

The Problem with the Writer

by Sandra Allen '09

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The writer set-up six rows of folding chairs for his reading and a smattering of people sat in them: a couple he was close with; a handful of local self-published poets; the guy who slept outside the general store. The writer's wife was in the back of the community center, hunched over an HD camera, hair matted beneath headphones.

"I'm excited to see him again," we said to one another as we drove over the mountain, down into the lulling cowlands of the town where the writer lived. We had arrived slightly late, the house lights were already dim, and the writer was seated on the stage side of the community center, preparing to read from his second book.

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A big problem when you're reading out loud is nervous butterflies, the writer told our fifth grade class. "So when you feel the butterflies, take a big deep breath, a big deep breath puts the butterflies to sleep." The writer was broad-shouldered and tall, he had to duck when he came into our classroom. His voice was big like him but gentle, dark chocolate dribbling in a thin stream. Everybody took deep breaths and in our minds all the butterflies - green yellow white and red - rose with the hot sweet inhalations of children's breaths and drifted down to our stomach linings to sleep.

Piper looked at the story in her hands. She looked at the writer and the writer smiled broadly, the texture of his beard rippling like a bulldog's neck. He wore sweatpants and a fedora. He straddled a tiny desk.

Sometimes he would read at assemblies: "Ruuunnn, runnn as fast as you can, ya can't catch me I'm the stinky cheese man," he would cackle and cry as he turned the pages, his voice springing and summersaulting, high and low, hilarious and tender. Seated cross-legged on mats in the multi-purpose room, we watched the stories unfold, as real as television. Everyone shook with laughter. Everyone quoted him afterwards. Everyone did impressions.

I was friends with his sons, the twins, so I'd know when he was coming to work with a class before anyone else did: "Pop's coming today," Brenden or Ryan would say, wearing bowl cuts and sweatpants, drumming on the rubber tire swing. Soon word got out. "He's at the fifth grade today," kids said at lunch as they swatted down tether balls and picked splinters from their palms and wiped away the water that had gotten on the sweatshirts tied around their waists when they slid down the orange slide. "He's here, he's going to read to us," they said in between double dares and dipping chicken nuggets into barbecue sauce and sucking water from bags of ice distributed by the nurse. The kids who played slaughter with tennis balls and the kids who read books at lunch and little kids crouched in the bushes digging traps for leprechauns, everyone was envious of the kids who got to hear the writer read. And today it was us.

Piper trembled but didn't begin to read. "Are you okay, Piper?" the writer asked. She shook her head. Water curled at the corner of her eyes and fell down her cheeks, fat water, and she hiccupped with fear. The writer rose from the desk and put his hand on her tiny shoulder and walked her back to where we were all sitting. The writer's job was to help us find our voices, and sometimes people couldn't find their voices at all.

I walked to the front of the room with my story. At the back wall of the classroom were illustrations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bill Clinton. One of them was president. The writer smiled at me, I was nervous to let him hear me read, afraid he wouldn't like what I'd written or the way that I'd talk. But I did like the writer said, I took a deep breath to put the butterflies to sleep. I began my story.

It was about the day when I was seven that our friend Sandy Park picked me up from school because my aunt had died from a heart problem that none of the doctors saw coming. My aunt, my dad's older sister, used to pick me up everyday when my mom went back to work selling houses. My aunt and I would watch soap operas and shoo ants away from her long-haired cat's kibble and eat cherry tomatoes from her yard. Her name was Peggy and she was only forty-two, which people told me was very young to die.

My mom was red with crying and Dad wasn't, even though it was his sister. We all sat down at the kitchen table, but it was the afternoon, not a time to eat. Mom told us about what happened to Peggy. She had a pain in her chest, so she went to the doctor. The doctor told her nothing was wrong. Before she left the hospital, she was brushing her teeth, and just like that, "Her eyes rolled back in her head," Mom said. In my mind I saw her dark curly hair and her brown eyes on their upward swim, the toothbrush falling slack in her mouth as she crumpled to the floor. The day she died I didn't cry because I didn't cry at things like dying. But as I read the story to the class, three years later, I looked at the writer and his bulldog smile and I felt water curl in the corners of my eyes. A voice inside said, "This is good, crying will look good."

When I finished my story, the writer told me I had a wonderful voice. He told me I should never stop telling stories. He made me promise I would never stop telling stories. He spoke softly and tenderly and looked me straight in the eyes, which was something that adults didn't usually do. I was jealous of the twins because they had a lizard named Liz and bunk beds and because every night they got to listen to the writer read and because they knew him so much better than everybody else.

The twins and I waded into the creek between their house and Safeway just until the point that water could sop down into our boots. We watched gray mud slide between the yellow dishwashing gloves on our fingers, searching. Ryan retrieved his arm from the current with a cordless telephone in hand. A cordless telephone! Brenden and I whooped in triumph, our greatest find ever. It would be documented with maps which would be sealed in jars or metal band-aid tins and hidden in their neighbor's succulents or buried beneath the cement we'd made from barbecue ashes in their backyard (which was quite possibly stronger than even real cement). The maps would be written in an alien language, to ensure that whoever found the codex was the right kind of person to go about digging up our buried treasure. The alien language, though, wouldn't be so complicated that someone who was cool enough to figure it would be able to.

"Don't you ever call me again!" yelled the writer, miming throwing the cordless telephone out the window. It was now washed and dried and displayed on the kitchen table. We laughed, wet crumbs flying from our mouths. We slid more butter across slices of hot oatmeal bread he'd pulled from the breadmachine while we were outside playing. The house was hot and always smelled like boys and baking. It was short and small, too small for the writer and his wife and the twins.

The writer chaperoned our fifth grade trip to Walker Creek. On a day-hike, everybody sat by the side of the trail picking through brown paper lunches. The writer asked me if I'd like to go on a short hike with him up a hill, so we could talk. Lots of people wondered why I got to hike with the writer while they sat down below. They wished they could hike with the writer too, they wondered what jokes he would tell me that no one else would hear. The writer's sweatpants were tucked into his hiking boots.

At the top of that hill we could see out west towards the triangle of Point Reyes peninsula, fog easing off its fringes. He took off his hat.

"My wife and I were lucky to have met you," the writer said, "because your mom found us the house of our dreams. We're going to live out there," he said, pointing towards the coast. They were going to a house that was bigger for when the boys grew bigger, and far away from the parents who invited him to read at their children's birthday parties and knew they were better than him because he was just a writer who read to children. The new house was nearer to the ocean and the blackberry brambles that they liked when it was time for jamming. "You can come visit us whenever you want. If you call, I'll come down and pick you up."

The writer leaned on one knee, his sweatpants just missing a cow pie, and hugged me. His arms were too long around my body. It was strange to hug the writer. Back at home I laid in bed and sobbed. I was glad to be home, and not sleeping in a bunk bed, but I was not glad to be home because at home hidden booze was guzzled quickly and the he-screaming and she-screaming and big loud footsteps came muffled through my bedroom walls long past bedtime.

The writer's wife worked with computers and had worked so long and hard to pay for the new house that her hands had grown brittle with arthritis, though she was still very young. Their steering wheel was rigged with a device that enabled her grab onto the knob with fingertips rather than a whole grip, and when he drove down the coast to pick me up he steered with the knob anyway, though his hands weren't arthritic. He was a writer, but hadn't written a book in the time I knew him.

"My dad is an alcoholic," I said to the writer as the car lollied over the little hills that line highway one between my house and his. I learned the word the other day. It was the right word, I could tell, looking at the picture of the cartoon girl near the fridge and her hand reaching for another bottle. Dad on the beach in Minnesota. Mom asking him how many beers that day. Dad holds up three fingers. Four. Mom huffs her shoulders. Dad continues on his way, crunching little shells and the frills of birch and lake seaweed caked on the shore. Other stories like that.

The twins and I set off into the hills behind their new house, kicking buckeyes and moss and swinging on creepers hanging from limbs up trees that stretched up tall enough to block all sunlight. Using hatchets and lightsabers we cut through the foliage and found clearings, hammered posts up one tree that we planned to furnish with an elaborate fort. We found a shingle and painted a sign that announced our fort, which we nailed to a neighboring tree. We drew maps that showed the way to the fort so that we, or somebody else that was cool enough, could find the way.

The writer whistled from the kitchen as he fussed with the fire in the woodburning stove. In his living room the sofas were so deep that I slept right through the hail and when he came in and woke me with coffee and freshbaked bread the decks were lined with icing. He put a hand on my forehead like I was sick.

I watched finches push frozen pebbles around with their beaks. I thought about that scene in *Forrest Gump* when Jenny comes and sleeps in Forrest's bed and Forrest says that Jenny must have been really tired because she slept for two whole days. The writer drove me back down the coast to my own home.

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The writer's first book took him ten years to write. I read it at on a computer screen in a Starbucks on the East Coast where I moved when I was eighteen. It was about having a father who coached football, and moving from Texas to California, and being an adolescent boy, erections and lotions and bowel movements. I knew the writer's father had coached football and had moved the family from Texas to California when he was around the same age. He called the book fiction, which was a lie. I didn't like that the writer was writing about real life and passing it off as a story.

"Book publishers are a load of crap," the writer told me. He self-published, he said, that was the way to do it. "Agents are a load of crap too. And reviewers."

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The bookstore had fallen through, the email inviting us to the reading said, but the community center was free. The writer blotted beads of sweat with a handkerchief. He wore sweatpants and a fedora. His face stretched with the first words of his second book:

"First day of the 1978 fall term in my junior year. I'm in a new school. Good God Damn Christ, here we fucking go again. It's 8:20 in the morning and the teacher might as well be talking to mannequins. The name of the class is Rhetoric and our professor is full of it. What sort of stimulant is he using to be so wired at this hour on a Monday morning? I have never in my entire life capably functioned at this

hour unless utilizing a hard-on." It was strange to hear the writer say words like these, even if we're both grown-ups now. I set the program on the chair to my left and glanced to look at how many chapters he was going to read-nine of twenty-three. He called this book fiction too, though from what I knew of the writer's life, all these stories were also true.

The book was about a homophobic young man living in San Francisco in the eighties and all the tang, as he called it, tight or loose, he went around catching. The one he never catches, the redhead Gwen, was always described as "braless," with a big exhalation. A weepy paternal gay character, who the writer read with a low and husky lisp, cures the protagonist of his homophobia.

In the last chapter, the protagonist runs into the weepy paternal gay character near the Panhandle and learns he's dying of AIDS. The writer pulled his fedora down across his brow and hunched his shoulders up, feigning illness.

There'd hardly been a mention of booze in the entire book, but in his parting words, the weepy paternal gay character chides protagonist for being an alcoholic. The protagonist replies that ever since he and his wife got pregnant with twins, he hasn't had a drink at all. The weepy paternal gay character knows he's right, though, remember how, years back, the bottles of booze on the protagonist's fridge would slowly diminish in earliest, loneliest hours of the day.

Light gleamed on the writer's glasses and, speaking in a low and husky lisp, he explained that "once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic, and the only way to make a drunk stop is for the drunk to stop drinking, which if he loves his family enough, he will do."

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When you're going on a booze hunt, it's good to start under the garage. Check in the wood pile. Check in the chest with saw blades. The cabinet that smells like snail poison. Check in the downstairs bathroom inside all the travel sized toiletries. Mom found it once in the dishwasher, which we never use. Next to the cookie cutters in the cabinet above the stove. Behind the furnace.

When you find the booze, set it on the kitchen table, so he knows you found it. Don't say anything. Watch him pour it out, masking all shame, explaining that it's not something he's been drinking from lately, scoffing at how long that bottle's been there. What an old bottle. Maybe she'll scream, maybe he'll scream back, maybe he'll set off into the night. Maybe cops. Maybe no cops.

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"You can't make him stop drinking, only he can do that, and if he loves you enough, he will," the writer said to me, his words flying out the window and into the blackberry brambles between his house and mine. I am ten and I want to go to college. The writer called my mother, his real estate agent, and told her what I told her, and convinced her that they should have an intervention. Everything is going to change.

My father's desk: a photo of my brother and me on a Conestoga wagon, a wooden box of baby teeth, a tin framed shot of my father's father who drank himself to death before my birth. Paralysis is a word I learn because of him. Also framed in tin: a tiny picture of his sister Peggy. In the top drawer there is a knife, which someday a cop will take when dad runs down to the beach so he doesn't have to talk to them. My mother is off somewhere weeping, calling off the intervention that the writer helped her plan. On the phone, my grandmother admonishes me: "Sandra, dear, alcohol is not a drug, there is no reason to go around telling people about our personal business."

My dad doesn't know about the intervention that the writer planned for him.

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When I was seventeen I wrote a play a wrote about a family. Mother father sister brother. The mother was sad that she was not close with the son anymore. The son was checked out, waiting to hear back from colleges. But the mother's determined to get her son to be her friend again, so she buys him beer so he can have a party, because kids like parties. He protests at first, but then gives in. What seventeen-year-old doesn't like to drink.

His friends, the funny and sad and fat and single, all come over and have a party. The play was cast with all my friends. We put empty cans around the stage before the second act began. In the beginning of the second act, the father comes home. He is wasted, ranting about the porch light. He was played by a big actor, a football player with an anger problem in real life, too. He and the son have a sloppy drunk fight. The mother runs downstairs and mediates, weeping. The younger sister, played by a girl with straightened hair and skinny arms, is fourteen. She doesn't drink, she tells them all she will never take a drink. She is based on me when I was ten or so.

I wrote it for a year and we rehearsed it for two months. I hid the script when I got home each night, I hid the posters, too. I didn't tell my parents where I was going the night it went up. Everyone else I knew came.

Outside the theatre the night was warm, fog off the coast and May buzzing. People handed me bouquets and said that they thought I had a wonderful voice and I should never stop telling stories. I drove on the long dark highway home and opened the door and shut it and locked it. I walked through the unlit hallway to my bedroom door and once inside shut it without letting it click. Upstairs heavy snoring broke through the silence.

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The weepy paternal gay character recedes into the streets around Golden Gate Park with his falling T Count. The writer read their farewell, alternating between his normal chocolate voice and the sickly low lisp.

"Is this good-bye?" asks the protagonist.

"Of course not, you'll see me again."

"When, where?"

"In Heaven. Remember? You'll see me soon."

The writer blotted his own eyes as he finished this line. It looked very bad, I saw, when a writer makes themselves cry. The writer closed the manuscript on the music stand and the writer's wife lowered the lights in the community center. Some hands clapped.

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In the community center's foyer, we looked at one another with eyes that said, "I don't want to wait around much longer," and "We drove this far, we have to say hello." We threw our programs in the garbage. The writer eventually came out from the back and hugged us. He thanked us, from the bottom of his heart, for coming to hear him read. He looked at us with eyes that said, "My God how you've grown." We fingered packets of cigarettes our peacoat pockets and constructed accolades to say to the writer.

"I just wish he wasn't such a horrible writer," we said to one another, letting our cigarette tips redden with the passing night air.