

# **STILL WRITING**

THE PERILS AND PLEASURES OF A CREATIVE LIFE

**10<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY  
EDITION**

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Grove Press  
*New York*

on the side of a highway. I haven't yet lived these moments, and perhaps I never will. But I know what it is to be alone. To be lost. To be afraid.

## PIANO

Every Wednesday after school, my mother drove me a half-hour to a neighboring town for my piano lesson. On our way, we stopped at a Howard Johnson's and I ordered a swiss chocolate almond ice-cream cone. I don't remember much about our car rides—I can't summon up a single conversation—but I do remember the precise taste of the ice cream, the satisfying crunch of the almonds. The sensory details of our childhoods are often what remain vivid: the glare of the late afternoon sun, the steady *whoosh* of the highway below, the car's upholstery against my back, the sight of my mother's hands—no longer young—on the steering wheel. She drove an enormous, dark brown Cadillac Eldorado. Why? I don't know. My parents weren't showy people. If I were creating a character like my mother, I wouldn't have her drive an Eldorado.

My piano lesson was the punctuation—a comma, perhaps, or better yet a semicolon—in the middle of my week. The rest of life paused on either side of it. Mr. Tipton was passionate,

exacting, wounded if a student came to a lesson unprepared. He had bright red hair and a ruddy face, as did Mrs. Tipton, and they had a brood of red-headed Tiptons. I cared a lot about what Mr. Tipton thought, and I tried never to be unprepared. When I practiced piano, my usual fears and anxieties fell away. Did Sol Kimpinski really have a crush on me? Did I have a crush on him? Had I studied enough for my American history exam? Was my father—so pale, so overweight, so unhappy—about to have a heart attack and die?

At my upright Mason & Hamlin piano in the den where my father spent the evenings hanging in traction, I practiced for hours every day. I ran through my scales and arpeggios, then turned to whatever piece of music I was working on: a Bach Invention, a Chopin nocturne, a Beethoven bagatelle, a Mozart sonata. I didn't consider the meaning of the word *practice*. It would be many years before I began to understand that all of life is practice: writing, driving, hiking, brushing teeth, packing lunch boxes, making beds, cooking dinner, making love, walking dogs, even sleeping. We are always practicing. Only practicing.

For a while, I thought I might want to be a pianist when I grew up. I thought this the way my son Jacob wants to be a professional basketball player. Or the way my mother wanted to be a famous writer. It was a romantic daydream; I had a little bit of talent, a pretty good ear, some dedication. I see

now that piano was my training ground—at least as important as any writing workshop. I was preparing myself for a lifetime of working with words. The phrasing, the pauses, the crescendos and diminuendos, keeping time, the creating of shape, the coaxing out of a tonal quality. All these are with me as I approach the page.

When you have written something—whether part of a story, a poem, an essay, an opening for a longer piece, anything that feels like it might be a keeper—listen to it. What does it sound like? Read your words aloud. Even if you look like a crazy person, it doesn't matter. No one's watching. Pay attention to the way the language moves. Is it creating the effect you're after? I think of some of Nabokov's sentences, or the end of Delmore Schwartz's "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities." Fluid sentence-rivers, carrying us along on a current of commas, faster, faster until we are nearly breathless. Or the atonal juxtapositions of Don DeLillo's. Or the clean, staccato beats of Hemingway, a period like a knife jab in the gut. What instrument does your language call to mind? A cello? An electric guitar? An oboe? Are you writing a concerto? A symphony? A lullaby? Listen and you will begin to hear the rhythms of your own voice.

## FIVE SENSES

A character is taking a walk—say, down a winding path in the countryside. That character is lost in thought. We get memory, wistfulness, longing, regret. This character—let's call him Joe—is on his way to his girlfriend's house. They've had a fight and he's hoping to make up with her. He's thinking about how he'll apologize to her, what she'll say, whether the day will turn out well. But in the meantime, Joe is walking. His good city shoes are caked with mud from the previous night's rain. A bumblebee buzzes in the nearby honeysuckle. The scent wafts over him, reminding him of a happier time with the girlfriend, a picnic they took last summer. He has a slight sniffle. His nose is running. He stuffs his hands deep into his pockets, looking for a tissue, but instead finds a wrapper from a fortune cookie. His stomach rumbles. He wonders if she'll offer him anything to eat.

For us to feel Joe's essential humanness, we must have access to his body. This is one of the simplest ways to bring a character to life on the page, and yet we so easily forget. If we inhabit his body as he walks down the path, things will happen in the writing: the bumblebee, the honeysuckle, the fortune cookie.