“Yes,” he says. “I thought they told you.”

I tell my story again. David Blaine records my performance. Then he offers to perform a card trick for me. I agree.

David Blaine then proceeds to convince me that magic is real. At the end of his trick, I find a playing card that I had signed in my shoe, which I never removed throughout the duration of the trick. It’s so unbelievable that I am a little frightened. I turn to a *New Yorker* reporter who tagged along to watch the trick.

“Did you see that?” I ask.

“How did he do it?” she asks.

“I don’t know,” I say. “It’s impossible. I think he made a deal with the devil.”

David Blaine laughs. “I’d like to talk to you more about storytelling, if you don’t mind. Let me give you my card.”

“Okay,” I say.

“You already have it,” he says. “Left breast pocket.”

Sure enough, it’s there. It’s a playing card — the king of spades — with his contact information embedded within.

We say good-bye, and I go and find Elysha. I tell her what she just missed. She’s still angry to this day.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

# The Two Ways of Telling a Hero Story (or, How to Avoid Sounding Like a Douchebag)

No one likes a braggart.

If you're religious, perhaps you know Proverbs 27:2: "Let another man praise thee, and not thine own mouth."

Or Leonardo da Vinci: "He who truly knows has no occasion to shout."

Or Mark Twain: "Noise proves nothing. Often a hen who has merely laid an egg cackles as if she had laid an asteroid."

One of my favorites is by humorist Evan Esar: "The only way to cure an egotist from bragging is by surgery — amputation at the neck."

Avoiding bragging can make storytelling difficult, because we all have moments of true accomplishment that we want to share, and, in some cases, we are almost required to share:

*Job interviews*

*College applications*

*Meeting the in-laws for the first time*

There is nothing wrong with sharing your success stories, but they are hard stories to tell well. The truth is this: failure is more engaging than success.

You'd rather hear from the ballplayer who struck out in the ninth inning with the bases loaded to lose the World Series than the slugger who hit the home run to win the World Series. It's just a better story.

Getting fired from your dream job is probably more entertaining than being hired for your dream job.

Tragic first-date stories are far better than perfect first-date stories.

The story of an F is almost always better than the story of an A+.

Think about it this way: The story of an incredible meal at an amazing restaurant is unlikely to contain anything of merit in terms of story. More than likely it will simply be an oral accounting of the food that a person consumed attached to a series of adjectives describing each item.

But if I told you that I was served soup with a fly fluttering amongst the beef and vegetables, trying not to drown, you would likely ask, "What did you do?"

## Why?

Something is going to happen. We have ourselves a potential story.

Nevertheless, there are times when you might want to tell a success story, and when you do, there are two strategies that I suggest you employ.

1. Malign yourself.
2. Marginalize your accomplishment.

Rather than attempting to be grandiose about yourself or your success, you must undermine both you and it. This is because of two realities:

First, human beings love underdog stories. The love for the underdog is universal. Underdogs are supposed to lose, so when they manage to pull out an unexpected or unbelievable victory, our sense of joy is more intense than if that same underdog suffers a crushing defeat. A crushing defeat is expected. An unbelievable win is a surprise.

You already know the importance of surprise in storytelling. If you cast yourself as the underdog, your audience will enjoy your success. They will root for you. They will expect you to lose and hope for you to win.

This is why Bruce Willis is outnumbered and barefoot in *Die Hard*.

This is why *Star Wars* opens on a massive star destroyer attacking Princess Leia's tiny rebel ship.

This is why Jack is from the wrong side of the tracks in *Titanic*.

Underdogs are what make movies like *Rudy*, *Revenge of the Nerds*, *The Breakfast Club*, *Miracle*, *The Karate Kid*, *A League of Their Own*, *Rocky*, *The Bad News Bears*, *Erin Brockovich*, and *Hoosiers* so beloved. All of these movies feature protagonists who are not expected to win. They are flawed, forgotten, failed people who achieve unexpected success.

In a story entitled “Bring Me a Shrubbery,” I tell about changing the life of a chronically shy student named Lisa through our unexpected shared love of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Through the humor of Monty Python, Lisa begins using her voice for the first time. Lisa’s parents tell me that I “saved her life” by bringing their withdrawn daughter out of her shell and helping her to make friends.

It’s a success story, to be sure, but I open the story by describing a moment on the first day of school that year when I throw my shoe in the direction of a student and accidentally clock her in the head.

Why do I open my story with this moment? I want to be sure that my audience knows that I’m not perfect, nor am I pretending to be. I’m not the best teacher in the world. Not even close.

I may save a girl’s life, but I also struck a child with flying footwear. I

marginalize myself. I cast myself as the underdog by sharing a highly imperfect moment of teaching, so I can tell you about the closer-to-perfect one later.

Second, human beings prefer stories of small steps over large leaps. Most accomplishments, both great and small, are not composed of singular moments but are the culmination of many small steps. Overnight success stories are rare. They can also be disheartening to those who dream of similar success. The step-by-step nature of accomplishment is what people understand best.

This is how to tell a success story: Rather than telling a story of your full and complete accomplishment, tell the story of a small part of the success. Tell about a small step. Feel free to allude to the better days that may lie ahead, but don't try to tell everything. Small steps only.

In "Bring Me a Shrubbery," Lisa's parents tell me that I saved their daughter's life. It's a joyous moment for me, and I feel incredible for exactly three days. Then I pass by Stephanie in the hallway, a former student and an equally shy girl. Stephanie was so shy that her friend Quiana often spoke on her behalf when she was in my class.

I didn't save Stephanie. I quit on her. I never found her *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. What was even worse, I stopped trying to find it.

There were others too. Kelly from a couple years before. Kayla from a year before that. And in my first year of teaching, Joseph, whose voice I cannot remember, probably because he barely spoke in class that year. I didn't save any of them.

In fact, I didn't even save Lisa. I got lucky. I shouted out the line from a movie, and by some miracle, it connected with a student in an unexpected way. I gave Lisa the space and encouragement to grow and thrive, but had I not shouted that line from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, she could have ended up like Stephanie and all the rest.

In the end, it's a success born from good fortune, but it was just one student. So many others had already passed through my classroom quietly. That is what my story is about.

I maligned myself by admitting I'd thrown a shoe at a student.

I marginalized my accomplishment by pointing out that while I may have saved Lisa, I had failed to save the many who came before her.

I know. It's not the easiest thing to do. Sometimes we are so proud of our hard-fought success stories that we want to tell every bit of them. Sometimes we want to be the hero, damn it. But the line between hero and insufferable person is a thin one. Caution is advised.

Sometimes you can't help but tell the whole story. In the summer of 2017 I worked with a man named Tim Warren who summited Mount Everest years

before. Is Tim expected to stop his story halfway to the top of the tallest mountain in the world?

No. That would be ridiculous. But Tim also failed to reach the summit on his first attempt, and he certainly didn't reach the top on his own. He was part of a climbing team. By passing on some of the credit to the teammates who made his climb possible, and by highlighting his initial failure, Tim can tell the story of his ascent in a way that an audience can relate and connect to.

I also suggested this: Can Tim's story be about something other than Mount Everest? Can the climb to the summit be about something more personal? More interior? Perhaps a bit of individual growth that resulted from the climb?

I know it sounds crazy to turn the summing of Mount Everest into something other than the summing of Mount Everest, but if I can turn a story about putting my head through a windshield and dying on the side of the road into a story about my friends taking the place of my family, why not?

If the successful climb taught Tim to trust others, listen to his gut, accept failure, find inner peace, believe in himself, or uncover a strength he never knew he possessed, that would make for a story with much greater universal appeal and potential connectivity.

We all have our own Mount Everests to summit. Tim's just happened to be the real thing. If he can use that enormous pile of rock and ice to reach his audience on their own level by expressing something more personal about his feat, the power of the story and its potential to connect to an audience increases exponentially.

Summiting Mount Everest is an adventure story. Changing your life by summing Mount Everest is a great story.

## STORY BREAK

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### **“Fine” Is Apparently Not a Good Way to Describe My Sex Life**

I’m backstage at a TEDx conference at Kripalu Institute for Yoga and Health in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. In a few minutes, I’ll be standing in that red circle, telling a story and talking about Homework for Life.

As I review my story in my head, Dr. Ruth Westheimer appears. She’s following me onstage.

“Hello, Dr. Ruth,” I say. I introduce myself. I tell her how honored I am to share a stage with her. I tell her that my wife would love to meet her if there’s time at the end of the conference.

“Tell me about your sex life,” she says.

I shouldn’t be surprised by this request, but I am. I stutter for a moment before saying, “It’s fine.”

She shakes her head. “Fine is not good.” Then she offers me five tips for improving my sex life with my wife. I diligently write them down.

After I’m done speaking, I meet my wife in the lobby. “Dr. Ruth gave me some tips for our sex life,” I say, perhaps a little too excitedly.

“Why did you ask Dr. Ruth for advice on our sex life?” Elysha asks. She sounds annoyed. She’s clearly not as excited about this as I am.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

# Storytelling Is Time Travel (If You Don't Muck It Up)

I am not a spiritual person. Nor am I one drawn to mysticism, transcendental planes, or otherworldly notions.

I am much more of a blunt stick. Straightforward. Uncomplicated. Grounded in what I can touch and see. I eat an Egg McMuffin for breakfast every day. I don't practice yoga because no one is keeping score. I don't pray or meditate. I don't believe in ghosts or angels. I have no superstitions. I don't even throw coins into fountains to make wishes. I'm a joy to be around.

So this is the only time I'm going to get a little hokey with you. The only time I'll propose something less than tangible. Here is what I believe: In its best form, storytelling is time travel. If I am doing my job well and telling an excellent story, you may, for just a moment, forget that you exist in the present time and space and travel back to the year and location that I am describing.

My goal as a storyteller is to make my audience forget that the present moment exists. I want them to forget that *I* exist. I want their mind's eye to be filled with images of the movie I am creating in their brains. I want this movie to transport them back to the year and spot that my story takes place.

*A lonely New Hampshire highway in the fall of 1991*

*The sidewalk outside of a record store on December 23, 1988*

*Main Street in Newington, Connecticut, in a rainstorm at 2:00 AM*

If a storyteller is performing well, and if the conditions are right, I think this magic can happen. I believe that audiences — in theaters, in boardrooms, or at dinner tables — can be transported back into the past.

It's admittedly easier to achieve this form of time travel if the conditions are just right. Lights turned down. Comfortable chair. Silence. Perhaps even a glass of wine or beer in the bellies of your audience members.

This is why movie theaters are designed the way they are. Filmmakers want you to forget that you're watching fiction. They want you to laugh and cry and worry about people who are pretending to be other people in a story that never actually happened.

It sounds crazy, but you know it works. You've become so engrossed in the lives of fake people that you have wept among strangers in the dark. This is what great storytelling can do.

Filmmakers also want you to forget about your own life for a while. Put aside your troubles. Ignore the fact that you're sitting beside strangers in a seat that has been occupied by thousands of strangers before you. Filmmakers want to transport you too. Not through time, but to a fictional world they have created on the screen.

As a storyteller, I seek a similar goal. I attempt to encircle my audience in a time-traveling bubble. I want to thrust them back to a time and place of my determination. If I'm doing it right, and my audience is in the right frame of mind, and the conditions are ideal, I believe it can happen.

But it's a fragile bubble. It can be popped easily. It doesn't take much. Storytellers must be careful if they don't want to ruin any time-traveling magic that they might muster.

Here are some rules to avoid popping this mystical bubble:

### Don't ask rhetorical questions.

Actors in movies never ask rhetorical questions of their audience (*Ferris Bueller's Day Off* being the only exception I have found so far), and neither should you. Asking a rhetorical question causes the audience to devise an answer in their mind. You have just turned your story into a Q&A session. You've reminded them that you exist, they exist, and this moment that you and they are occupying exists.

### Don't address the audience or acknowledge their existence whatsoever.

Avoid phrases like "You guys!" for the same reason you shouldn't ask rhetorical questions. When a storyteller says something like "You guys, you're not going to believe this!" the bubble is instantly broken. Time travel has abruptly ended. The audience is keenly aware that someone is standing in front of them, speaking directly to them and the people sitting around them.

This also applies when the audience talks back to you. If you say, "I was walking across the campus at Ohio State" and someone in the audience shouts in approval at the mention of their alma mater, say nothing and do nothing. Unless you're speaking in a Baptist church, storytelling is rarely a call-and-response scenario, so pretend the whoop or the cheer was never uttered. Ignore it completely.

We disregard fools in the hope that our lack of recognition will cause them to cease acting foolish in the future. Allow them to silently stew in a puddle of shame and regret, and move on.

### No props. Ever.

I once listened to a man tell a story about his frantic sprint through the Miami airport while dragging his daughter to catch a flight. He treated everyone in his

path terribly. He was rude, dismissive, and unkind. When he finally arrived at the ticket counter, he demanded that the airline employee hurry so he and his daughter could board the plane before it was too late. The airline employee looked at the ticket, smiled, and told the man not to worry. He had plenty of time. The ticket was for next month.

The man looked down at his daughter and realized that he had just dragged her through the airport, setting the worst example for her ever. He felt like a fool.

Great story told brilliantly. I could feel the heat and humidity of Miami. I could see the throngs of travelers blocking his path. I could even hear the public-address system call out flight numbers and gates. I was in that airport with him and his child. Brilliant.

Then he removed the ticket from his back pocket and waved it to the audience. “And it’s still good,” he said. “Too bad I won’t be in Miami three days from now to use it.”

Pop! That was it. I was no longer in the Miami airport. I was in a theater in Brooklyn, staring at a middle-aged man with a piece of paper in his hand.

Time travel over.

Did the ticket help his story? Of course not. It punched his nearly perfect story right in the mouth.

Don’t use props. They never help. Even worse, they always hurt.

## Avoid anachronisms.

An anachronism is a thing that is set in a period other than that in which it exists. It’s a microwave in the Middle Ages. A refrigerator during the Renaissance. The internet during the Inquisition.

If you’re telling a story about something that happened in 1960, but at some point you say that your mission was as unlikely as the moon landing, you’ve created a temporal impossibility in the story and likely popped your time-traveling bubble.

Anachronisms are like sledgehammers, reminding us that this story is just a story. It reinforces the idea that we are not traveling through time.

Sometimes, unfortunately, they are also unavoidable.

In “Charity Thief,” I mention that it’s 1991 and cell phones don’t exist. I hate saying this. If cell phones didn’t exist in 1991, then they shouldn’t be spoken of at all in my story.

The only reason I mention the absence of a cell phone is because too many millennials have asked me why I didn’t have a cell phone on that day, so I feel the need to control their wonder by reminding the audience that something that didn’t

exist in 1991 did not exist in 1991.

Apparently if you've lived in a world where cell phones have always existed, it's hard to imagine them not existing. Annoying. But in most cases, I avoid these anachronisms at all costs.

### Don't mention the word *story* in your story.

Phrases like, "But that's a story for another day," or "Long story short" serve to remind our audience that we are telling a story. If your audience knows that you're telling a story, then they're not time traveling.

### Downplay your physical presence as much as possible.

When I tell a story onstage (or even in a workshop or at a conference), I wear blue jeans, a black T-shirt, and a hat. I wear this every time. It's my uniform, chosen because it suits me as a person and is fairly nondescript.

My goal is to downplay my physical presence. I want to increase the likelihood of becoming a disembodied voice in the mind of my audience. I want them to completely forget that I'm standing in front of them.

There was a time when I varied my outfit slightly. I wore graphical T-shirts and other variations of shirts and pants. Then I took the stage in Boston one night wearing a T-shirt featuring a half-dozen storm troopers from *Star Wars*, sitting on a beam, looking like construction workers. As I adjusted the microphone, a cluster of audience members up front began to laugh.

I looked. Why were they laughing? I listened. They were laughing at the graphic on my shirt.

I didn't want my audience laughing yet. I didn't want them looking at me. I didn't want them taking inventory of my wardrobe or thinking about my shirt at all. From that moment on, I've opted for the same bland outfit every time.

This is not to say that jeans and a black T-shirt are my recommendation for everyone. Just don't wear clothing that might upstage you or attract the audience's attention during your story.

An audience member once told me, "Listening to you tell a story is like listening to an audiobook." Exactly what I wanted.

## STORY BREAK

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### **I Berate Storytellers at the Worst Moments**

I'm sitting in the wings with storytellers at one of our biggest Speak Up shows of the year. We've sold out a 550-seat theater in downtown Hartford, and Elysha is center stage, introducing our first storyteller of the night, Jeni Bonaldo. I'm sitting beside Jeni, demanding that she start her first novel.

"Write a sentence a day," I say. "And then make it a page a day. Write a page a day, and after a year, you'll have a novel."

"You're always berating me for not accomplishing enough," she says. "It's never enough for you."

I've just launched into a lecture on the importance of goal setting when I hear Elysha reaching the end of Jeni's introduction, and I realize that this woman is about to take the biggest stage of her life, and I have just spent the last minute before her performance haranguing her.

As she rises from her chair, I try to tell her how impressed I am with everything that she does. Teacher. Storyteller. Mother. Future novelist. I don't think she hears a word I say as she steps into the light.

She performs brilliantly. Truly. She is vulnerable and hilarious and heartbreakingly beautiful. But it isn't any thanks to me.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

# Words to Say, Words to Avoid

In 2007, a small band of terrible human beings excerpted about ten years' worth of my blog entries and created a thirty-seven-page packet designed to make me look like a violent, sexually deviant person who was unfit to teach children in a classroom. The authors also accused me of receiving excessive favoritism from my principal and demanded that he and I be fired immediately, along with my wife, who was teaching in the same school at the time. The packet was signed by "The Concerned Parent Body of West Hartford."

The authors took my words out of context to fabricate a persona that was unlike anything that existed in reality. For example, in one blog post, I wrote about my opposition to placing text on the butts of female clothing. At the time, the Juicy brand was all the rage, so elementary-school-aged girls were walking down the hallways of my school with "Juicy" plastered across their bottoms. I questioned a company's decision to manufacture this product and the parent's decision to purchase this clothing and wrote, "Even worse, the eye is naturally and unavoidably drawn to text, so I find myself staring at girls' butts every day."

The only line excerpted for the packet was, "I find myself staring at girls' butts every day," without any reference to the Juicy brand or my moral outrage against it.

Under the category of favoritism was listed this out-of-context quote: "[My principal] said I can take as much time off as I want. 'Do whatever you want to do,' he said."

The authors failed to include the fact that this was said to me on the day that my mother died.

The authors included photos that I had taken while in Bermuda of the photos of barely clothed models hanging in the storefronts. I wrote the post to criticize the objectification of women for the purposes of selling these products to women, but again, the only thing included in the packet were the photos and the suggestion that I am obsessed with sex.

This kind of deliberate manipulation went on for thirty-seven pages. I wrote about my love of the classic *Calvin and Hobbes* snowmen, often drawn in morbid and horrific poses, so the authors of the packet implied that this was something I did with regularity. I was compared to the Virginia Tech killer and referred to as "sick," "deviant," and "violent." Page after page of unfair, deceitful characterization.

The authors threatened to send this packet to every family in my school district, as well as the press, if action was not taken immediately. It was sent to the

superintendent, the mayor, and every member of the board of education and the town council.

The district placed me on three days of administrative leave in order to conduct an investigation. After three days, the human-resources director found that I was well within my First Amendment rights while writing my blog and had not written anything that would preclude me from teaching children. I had done nothing wrong.

It was a hit job, plain and simple, most likely perpetrated (in the estimation of the human-resources director) by a colleague or former colleague with an ax to grind. He assured me that threats to send material of this nature to the press or public were never acted upon, and I had nothing to worry about. I returned to school triumphant and finished my year.

Two weeks into my summer vacation, the packet was mailed to more than three hundred families in my school district. In addition, it was handed out in driveways. Stuffed under windshield wipers. Copied and distributed widely. Having taken down my blog (at the request of the district), there was no longer any context that readers could apply to the packets. Each of the examples now stood on its own.

A firestorm erupted in my town. It was a long and terrible summer filled with meetings with the superintendent, union representatives, attorneys, and town officials. My realized dream of teaching children was now in jeopardy, and my wife's career was teetering as well.

Ultimately, the parents of the twenty-three children who were placed in my classroom in the coming school year were given a choice: keep your child in my class or move your child to another class without prejudice.

Because of the inflammatory nature of the packet and the lack of context, the district expected every parent to pull their child from my classroom. If so, it was decided that I would be assigned an administrative position at Town Hall and likely never teach children in my district (perhaps in any school district) ever again.

Of the twenty-three children assigned to my class that year, all twenty-three families opted to keep their children in my classroom. In addition, another twenty families contacted the superintendent, asking to place their child in my class if a spot opened. The superintendent called me and demanded that I stop soliciting support from these parents. I told him (in all honesty) that I had not spoken to a single parent all summer. These were unprompted, unsolicited requests.

“Stuff it,” I told him.

It was a happy ending to a horrible series of events. To this day, I don’t know for certain who the anonymous authors of the packet were. I have evidence of some, but perhaps not all. It’s possible that one of the authors still works in my school district. Not a day goes by that I don’t think about what happened to me and

how powerful anonymity can be.

I owe those twenty-three families so much. They knew me. They trusted me. They were willing to look beyond the accusations and supposed evidence and think thoughtfully about me as a person.

But what also saved me was the reputation I had established over my first eight years of teaching and how careful I had been with the words on my blog and in person. While I was admittedly offering controversial opinions and frequently played devil's advocate on my blog, district officials expressed great appreciation for the fact that I had never mentioned my school district or colleagues by name, never used profanity or vulgarity on my blog, and never promoted my blog to students or colleagues.

My decision to keep my blog clean and free of specific teaching references and vulgarity helped a lot.

I continue to blog daily, but I still don't swear or speak profanely on my blog. I don't criticize my school district or my colleagues. You'll never find a photograph of my holding a beer or drinking wine. I knew what to write and what not to write to preserve my reputation in my community. I knew where the line was, and I often stepped on it but never over it.

It saved me.

As a storyteller, you need to do the same. Whether you are telling a story to a coworker, conducting a presentation in a boardroom, toasting your brother at a wedding, or performing onstage, the words you choose will in part determine how your audience perceives you. It will impact the opinions that they form about you.

Here is my advice in these matters.

## Profanity

I don't swear much when I'm telling a story. In truth, I don't swear often in real life. And I don't swear often in storytelling, for a couple of reasons.

To date, The Moth has been generous enough to air eight of my stories on their podcast and *The Moth Radio Hour*, providing me with an audience numbering in the millions. To make it easier for The Moth and others to use my stories publicly, I try to tell stories suitable for the masses.

Avoiding swearing also makes it easier for public and private organizations, religious institutions, school systems, and the like to trust me and hire me. A storyteller who leans heavily on profanity isn't likely to be hired to teach children, rabbis, corporate executives, librarians, priests, or teachers. He's less likely to be hired to perform for nonprofits, yoga institutes, holiday parties, religious retreats, high schools, and more.

Also, swearing is lazy. In most cases, a swear word can be replaced by a better

word or phrase. The swear word is easy and may engender a laugh, but it's rarely the best word to choose.

That said, there are times when I think it is appropriate to swear:

- Repeated dialogue: The kid who arrives at my car accident swears. He says, “Dude, you’re fucked.” It’s his words, repeated exactly.
- When a swear is simply the best word possible: There is no better way to describe my former stepfather than *asshole*, so that is the word I choose every time.
- Moments of extreme emotion: There are certainly times in our lives when the best way to capture the heightened emotion of a moment — particularly when it comes to anger and fear — is with profanity.
- Humor: Though I would never rely solely on profanity for humor, there are moments when a well-placed swear word makes a perfect punch line to a joke.

## Vulgarity

Vulgarity is the description of events that are profane in nature. This includes actions of a sexual nature, anything involving bodily fluids, and the like.

In “Genetic Flaws,” for example, I tell about my visit to a semen-collection facility for the purposes of genetic testing. I acknowledge in the story that I will need to masturbate in order to provide a sample, but at no time am I specific about it in such a way to make an audience uncomfortable. I use euphemisms, allusion, self-deprecation, and humor to set the scene without exposing the scene. Everyone knows the reality of the situation without needing to know the *exact* reality of the situation.

In all stories, we take care of our audience by ensuring that they are not repulsed, offended, or disgusted by what we are saying.

A friend once told a story at a Moth StorySLAM about his intestinal disagreement with Thai food while on a first date. While sitting on the woman’s white couch, my friend experiences a loss of bodily control, and the result is an unfortunate situation for both him and the couch. He described the defiling of the cushions in specific, graphic detail, including color, smell, viscosity, and texture. He scored poorly with the judges that night, because his description of the situation was repulsive and sickening. What he thought was honest and authentic was revolting.

All he needed to say was that he stood up, turned around, and discovered a “situation” on the couch. “A serious situation. An unfortunate situation.”

This would have resulted in both an understanding and a laugh while not repulsing the audience in any way.

I once heard a storyteller talk about how he and his father would spend hours in their basement watching pornography when he was a teenager. This story was less graphic than my friend's couch defilement, and yet the story was still vulgar because of the level of creepiness and the ick factor. I actually think this story could be told well with humor, self-deprecation, some unexpected heart, and the heavy use of euphemisms, but this storyteller opted for none of these, and the judges made him pay the price.

I once heard a storyteller describe sex with a woman as a Christmas tree, with the presents underneath the tree being worth the wait. He was not graphic or overly specific, but it was creepy and objectifying, and therefore vulgar.

The rule with vulgarity is simple: If you are speaking about a topic that would be awkward to talk about with your parents or grandparents, tread lightly. Take care of your audience.

## Other People's Names

I'm often asked how to handle using real people's names in my stories. I tell storytellers that changing the names of people to protect their anonymity is perfectly reasonable. When you change the name, however, I always suggest that you choose a similar name to make it easier to remember.

Barry becomes Bobby.

Sally becomes Sandy.

As a teacher, I always wait five years before telling a story involving a student. Even then, I always change the student's name, and I never tell stories about students that cast them in a negative light. They are always stories about my failures as a teacher. Never the failures of my students.

Sometimes we just don't tell certain stories. Speaking them aloud might irreparably damage relationships with loved ones. You may expose someone else's secret. You may put your job or your company in jeopardy. Sometimes it's just not worth the story.

I once had a storyteller say to me, "You're so lucky that your mom is dead." She quickly realized what she had said and backtracked, but I understood her meaning. My mom passed away, so I'm able to tell stories in which she is less than heroic. I don't have to worry about her getting angry with me.

In truth, I've been talking about my parents' failures for a long time. There is very little that I don't share with the world, but this is me. It might not be you. I'm a big believer in the words of novelist Anne Lamott: "You own everything that happened to you. Tell your stories. If people wanted you to write warmly about them, they should have behaved better."

For this reason, I also name my former stepfather by both his first and last name in my stories. I believe in naming the villains in our lives. Neil McKenna

destroyed my mother's life, and in many ways he seriously damaged the lives of his stepchildren in the process. He was a despicable human being, so I say his name with enthusiasm.

In the end, you make the choice over what names you want to use. Just be sure to consider the possible long-term effects of using the name.

## Celebrity / Pop Culture References

I once described a former girlfriend in a story as “the kind of girl Zooey Deschanel plays in movies.” Then I watched about half the audience nod in understanding and the other half squint in confusion.

That was the moment I stopped using celebrities as comparisons in my stories.

When we refer to celebrities in our stories, we make three mistakes:

1. We risk alienating half of our audience, who might not be aware of the reference. While one side of the room nods and laughs in recognition, the other side of the room feels foolish or lost.
2. Comparing a person to a celebrity sticks that celebrity into the story and pops that mystical time-traveling bubble. I once heard a storyteller say that her father looked a lot like Ronald Reagan. As a result, Reagan was now playing the role of her father in the story, and having a former president walking around her cruddy little apartment made no sense. It's impossible for an audience to picture someone looking “kind of like Ronald Reagan.” They will just use Reagan, turning a formerly sensible story into something dreamlike and strange. Just don't do it.
3. It's lazy. We gain very little by saying “so-and-so looks or acts like so-and-so.” It's shorthand, but it doesn't reveal much about character.

Instead of comparing my former girlfriend to a Zooey Deschanel character, I now say something like this:

*Jen was the kind of girl who never seemed to have a job but always seemed to have just enough money. She was carefree. The girl who would never grow up. Never grow old. Never worry or complain. She always had a new obsession, and each obsession was cooler than the one before. She was ethereal but present. Happy but aloof.*

This description makes people nod, smile, and laugh. No one squints.

## Accents

The rule on accents is simple:

Don't.

There is never a reason to imitate the accent of a person from another country

or another culture. A white man imitating the accent of the Mexican cabdriver (as I once heard a storyteller do) only runs the risk of making the white man sound insensitive and racist (which it did).

There is one exception to this rule: you can always do the accents of parents and grandparents. Parental love conquers the potential hazards of racial stereotypes.

I also think that you can imitate the accents from the region where you grew up, particularly if you share a race with the people who you are imitating. For example, I grew up near Boston and had a Boston accent. I've lost much of it after living in Connecticut for almost twenty-five years, but I could reproduce the accent for a story if I wanted, and it occasionally creeps into my speech.

I don't think I would use it. I can't see any reason to do so, and I think it might be a distraction. But it wouldn't be objectionable, just as it wouldn't be wrong for a person who grew up in Ireland but has lost the Irish accent to imitate it when repeating dialogue from childhood.

But I would tread lightly here. Even if a blond, blue-eyed, white man grew up in a Puerto Rican neighborhood with Puerto Rican friends, imitating a Puerto Rican accent under these circumstances is fraught with peril and should not be done.

When in doubt, don't do an accent.

## STORY BREAK

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### **The Weather Sucks. So Don't Talk about It.**

As I write this, it is snowing outside. Meteorologists are referring to the storm as a blizzard. Much of Connecticut is shut down (though I've just returned from a successful trip to Dunkin' Donuts), and apparently the grocery-store shelves are empty, but here's the thing:

Tomorrow, less than twenty-four hours from now, the storm will have ended. The sun will shine high in the sky. The roads will be clear. And though we may have a foot or two of snow on the ground, we have certainly seen this much snow before in New England and will see this much snow again. Probably more.

I despise the ongoing, never-ending, relentless conversations about the snow, the impending snow, the snowfall projections, and the incessant complaining about the snow. One of my primary goals in teaching storytelling is to make the world a more interesting place. If people know how to tell great stories and know the right stories to share, then the world becomes a more entertaining, connected, and meaningful place to live. I believe this with all my heart.

Conversations about the weather are the antithesis of this ideal of an entertaining, connected, meaningful world. They are the death of good conversation. They are the enemy of the interesting.

My humble suggestion: Avoid these conversations at all costs. Change the subject. Do not engage. Walk away if necessary. You will be the happier, and the more interesting, for it.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

# Time to Perform (Onstage, in the Boardroom, on a Date, or at the Thanksgiving Table)

As I've said, I've only been nervous while performing twice in my life. Once was that time at a Moth Mainstage at Boston's Wilbur Theatre. It's a story I've told in chapter 9.

The second time was in 2015, when I told "The Robbery" at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. I had told a version of the story the year before at a Moth GrandSLAM, but I have no recollection of telling it. My post-traumatic stress disorder is linked specifically to the events that took place in that story, but after years of therapy, I was finally able to talk about the robbery without breaking down.

It had become a scar instead of a wound. Or so I thought.

I took the stage that night, stepped up to the microphone, and took a deep breath. The next thing I remember, I was walking off the stage and back to my seat. I sat down beside Elysha, and she said, "What happened?"

Though I told a coherent version of the story, and I had actually scored well (finishing in second place), it was not the version of the story that I intended to tell. I was angry, defiant, and emotional. I left out some of the more reflective parts of the story and included parts that I had intended to leave on the cutting-room floor. The sound engineer that night, Paul Ruest, later said to me, "I've never heard you get so upset onstage."

I have no recollection of the performance. It's a perfect hole in my memory.

My therapist later explained to me that I had not mentally prepared myself to tell that story to a large audience. "There's a big difference between telling the story to me or Elysha and telling the story to hundreds of strangers. You can do it, but you need to be prepared."

A year later, I was ready to tell it again, this time in a Moth Mainstage in front of an audience of almost a thousand people. But for the second time in my life, I was nervous. I didn't want to black out again.

I also wanted to do well. Catherine Burns, The Moth's artistic director, the director of my story, and the human being whose opinions on stories I value the most, would be sitting in the front row. For the second time in my life, those damn butterflies began fluttering around.

Catherine was nervous that night too. She was directing another story and was worried about the storyteller. He was performing for the first time, and she wanted him to do well.

During our mic check, I started to wonder if Catherine was worried about me too. I thought she had confidence in me, but now I wasn't so sure. About half an hour before showtime, I finally asked, "Do you ever get this nervous about me?"

"No," she said. "You could certainly mess up your story, but you never stop talking, so I know you'll eventually find your way back."

That was the second and last time I was nervous taking the stage to perform. Catherine's words meant the world to me, not only because of the confidence they conveyed, but because she was right. As long as a storyteller keeps telling a story, all is well.

I've seen people stop speaking onstage. Typically these are storytellers who have memorized their stories word-for-word, and at some point, they've forgotten a word. I've seen moments of silence last a minute or more. They feel like forever.

Part of it is nervousness too. When your mind is frayed and frazzled because you are afraid (which is what nervousness really is), it's hard to perform at your best.

This does not mean that nervousness is always a bad thing. Back in 2012, I stepped off the stage at The Bell House and was met by Steve Zimmer, who, as I've said, is one of the best storytellers in the world. I had been admiring Steve from afar for a while, mesmerized by his craft. He has beaten me two or three times already and deservedly so. He was (and is) my storytelling hero.

Steve stopped me as I walked back to my seat and said, "You know what your problem is?"

I had never spoken to my hero before, so I was flummoxed. "No?" I managed.

"You're not nervous up there, so you have to have a great story every time."

Steve said other things to me that night. Kind and generous things. Things that made me feel as if I was on top of the world. Today I'm proud to call him my friend.

But that night in The Bell House, I knew almost instantly that Steve was right. When Steve performs, he is nervous. Backstage, he paces and mumbles to himself. Onstage, he is jittery and uncertain for the first few moments of his story, despite his honest-to-goodness greatness.

His nervousness serves him well. Audiences love Steve before he even says a word. Every person in an audience wants to be on the stage to some degree. Maybe it's less than 1 percent of their being that wants to perform, and maybe it's 99 percent. Whatever the percentage, Steve connects with the audience before he even speaks, because through his nervousness, he shows them that he is just like them.

They are rooting for him before he ever says a word.

I stand there like a jerk. I'm not worried at all. If the audience doesn't like me, I act as if it's their own damn fault. Steve is right. I had better tell a great story, because I give the audience nothing to love as I stand before them. I'm an overly confident, probably arrogant, "neckless stump with legs for arms," in the words of one friend.

The lesson here: Nervousness can be your friend. Too much of it is never good, but not being nervous at all isn't good either. I bristle at the saying, "If you're not nervous, you don't care enough," because I couldn't care more about performing well, but there is some truth in this statement. It ain't always bad to be nervous.

Elysha is nervous before every show she hosts, and during the first few minutes onstage, her hands have been known to shake. She eventually eases into confidence as the show proceeds, but initially, she is visibly anxious.

The audience loves her for it. They love her courage. Her authenticity. The way that she is just like them, just as nervous as they might be if they were hosting the show.

There are moments, of course, when nervousness won't help you. If you are presenting at a professional conference, pitching or selling a product, delivering the State of the Union address, or teaching high-school seniors, nervousness will not be perceived well. When you are supposed to be the expert or the authority, confidence is often required.

But performing onstage? Talking to a girl on a first date? Delivering a wedding toast? Even a job interview? A little bit of nervousness is fine. Helpful, even. It's endearing. It shows how much you care. It bridges the gap between you and your audience.

I was recently asked why I am not nervous onstage. I used to say that twenty years working as a wedding DJ equipped me to speak extemporaneously to large groups of people without being nervous.

But then Bengi, my DJ partner, reminded me that I wasn't nervous when I started working as a DJ. I was supremely confident from the get-go, even though we had no idea of what we were doing.

So I told the woman who asked that I wasn't sure why I'm not nervous. "Maybe it's just in my DNA. Maybe I'm just a confident jerk." Then another woman who had spent the week learning storytelling from me raised her hand. She said, "I just think you're not afraid because speaking onstage can never be as bad as all the stuff you've been through."

She might be right. When you've been brought back to life by CPR twice, been arrested and tried for a crime you didn't commit, been homeless, and suffered through a brutal robbery and decades of PTSD, the stage doesn't seem so bad.

I started this book assuring you that you needn't die or spend time in jail or get pulled from a burning building to be a great storyteller, and it's true. Absolutely true. But perhaps reminding yourself of the adversity that you've overcome in your own life will help with your nerves. Maybe it'll give you a little bit of confidence onstage.

Maybe it'll give you too much confidence onstage. So much so that your storytelling hero sees it as a problem.

Regardless, don't avoid telling stories because you're nervous. Embrace your nerves. Allow them to serve you well.

When it's time to perform, here are some other hints to help you do well, whether you're telling a story at your uncle's funeral, your mother's fifth wedding, your high-school graduation, your dream job interview, or The Moth.

## Don't memorize your story.

Actors are required to memorize their lines. You are not, nor should you. Actors also have fellow actors on the stage or in the wings to help them when they forget a line. Actors are also pretending to be other people.

It's hard to be authentic and vulnerable when you're reciting lines. It's also obvious to an audience when a storyteller is simply reciting a story instead of telling a story.

Instead of memorizing your story word-for-word, memorize three parts to a story:

1. The first few sentences. Always start strong.
2. The last few sentences. Always end strong.
3. The scenes of your story.

If you're following my advice and placing every moment of your story in a physical location (chapter 11), then your story will be composed of scenes: places where the action, dialogue, and internal monologues are taking place. If you remember these places, you will remember what happens there, even if every prepared word of your story suddenly flees your mind. In "This Is Going to Suck," for example, my scenes are:

1. On the sidewalk outside the record store
2. Driving in my car through Mendon, Massachusetts
3. The accident scene immediately following the collision
4. The ambulance
5. The emergency room
6. The waiting room outside the emergency room

## 7. The other side of the emergency room

I don't memorize my stories. I memorize the places where my story takes me, so even if I can't remember how I want to tell it, I can still do so. I may lose some laugh lines, clever transitions, and "golden sentences," but I'm still telling my story. It may not sound as good as it could, but I'm not trapping my audience in awkward, story-killing silence.

As Catherine said, I just keep talking.

Some people remember their scenes in a list, but I actually remember these scenes as circles in my mind. The size of the circle reflects the size of the scene. The color of the circle reflects the tone and tenor of the scene. This is not something I do purposefully. It's just the way I have always remembered my stories. I tell you this because for some people, this method has been exceptionally helpful.

I try not to have more than seven scenes in a story. The phone company uses seven digits in our phone numbers because they determined that seven bits of information is the most that the average person can retain at one time. Seven feels right to me. I have some stories that only have three scenes — even better. I have a story composed of just one scene. But seven is my max.

### Make eye contact.

There are many times when I am standing onstage and I can't see a thing. A spotlight is shining in my eyes, and I am enveloped in a curtain of black. In those cases, eye contact is impossible.

But when you can see your audience — in a classroom, a conference room, your aunt's kitchen, a reception hall, or a faculty meeting — eye contact is important. You can't speak to the middle distance and expect your audience to connect.

That said, you also need not make eye contact with each and every person. You have enough to do without inventorying your audience.

My suggestion is this: Find a person on your left, a person on your right, and a person dead center who likes you. These will be the people who are smiling. Nodding. Laughing. Use these three people as your guideposts. Make eye contact with them, and the people in each of those areas will feel you are attending to them as well.

Choosing people who like you will make you feel great.

### Control your emotions.

There are moments in a story when you may become emotional. This is perfectly reasonable. We talk about the moments of our lives that mean the most to us. Naturally, some of them will be emotionally charged.

I become emotional during “This Is Going to Suck” when I say that my friends have filled the waiting room outside the emergency room. Part of the reason for this is that I see my story in my mind’s eye. When I say that the emergency room doors open, I see them open as I tell my story. I see my story. I relive my story.

Not everyone can do this, but those who can often run the greatest risk of becoming emotional as they perform. To prevent myself from becoming too emotional in these moments, I’ve developed a trick. A strategy to get some distance from my story.

When I was a kid, I played video games in arcades. One of these games was a car-racing game. I would sit behind the wheel and race against other players behind other wheels. The game had an A and a B button to the left of the gearshift. If you pressed the A button, the screen displayed the road as a driver would see it through the windshield. If you pressed the B button, your perspective shifted to outside and above the car, looking down upon it.

As the moment of heightened emotion approaches in a story, I press the B button. I shift my perspective from seeing my story through my eyes to seeing my story from above. Rather than watching my friends appear in that doorway, I watch a wounded boy see his friends standing in that doorway. I am still emotional in that moment, but not nearly as emotional as I would be if I relived the experience through my own eyes.

It takes some practice to be able to alter perspectives in this way, but it can be helpful in stories when a little emotion is perfectly fine but weeping is not.

You can also inoculate yourself against the power of certain sentences by saying them over and over again before performing. By turning meaningful moments into repetitive sentences, you can sometimes strip some of the emotion from them. Often an audience’s presence will inject some (or all) of the emotion right back into the sentence, but usually to a lesser degree, making the moment more manageable.

There’s also nothing wrong with becoming emotional during storytelling as long as your emotion doesn’t overwhelm your craft. My wife was emotional during our entire wedding ceremony, but she was still able to recite vows, laugh, and enjoy the moment. She was endearing, sweet, and authentic. Beautiful too.

You should aim to do the same.

## Learn to use the microphone.

Learn to use a microphone from someone who uses a microphone professionally. I could discuss proper microphone use here, but there are many kinds of microphones, and it’s the kind of thing learned best while doing it.

Most people use microphones poorly. Don’t be that person. The audio engineer at The Moth once complimented me on my microphone use. “You can cut right

through the laughter when you want,” he said. “That’s so great.”

It is. When I can cut through laughter or applause and return to my story, I control the pacing of the performance. *I* dictate how the story will be told.

I learned how to use a microphone effectively by working as a wedding DJ for two decades. Just try to guide a bride through a bouquet toss while music plays, single girls scream, and photographers call out for the ideal pose.

You learn quickly about how to cut through the noise with your voice.

You think you know how to use a microphone, but you probably don’t. Find an expert and practice.

That said, here are three universal tips that apply to almost all microphone situations:

1. The microphone is not a magical device. Many people believe that once they are speaking into a microphone, they can speak as softly as they want. It’s not true. Even when you’re speaking into a microphone, you should be trying to speak to the back of the room. Think of the microphone as the guarantee that your voice will reach the back of the room, but you must do the work first. You must push your voice through the device.
2. If you’re speaking into a microphone set on a stand, be sure that the microphone is perfectly adjusted before you speak. Don’t rush this process. Every second that it takes you to adjust the microphone will feel like ten minutes, but to the audience, it will feel like less than a second. Take your time. There is nothing worse for you or the audience to be thinking about a poorly set microphone as you speak.
3. If given the option to use a microphone, do so regardless of how booming your voice may be. In speaking to hundreds of audiences, I have learned that hearing impairment is far more prevalent than most people realize, and quite often hearing-impaired people have no desire to announce their impairment to the world. I simply assume that there is a hearing-impaired person in every audience, so if asked if I want to use a microphone, I always say yes.

## STORY BREAK

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### **The Solitude of the Storyteller**

I'm standing onstage at the Music Hall of Williamsburg in Brooklyn. Storytellers are taking turns sound-checking for tonight's Moth GrandSLAM.

One of the storytellers finishes her mic check and moves to the rear of the stage beside me. "Wow," she says. "This place is huge. That was scary. Intimidating." It's her first GrandSLAM. It's my sixteenth.

"Yeah," I say. "And the thing about storytelling is that it's not like theater. You're on your own out there. No one can help you. You stand alone in your truth and hope that you don't freeze or fail. The whole thing rests on your shoulders."

By the time I'm done speaking, the storyteller's jaw has dropped open. She looks terrified.

"Oh my God," I say, realizing what I have just done. "It's not like that at all. Everyone performs brilliantly here. You have nothing to worry about. I'm an idiot."

Only the last sentence is true.

Fortunately, the storyteller does well.

I win my fourth GrandSLAM that night, but I'll always wonder if that storyteller thought I was messing with her head.

I wasn't. I really am an idiot.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

# Why Did You Read This Book? To Become a Superhero!

In his memoir *Tough Shit*, filmmaker Kevin Smith writes that anytime a person is speaking to a group of people, in any context, the speaker has a duty and an obligation to be entertaining.

I couldn't agree more. It's the purpose of this book. Or at least one of them.

Whether you are speaking to friends on barstools or students in a classroom or customers in a conference room or grandchildren at Thanksgiving or an audience of thousands in a theater, you must be entertaining.

I have attended thousands of meetings, training sessions, conferences over my lifetime where the person delivering the content made no effort to engage the audience in an entertaining and memorable way.

I will never understand this. Not only do you have an obligation to be entertaining, you have an *opportunity* to be entertaining. You have the chance to set yourself apart from the ever-present drone of the masses. You have the opportunity to make people smile. Laugh. Engage. Learn. Feel better about the time spent.

This is what I call the Spider-Man Principle of Meetings and Presentations (though Voltaire admittedly said it first): "With great power comes great responsibility."

I like to think about storytelling in terms of superheroes, because I believe that a person who can speak in an entertaining and engaging way to a group of people possesses a superpower that is sorely lacking in the world today. As people's gazes continue to fall to their screens and communication is truncated into bite-size text messages, the human beings who can still hold the attention of an audience and teach and speak in an entertaining way possess enormous power.

In 2015, I spent some time in Brazil consulting with an engineering firm. The CEO of the company told me that he would rather hire poorly trained engineers who can speak to potential clients, meet with government agencies, and pitch projects to large groups of people than highly skilled engineers who lack these communication skills.

Why? "I can teach a bad engineer to be a good engineer. But I have no idea how to turn a person who can't write or speak well into someone who can. I'm not sure if it's even possible."

It's possible; unfortunately, it takes longer than the afternoon I was spending

with this man. But think about that: bad engineers who can speak well will be hired over good engineers who cannot. That is a superpower.

Or think about it this way: If you are conducting a one-hour meeting at your company, you have effectively stolen one hour from every person in the room. If there are twenty people in the room, your presentation is now the equivalent of a twenty-hour investment.

It is therefore your responsibility to ensure that you do not waste the hour by reading from PowerPoint slides, providing information that could have been delivered via email, lecturing, pontificating, pandering, or otherwise boring your audience. You must entertain, engage, and inform. Every single time.

But I also believe that there is a second, equally important reason to be entertaining:

When you are entertaining, people learn better. You convey information more effectively. You will become a better teacher, presenter, coach, salesperson, trainer, CEO, professor, parent, and dinner companion.

Yes, dinner companion. If you are on a first date, your goal should be to share information about yourself in an entertaining fashion.

*This is who I am.*

*This is what I believe.*

*This is what I want.*

*This is what I dream.*

*How about you?*

A first date is an interview of sorts. If you can make the person laugh, share a little vulnerability, and tell a good story in the process, your chances for second and third dates increase exponentially.

My wife married a neckless stump with legs for arms. It wasn't because of the way I looked.

And yes, it will make you a better parent too. When I can teach my son and daughter a lesson using an entertaining story from my past, not only is that lesson more effective and enduring, it's often requested again and again. Rather than nagging my children about something that I feel is critical to their development, I find them demanding that I teach them the lesson over and over again. That is a superpower.

When a student-teacher presents me with a lesson that he or she would like to teach to my class, my first question is always this: "What's the hook? What is the reason for my students to listen and pay attention to you?"

Far too often, inexperienced (and ineffective) teachers believe that if they

design a lesson using all of methods and strategies that they have learned in college, their students will sit quietly, attend fully, and absorb the content.

For about half to two-thirds of an average class of students, this will probably be the case. But for the rest, effective lesson design is never enough. These are the students who slip through the cracks in many classrooms. They are the kids who have ability and potential but lack the necessary skills to learn. They are the children who are not predisposed to quiet, thoughtful attentiveness. They are the kids who can barely sit still. The ones with one foot still on the baseball diamond and one finger still on the video-game controller. They are the students who do not believe in themselves or their capacity for a bright future. They are kids who come to school hungry and tired and still reeling from the chaos and violence of an evening at home.

These are the students who need a reason to listen.

I believe that it is the teacher's responsibility to provide a reason to learn. A meaningful, entertaining, engaging, thrilling, fly-by-the-seat-of-their-pants reason to keep their eyes and ears and minds open.

This is why every lesson requires a hook. A hook is not a statement like "This material will be on Friday's test" or "This is something you'll use for the rest of your life." A hook is an attempt to be entertaining, engaging, thought-provoking, surprising, challenging, daring, and even shocking. This can be done in dozens, and perhaps hundreds, of ways.

A teacher can be funny. Surprising. Animated. Confused. Even purposefully depressed. A teacher can offer students uncommon levels of choice or challenge them with a meaningful, winner-take-all competition. A lesson can include something students have never seen before or (even better) something they have seen a thousand times before, but now in an entirely new context. The lesson can include cooperative learning in groups that the children will actually enjoy. Students can be made the center of the lesson. Students can be invited to teach the lesson. Lessons can be broken up into smaller, rapidly changing segments to hold student interest.

This is just a smidgen of the strategies that teachers can use, and most if not all of them can also be used by a person running a meeting, conducting a workshop, or otherwise stealing an hour from people in order to convey content.

Most importantly, a teacher can use storytelling. Not only is storytelling an entertaining way to engage and entertain students, but it opens your heart to your students. It demonstrates your humanity, your authenticity, and your vulnerability. It's a way to establish trust and faith with your students. It connects you to them.

When your students love you, they will learn, even if they despise the subject.

This is how I approach teaching every day. I believe with all my heart that I am stealing seven hours of childhood from each of my students on a daily basis. I am

paid to be a thief. I rob my students of hour upon hour of the most precious and fleeting time of their lives. Therefore I have a duty to make this time as meaningful, productive, memorable, and yes, entertaining as possible.

I do this through storytelling.

I do the same thing when delivering a TED Talk. Speaking at a conference. Sharing a story at Passover dinner. Telling my kids a story while driving the car. Sharing a memory on the golf course. I entertain and engage and inform through storytelling. I open my heart and allow my audience to step inside.

Here is something crazy. Perhaps the craziest thing that has ever happened to me through storytelling:

*Four times* I have stepped off the stage at a storytelling show and been approached by a woman who wanted to share the story of her miscarriage with me.

*Four times.*

In all four instances, the woman's miscarriage was a secret. She had told no one that she was pregnant, and no one knew that she had miscarried. She told me first.

I was speechless the first time this happened. I called Elysha immediately after the show to tell her.

Elysha's response was surprising. "Of course she wanted to tell you," she said. "You stood on that stage and talked about one of your most difficult moments in your life with complete honesty. Your story made you safe to talk to. And she never needs to see you again. She could unburden herself of this secret to someone she knew she could trust, and she doesn't have to see you at work or home the next day." It made sense.

It's why I tell the story of my homelessness to my students, and an hour later a girl tells me about living in a car with her mom over the summer.

It's why I tell the story of spending a day in jail, and the next day a boy tells me that his father is in prison.

It's why my friend Jeff accidentally told me the sex of both of his children prior to their birth. I told him a story on the golf course, and finding a safe and vulnerable space, he filled it with a secret he was carrying. Accidentally. *Twice.*

Back in 2011, Elysha suffered a miscarriage, and I watched her navigate the complex landscape of emotions surrounding this loss. Grief. Shame. Anger. Blame. Miscarriages are not often spoken about openly in our culture, so women find themselves dealing with this tragic loss quietly.

Of course it makes sense that these women shared their stories with me. Elysha had me to talk to when she miscarried, and I had Elysha, but not everyone is so fortunate. Not everyone is blessed with close, trusting friendships, understanding

family members, or loving partners.

These women didn't tell me about their miscarriages because of who I am. They told me about their miscarriages because I told them a story. A story filled with heart and humor. A story that expressed authenticity, vulnerability, and truth.

This should be our goal.

The world is filled with uninteresting people. I meet them every day. I suspect that in most cases, there is an interesting person lurking beneath their unfortunately uninteresting veneer.

These are people who answer, "How was your day?" with an itinerary of the day instead of sharing a meaningful moment. They are folks who tell us about their vacations by offering an adjective-laden time line of the week. They are the people who make meetings feel endless, dinners feel monotonous, and conferences feel disappointing.

These are the people who are afraid to talk about embarrassing moments or epic failures. They lack authenticity. Listen poorly. Fear vulnerability. Lack the skills and strategy to craft and tell a good story. They are not the superheroes of our world.

Storytellers have a superpower. They can make people feel good and whole and right. They can inspire and inform. They can make people see the world in a new way. They can make people feel better about themselves.

I may not be able to stop a bullet, but I make a woman feel better about a tragic loss. I can convince a reluctant teen to learn. I can make an audience laugh and cry in the span of a single story. I can make my children beg for more. I can make an eight-hour training session feel like two hours. I can convince a woman of absolute grace and beauty to marry me.

*Me.*

Fuck Superman. I'll take storytelling any day.

I offer this superpower to you. This book is the instruction manual. All you need now is to practice. Begin collecting stories and telling stories.

Become the storyteller I know you can be.

# Acknowledgments

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## About the Author

Matthew Dicks is the internationally bestselling author of the novels *Memoirs of an Imaginary Friend*, *Something Missing*, *The Perfect Comeback of Caroline Jacobs*, and *Unexpectedly, Milo*. His novels have been translated into more than twenty-five languages.

He is also the author of the rock opera *The Clowns* and the musicals *Caught in the Middle*, *Sticks & Stones*, and *Summertime*. He is a columnist for *Seasons* magazine and has published work in *Reader's Digest*, the *Hartford Courant*, *Parents* magazine, the *Huffington Post*, and the *Christian Science Monitor*.

When not hunched over a computer screen, Matthew fills his days as an elementary-school teacher, a storyteller, a speaking coach, a blogger, a wedding DJ, a minister, a life coach, and a Lord of Sealand. He is a former West Hartford Teacher of the Year and a finalist for Connecticut Teacher of the Year.

Matthew is a thirty-six-time Moth StorySLAM champion and five-time GrandSLAM champion whose stories have been featured on the nationally syndicated *Moth Radio Hour* and its weekly podcast. He has also told stories for *This American Life*, *TED*, *The Colin McEnroe Show*, *The Story Collider*, *The Liar Show*, *Literary Death Match*, *The Mouth*, and many others.

Matthew is also the cofounder and creative director of Speak Up, a Hartford-based storytelling organization that produces shows throughout New England. He teaches storytelling and public speaking to individuals, corporations, and school districts around the world.

Matthew is the creator and cohost of *Boy vs. Girl*, a podcast about gender and gender stereotypes.

Matthew is married to his friend and fellow teacher Elysha, and they have two children, Clara and Charlie. He grew up in the small town of Blackstone, Massachusetts, where he made a name for himself by dying twice before the age of eighteen and becoming the first student in his high school to be suspended for inciting riot upon himself.

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