



I Take Notes, Fool

Or

Another One,  
a memoir

Dedicated to all the people  
that have crossed paths with  
me... Grains of sand in a vast  
sandy beach, all adding a  
little to the composition.

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July 2025

## METERED WORDS

"Not poetry. Not poetry," my thoughts.

"No poems. No freaking poems!" the voice sitting next to me.

"Previous class covered Fiction writing and self-publishing. Next can be poetry or back to writing basics," this from the class facilitator, Pete.

"I think we should do poetry," says the first me, me, me, I, I, I voice.

"Yeah, let's do poetry next," me, me, me, I, I, I voice number two.

"Poetry then," Pete announces.

So this is the exchange, as I remember it, which forced me to try to write poetry. Probably all wrong, in sequence as well as words said, but I know for sure that my thoughts against poetry, and the words from the friend who sat next to me for the poetry torture and others, were real. Actually, I'm pretty sure said friend, to this day, continues to harbor disdain towards poetry, as I do.

Those two me, me, me, I, I, I individuals, teacher's pets if you will, won. To be fair, one was Pete's assistant. Both had been regulars at Pete's classes for quite some time. It being a repeat or continuous class, regularly rotating topics. Poetry was just next in the cycle.

(My friend and I were just not fans of poetry. We were even less fond of the two me, me, me, I, I, I's. Their self-absorbed miens permeated into any and every situation they had even the most superficial involvement. Just that type of gratingly assertive and bumptious types. Call them gadfly or hauteur. My friend and I had many terms. Times passed.)

Poetry. Yikes! Just something about it. So many different types and rules to each. I tried. I tried taking notes one class. Pete was talking about Haiku. I mean, Haiku! The name itself is cool.

"Seventeen syllables in 3 lines," Pete explains.

Line one, 5 syllables. Line two, 7 syllables. Line three, 5 syllables. Even now I'm thinking, "What?!"

"Two subjects juxtaposition." Pete says.

'Seasonal reference,' I write in my notes.

"Two subject comparison," Pete throws at us.

Almost a two hour class and that is all I took away. It was that much only because, well, Haiku. Like haggis just sounds bad. (Then you learn what it consists of and you wonder how that could be a food. Well, I wonder how.) Haiku sounds cool.

Limericks. Next class covers them. Maybe some hope. I can still sense my friend fidgeting next to me. Years later, I feel his unease. Pretty sure I made fun of him then. I know I would do so today.

Limericks. I at least know of the term. Fun stuff. Humor in poem form. Can't be all bad. Oh, and only five lines –bliss in my feeble mind. Easy.

"Rhyme – aabba..." Pete drones. He throws "meter" at us. I have notes with "1 2<sup>nd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>. 11, 11, 6, 5, 10" and "10, 10, 6, 6, 11 syllables." And I am like, "what?" I'm sure I was just as lost then taking the notes as I am now looking over them and typing them out.

That was the extent of the Limerick notes. Likely the extent of my interest in limericks –then and now.

My dislike for poetry, then and now, is odd though because I easily get lost in a "good" song. Good to me being one that hits all the elements that make it pleasing to my ears, spirit, and mind. It's odd then because songs tend to be rhyming lines, following form and meter. As I see it, songs are poetry, sung.

I like music so it would stand to reason I would like poetry. Just not so. And it's not that I shy away from certain types of poetry because of too many rules or too convoluted structure. No, poetry as word on a page poetry just does not interest me. Hmm, not only that it doesn't interest me but that it often baffles me. (It probably doesn't interest me because I don't get it. Those words go over my head.)

I did give poetry a try. I gave Pete and his tutelage a chance.

Walking into class one day Pete says, "write a poem." There were more detailed instructions with parameters and topic, but the gist was write, now. (Oh, and he would have a few of the submission he deemed good read in front of the class. Joy!)

My "Why."

I can fill my lungs with air.

But the fact carries no flare.

I can climb to the top of any hill.

But within me, there is little will.

I can smile and laugh, pretensions of glee,

But it is hard to say how true I will be.

I can feel the love of many,

But my heart does not reciprocate to any.

I can dream dreams beyond hope,

But it leaves me feeling like a dope.

I can sweat all this small stuff,

But who cares? I've had enough.

I will trudge forward with compassion,

And I welcome even shallow distractions.

Okay, so not bad on the fly, right?

Pete's note: "You packaged a lot of thought into these lines in a short period. Good work. Do some more."

The two me, me, me, I, I, I's read their creations, of course. Can't remember if any one else did as well. Probably so. There were more than the two agro types in the class. I know I didn't read mine. Nope. I take notes, but I don't showcase in front of an audience.

I don't think I did "do some more." Not poetry attempts that I kept, at least. My only other try at poetry that I still have came as a dare. "Write a rhyme to Orange," or words to that effect.

My thought then, "okay, I'll bite." I wrote this:

NOT ONE DOOR HINGE or

An Ode to Orange

"With justly cause you may take umbrage,  
as I wrap myself in my 'thinking' sarong,  
in hopes of nullifying; of conquering this gloom presage,  
of setting correctly and arrange,  
just a few words of short-range,  
with a mild but insightful exchange,  
without verbose or winded harangue,  
all witty and not a bitter cringe,  
to simply aline a rhyme with Orange."

Pete thought "clever!" and "well done." He also checked me on my original misspelling of harangue –I had "harange" –and "aline." His notes, "align is misspelled. However, if you're writing in the style of someone like E.E. Cummings or Ogden Nash, your misspelling could be justified –a line, as in trying to write a line of poetry that rhymes with orange."

Right, I was being clever. I meant aline. Maybe. (Who are E.E. Cummings and Ogden Nash?)

If I made other attempts at poetry, I didn't keep them. I keep notes, not weak attempts at poetry, fool. The class didn't linger on poetry long.

# FLASH

"I'd quit the class if we did poetry much longer." I can hear my friend say that even if he didn't actually say those words. We were clear about our feelings for poetry.

The class moved on to something else. I braved the poetic realm, tried my hand at it, and almost electro-shocked my brain into creating some works, but am no closer to liking it that I was before the Pete and poetry ordeal.

Still seems odd to me, looking at it from a logic point of view, that poetry in song is, and has been for most of my life, an integral part of my world, but written poetry confounds and repulses. Weird.

I didn't "get" poetry, so I closed my mind to it. There are variations to the saying that we fear what we don't understand. If we don't fear the unknown, we sometimes form an aversion to it. Both are illogical reactions, yet rather common. Not liking absolutes, I won't say all people have some sort of negative reaction to things unknown or things not understood. I know I tend to close myself off.

The class happened and as closed off as I may have been, information was shared, and I was bound to absorb some of it. I take notes, and sometimes keep them long term. I also kept some class hand-outs.

Do you know what a Caesura is as it relates to poetry? (It is a "deliberate rhetorical, grammatical, or rhythmic pause, break, cut, turn, division, or pivot in poetry.") Rhetorical. I like rhetoric.

I like irony as well so it's good to know there is a term for "understatement for effect, often used for irony." Litotes. Hyperbole is the term for an exaggeration for effect. Pun, paradox, and oxymoron also apply in poetry. Who would have thunk?

So much to learn. Spondee, strophe, inversion or anastrophe, enjambment, and envoi. Alas, such a closed mind mime is.

One constant in life, one that shapes us, one that often haunts us, is change. After four weeks of poetry, the writing class moved on. No need to dread this change.

"Anything will be better than more poetry."

"Back to grammar basics is fine with me."

"No more rhyme and meter stuff!"

These could have been thoughts spoken between my friend and I. Instead of negative thoughts and whispered jibes, we walked in to be delighted. Minutes into the class, we were two kids in a candy store, "eat all you want."

"Never heard of it."

"Like Ray Bradburry short fiction but even shorter."

Pete introduces my friend and I to Flash Fiction.

"Fewer than 1500 words," My notes say. "Usually 1,000 words," and "2,000 max," according to my chicken scratch.

It is years later but I'm pretty sure the room we were in could have caught on fire and we wouldn't have noticed. We were riveted. Fiction was our thing. I dabbled in science fiction short stories (as well as, secretly and for my eyes only, erotic shorts) while my friend did a lot of exploration in comic strip and graphic novel work.

Flash fiction. I was already doing it. I'd just never thought it was a thing; a true niche.

"I do this."

"This is perfect for my graphics."

"He should have been teaching us this from the start."

"Flash Fiction rocks!"

Okay, "flash fiction rocks" is not something I would say, then or now. My friend, well, he doesn't do emotions. The dialogue between us that day may have gone differently, but I have no doubt of the thrill felt. We dug our claws into the day's material.

I wrote in my notes that Flash Fiction is often found "in anthologies, journals, collections." I journal. I did back then, and keep something like a journal now. My friend kept a journal back then, and maybe still does, grudgingly. (Journaling was required of us.)

"Comics are collections and anthologies," my friend's revelation.

Flash fiction follows the form of regular fiction in having hook, conflict, and an ending. My notes add that in flash, "usually best to start at 'flashpoint'" and to have writing be "direct and aggressive." Settings need not be detailed and characters usually limited to two.

Intense prose. About a moment. I'm sure I thought then, "I can do this. I do do this!"

I do this. I did this one class assignment:

## HUBRIS and a DOGGY DOO-OVER

Next!

Mr. Brodrick Overton Tobias Sexton... the third?

That is you, correct? Just nod your head.

I know. All this is rather overwhelming. Sudden, I suppose. A broadside by a Peterbilt eighteen wheeler traveling in excess of sixty miles per hour can leave anybody in a bit of a daze. Perfectly understandable.

Missing those red lights and the stationary vehicles in your travel lanes and continuing on into the path of said Peterbilt, well, no need to harp on that mistake now, I suppose.

Shame though. You were driving –or in, I suppose—one of these new vehicles with all the latest automated and safety technologies. Practically driving themselves now. You spent a bunch of money on it too. One could feed three families rather well for a year on what you spent on that thing.

Now, that thing is smears on pavement and like those nasty love bugs that fuse into the paintwork of unprotected vehicles. Except, in the case of your fortune on wheels, it is more like fragments embedded into the Peterbilt's grill.

I digress.

Let us see here...

Yes, you've done very well for yourself. Senior partner. Some financial thing. Playing with other people's money. Not so much work. A game, perhaps. For you. Not so much for those whose money you play away.

Though the game –sorry, the work—bought you all the latest and greatest, didn't it?

Nice. Beautiful house. Marble surfaces throughout, right? Smooth. And of course, technology everywhere. A self-closing front door? A self-closing toilet seat. They make those now too? Amazing.

Lovely family, too. Junior looks like a fine young man. Ten is he? Nothing but the best for him. Schools. Tutors. Top of the line electronics. Toys. Yikes, what doesn't he have?

Look at this: Learned to throw a ball from a real pro. What a treat. Impressive. Some just learn from a friend –or their father.

And little Julie. Only eight but so poised and charming. She was thrilled to get that doll castle last year for her birthday. Your secretary did a fantastic job finding it and getting it to you in time. Anybody could forget. Don't fret. Kids and birthdays, who can keep up?

A thank you from you would have been nice. Too late. Maybe her next boss will notice her.

Wow! What a beautiful wife. She so dutifully took on the domestic duties. She aimed to please. Did you notice?

She'll have to adjust, of course; become the breadwinner. Maybe she can return to nursing. Seems she was doing quite well before she married you.

A neonatal nurse. Head of her department. Quite an accomplishment. Even in that small, backwater place you saved her from. Her pay then was rather good, for the times, place, and given her gender.

She may still have to downsize. Perhaps adjust to a more modest lifestyle. Women still have it rough.

Any life insurance? No?

Oh, look here. What luck. Your company automatically enrolls all employees in a budget life insurance policy. Ooh, seems you opposed this for a long time. Kept it from being an amount representative of current cost of living. Seems you didn't much care for insurance. Thought you'd live forever, eh? Many do.

No matter. It is forward and onward. The company insurance is there and will help your family move forward without you. The company will forward too.

That company. Commodities or some such thing. Beyond me. Took you a lot of work and sacrifice to get there. Many long hours and late nights. Missed a few birthdays and anniversaries along the way, eh? Missed a birth along the way too, no? But you became a great provider.

At least you avoided greater pitfalls. No office affairs. No embezzling. Not for you. Others do that. Would be beneath you, right? Yes, it means others there, colleagues, have fallen into those sinful habits. That surprise you?

No matter. You have been the dutiful, hardworking provider. The flip side is being just the mentioned name, never present. Being the absent parent. Being the ghost husband, the father who never shows.

That is the fallen angel's greatest temptation: pride. Very hard to ignore. But whether entangled in office affairs, embezzling, working too hard, or just losing yourself in hubris, we believe in second chances. Mercy and all that.

What I have in mind is another opportunity for you. Going back. That sound good? Fair?

Canine. Caninus. That's Latin. I am picturing a retriever. Golden? No, no. A Dalmatian. Very loyal. Popular.

But perhaps too familiar for you. Purebred pride. Pedigree hubris. Too close to the old senior partner you.

No. Something simple. Unencumbered by pride and lofty expectations. Mutt. Just an ordinary mongrel. A brindled thing. A street cur.

Yes! That will do.

What a gift. A grand opportunity. A great gift, life is. Would you not agree? If in doubt, just look up. Take notice.

Right, so that's it.

Woof, right?

Go now.

Good boy.

My Flash Fiction. Maybe not a strong "classic narrative arc" but enough elements. In re-reading it to include here, it surprises me I came up with it, wow! How cool.

Pete liked it too. "You have nailed flash fiction with this." He encouraged more. He liked my title too, "is terrific."

The nature of the flash fiction, short and to the point, fit my way of thinking, fit my structured days, and fit my limited writing talents. I wrote more. Pete saw some of it. Some of my other works reached more towards short fiction rather than "flash," but used elements I learned with the flash fiction attempts.

It didn't take Pete to understand that my friend and I were not interested in drawing attention. I like to think it was we wanted knowledge, to improve our abilities, not to garner accolades. We were rarely called on or asked to read our efforts out to the class.

Once, Pete took one of my submissions and shared it with the class. I had "nailed" Flash fiction form and function. He felt compelled to showcase it. My name never came up. My friend knew though. Others suspected. The experience was a bit odd, though admittedly, a little flattering too.

## TRIM

"Gonna have to shave."

"My beard is gone!"

"They're going to make everyone shave."

This topic of conversation circulates a month or two before the clippers start working overtime.

"Did it before they told me to."

"Just wanted to get it out of the way."

The clipped facial hairs soon begin to carpet the barbershop floor. Some clip their hair early to avoid being told to do so. Others take a preemptive approach, thinking they will be ahead of others in the re-growth race,

"Naked chins and bay-smooth cheeks." The week sees the rumors of clean shaves become truth, and the shave-off starts in earnest. New faces everywhere.

"Hey newbie!"

"New guy, when did you get here?"

The jokes, along with the odd looking people, start to fill hallways. Pink cheeks, naked chins, and bare upper lips increase as the weekdays tick closer to the weekend.

"They look weird without facial hair," my friend says. (Or says something like it. He's the one with photographic memory.)

"They looked weird before," interject. "The face hair just hid their weirdness."

This baring of faces comes at the same time I have to reconsider my writing style. "By" and "there" are now bad words. In my notes I wrote 'the use of "these" signals a passive voice sentence.' I also have "was" and other derivatives of "to be" show bad style.

My writing form feels threatened by the shaving clippers of modern writing style. Where I once saw long, wordy sentences as sophisticated and mature, I see trim and simple.

"Word count counts." Long ago that mean having many words. Now the teaching says "less is better." My writing face is being shaved of a covering grown and manicured over years.

Like my friend says of the face shaving, "it is what it is." I may or may not have replied with "you as the subject will receive my action." This followed by some form of body contact. (If brought in for questioning for possible physical hostilities, I will deny everything, admit nothing, and demand proof. (I learned that fine canon early in my EMT training days!) I will further suggest that my passive voice could not have possibly taken such action on a subject.)

My adjusting does not stop with trimming of words. A droning class video shatters my verbose writing style by explaining passive versus active voices.

"Passive and active voices?" My friend suffers my ignorance. Me, the once Editor In Chief and multiple articles contributor of a newsletter, turn to him (he, the newsletter's artist and artistic influence) for clarification.

"In passive, the verb comes before the noun. Active voice means the noun does." That is what I remember him saying. (My notes say "subject does action in active voice writing while passive has subject receiving action." Active is preferred.) I have to change my writing style.

Maybe poetry wasn't so bad. This whole "showing" rather than "telling," fewer words, and active versus passive voice stuff hurts my head.

Years back I taught about nouns, verbs, and sentence structure. The rules were simple. The rules were direct. Some students took to it. They progressed, from not knowing what the letters on a page represented to being able to read. 'See Spot run' was a milestone. Others stumbled, struggled, and failed. 'To,' 'two,' and 'too' overwhelmed them. Never mind grasping periods, commas, and the general idea of a simple sentence.

During the class with the droning active versus passive voice" video, I felt like those floundering, failing students.

"Doing homework," I say. My friend intrudes a day after the droning video.

"Homework?" he questions. The concept if homework escapes him, I think.

"I can't skip a line like he wants," I state in supplication for support. "It messes me up," I add. He just laughs. I let that issue drop. I let him read what I have. (Because he grabs it before I can stop him.)

"Isn't this what you turned in last week?" He barely scans the four pages he took.

"You read my first draft." That you took out of my folder. I don't say the last part. I snatch the sheets back and add, "I'm working on reducing words and spotting passive voice." He gives me one of his sarcastic looks.

"Editor AND Chief, remember?" I thump my chest as I say this, as if to emphasize the importance. His response is some nasal sound. (I have always found it hard to reproduce sounds on paper, so I won't try.)

In producing a second draft, I realize that some words are unnecessary. I trim. One 'there' disappears. Then another. A reworked sentence loses its 'was.' Like the faces around me, going from scruffy and full to pink, clean, and lean, I make my sentences active, direct, and youthful looking. Like those few students years back whose face lit up with understanding and glee, I see radiance in this active voice and fewer words writing concept.

"Memoir writing..." my friend states, loudly. I know what he means without any further words.

"Yeah, but maybe there is something in this active versus passive voice thing," I tell him. The comment is received with a scowl and a slap to the back of my head. Deep down I know he sees the merits too. I get his point though. When life experiences are

limited, memoir writing feels like drawing water from a very shallow pond. What is dredged up tends to be scum and scurf rather than useful, inspirational writing material.

"So write about the negative stuff," I encourage him. "Spin it to fit you."

"You take notes, fool." His mocking retort tells me he will resist, yet secretly concede and consider my point.

"You could always do poetry again." I take the elbow to the ribs like a man, and brace for more as I add, "you write like a poet, and don't even know it." He does too. Rhymes and drawing pictured with words come easy to him.

"Whatever," he replies. (Some harsher words were expressed as well but best not put those down on paper.)

"I still take notes, fool," I say. I do too. And I also adapt. True fact!.

"Trim" earned me a "Suprr Star!" sticker. Pete wrote, "this is excellent! You have developed your style and voice." Hmm, sarcasm and dry humor. would these be my style and voice? If so, it would mean not so much finding these, style and voice, but putting my usual temperament into written words. Trim was my response to a class assignment. It was one of Pete's challenges, coming up with a piece under pressure. Little time, rigid scope.

(This assignment called for writing about change, personal change, since coming to the particular institution. "My favorite piece of writing from anyone this quarter." Pete was heavy on praise for me.

Out of frustration, not with my "success," or not only because of it, but with having to create something personal yet abstract, with limited time, my friend doodled this:

### THE UNIMPORTANCE OF I

I was a lovely letter. The other alphabets shied away for I seemed to think he was a superstar. Growing distraught I thought he could be like H, so he simply leaned over on his side.

H was outraged, accusing I of attempting to take his spot. I ran as H heckled and harried him. Escaping this I now sought another way to make friends.

Deciding to straighten up his act, I took the shape of L. L lamented and lambasted I as the innocent display turned to ridicule.

In a fit of disgust I decided to just go crooked and slide into an S. In a fit of rage S came sticking and stabbing as I shot away as fast as he could.

Dejected I could not find a way for the other letters to accept him or his stardom. As I traveled he noticed Z and Y coming his way.

Delighted and energized he ran toward them.

Pete may have thought a lot of my work and potential, but I thought, and still think, my friend a better, more creative writer. I need to help him write more.)

# GRAMMARLY WORDS

"Don't dangle your participles while handling your modifiers." Ah, words to live by. Well, maybe if you write and take time to think about words or phrases meant to describe or explain a part of a sentence. That would be "handling your modifiers." The potentially participle is only an adjective form of a verb.

Yikes! That's the stuff that kills inspiration to write beyond 'see Spot run' or LOL, BRB, and K. In a world quickly finding the "only pay for what you need" the norm and accepted, focusing on grammar rules can seem unnecessary. Pete covered this in two classes. So little time devoted to this is probably a disservice to the written English language, given the increase in its abuse, misuse, and degradation, but a relief to the class.

Cutting out "bad" words, to "trim" the writing, this I can listen to. (Hmm, my class notes suggest rewriting or rethinking a sentence when a preposition follows the verb.) Learning about words to avoid can't hurt. Though my writing does not always reflect all that was covered, I take notes, fool. I can (and have) reviewed those notes, maybe use them to proofread.

My transgressions with bad words haunt me. I like to think I'm not alone. Bad words, as I wrote in my class notes, include 'very,' 'extremely,' 'really,' 'just,' 'suddenly,' 'replied,' 'haha,' 'seem,' 'that,' 'big,' 'nice,' 'car,' 'gun,' 'bug,' 'dog,' 'saw/sees,' 'heard/hears,' 'felt/feel,' 'smell/taste,' and contraction words. Yikes! right? That is a long list. A lot of common, easy words too.

Feeling challenged and wanting to improve my writing, "that" is my first victim. Amazing how many "that's" show up which are not necessary. (Yeap, 'which' replaced a 'that' in the previous sentence.) Try it yourself. Trim.

Another abuse of written English comes with familiar phrases. 'In the near future.' Common, often used, right? Redundant. 'Soon' says the same, but better. 'Point in time.' How about just 'now' or 'then?' It isn't alright but all right. It's just a 'result,' not 'end result,' and 'better foot forward' rather than 'best foot forward.'

If the abuse of those to the point of turning the erroneous versions acceptable aren't egregious enough, there is the plethora of incorrectly used words. 'Discreet' versus 'discrete.' 'Envy' versus 'jealous.' 'Lend' and 'loan.' 'Past' versus 'passed.' (Often gets me.) The 'recline' meaning of 'lay' and 'to place' lay still confounds. So much advice to advise a fledgling writer.

Some misuse has become so prevalent it is accepted or not even noticed. To devise a device to expose errors seems moot. Who now is anxious about writing correctly when most are just eager to quickly and effortlessly put thoughts in writing?

If only English were easier, more precise; or is it 'if English only were easier'? Play with 'only' and notice how its placement can alter the message or meaning. We lose clarity when word choice is loose.

## Untitled

Imagine if you will a parallel universe in which an instructor envisions imparting knowledge to what passes for able minds. A few accept, comprehend, and even assimilate the given knowledge, while some fade into nether world of obfuscation...

I don't know about this writing stuff, but I will try as best as I can. Memories. There was a word the teacher gave us: insuperable. I think it has to do with something not being possible of solving. To me, that is how this writing thing feels like. Still, I will put my best foot forward and see what the end result is like.

The day started bad for me. Like rain that one time you forget your umbrella. True fact! I remember days like that clearly. This day, it was like nothing was going right. My toilet paper falls in the toilet as I reach to grab it. There is no more under the sink. I force myself to eat cereal with almost spoiled milk. Then the toothpaste has nothing but air in it. Things only get worse.

"Why doe she say nude is nude but partly nude is not right?" I whisper to my friend. Half the time I don't get what the teacher is talking about.

"It is nude or partially clad, he says," my friend whispers back, shrugging as if that should of cleared everything up for me.

I try to be discrete in class and blend in. Like a shadow in the dark. Not like the others who are always talking, asking questions, and acting like kids with new toys. I always end up feeling tired. Exasperated, to use a big word. While I know I am further from smart, it seems I am completely surrounded by super smart people. Every time, they are nodding in total agreement or asking super intelligent questions. The end result is that I feel dumb.

One time the class had this long, drawn out discussion over a sports term. Sports! Yish.

"Why would 'all-time record' be incorrect?" this question –or something like it— was from one of the know-it-alls who sits up front. Actually, they all seem to sit in close proximity to the front, as if smartness will absorb better the closer they are to the source. I guess since I sit way back, the smart gets diluted or loses its strength by the time it reaches me.

"All-time record is used in sports," someone says, with which several others agree...

"All-time best pitcher."

"All-time record long jump."

"All-time record 3-point shooter."

It went on and on. All the all-time records made me nauseous.

"In writing prose, fiction, essays, and serious works, using 'record' alone is preferable." One of the know-it-alls says this as if he was the ultimate authority. Of course, the rest of them agree, only to spend twenty more minutes bringing up exceptions.

All I could think was, "all right, let's move on!"

"So is it envy or jealousy?" My friend had to elbow me in the ribs before I realized he was asking me the question. "Did you understand the difference?" he adds.

'The difference?' I thought to myself. I had no idea what he was talking about. I just shrugged.

Most classes seem to go like this. I get only a fraction of what is said. Even when my friend lends me his notes, I still don't get it. I am just an empty hole that no matter how much you put in it, it never seems to fill. I am so jealous of smart people!

I said that to my friend at some point in time. You know what he said back? "If you are jealous it means you have the thing but don't want others to have or take it."

"What?!" I was furious. He was turning into one of them.

"If I'm not jealous, then what am I, Mr. Know-it-all?"

He countered with "the correct word is envy, you fool."

I knew that when he added the 'fool' part that he was trying to help me out. He is mostly all right.

"Verb tense is..." The teacher lost me at the word tense. My brain burst. Once again, I turn to my know-it-all friend.

"Passed verb what?"

"Verb tense," he whispers at me. "Yes, like past tense. I guess there can be 13 or more past verb tenses."

I just look at him like he were speaking Chinese or something. ('Cantonese,' he would correct.) I remember having trouble figuring out when to add 'ed' and 'ing' to assemble together my words. Thirteen to sixteen tenses? At this point in time I know I am way over my head.

"Memoir writing..." The teacher said we would be covering this memoir thing next. He was all excited. Seemed like all the other students were looking forward to it too. I was lost. I wanted to shout "what's memoirs?" Then they started saying memories, memoirs, and other strange memoir words.

I think I'll stick with TV. Less big words to figure out. No. Not less –fewer words. Right?

"But how do you really know he liked it?" my friend asked, trying to instill doubt in my burgeoning writing talents.

I felt like a flower bud waiting for the right time to unwrap the hard, stark outer layers and reveal the multitude of colors and textures concealed within. My friend was being like some Neanderthal drunk on fruit nectar, content only on emptying his bladder.

To his inane inquiry I replied, "he made no harsh comments about 'verb tense inconsistency' nor of using 'dialogue as it might have occurred.'"

"Oh," he intoned.

He was algal to my tephra embers of writing inspiration. Then followed with 'fool' and re-read my second memoir attempt. Returning the papers to me, he whispered, "good job." He wasn't just reading what the teacher had written on my paper, he mean it.

As class started, I elbowed him in the ribs. "Just 'cause we're now sitting up front doesn't mean you're safe, fool." He looked stricken. True fact!

That untitled piece is what happens when a sarcastic, dry humor fledgling writer is tortured through over an hour of 'words and phrases to avoid in effective writing,' and then let loose to write.'

""Don't use 'that.' 'Point in time' should be now, then, or once. 'Completely surrounded' and 'in close proximity' are really 'surround' and 'proximity.' I 'should of' done so, instead I took all the 'should have's' to heart. I took as many of the 'bad' and worked them in.

Oh the joy I found in that piece. It was all dry humor, sarcasm, and maliciousness. It gave me the satisfaction, the joy, that any passion should give. I hope every piece I write gives me some similar sense.

Poor Pete. He wrote, "I get it!" He did get it, after red-inking most of the paper, correcting my "mistakes" and adding notes over my "errors." He didn't notice my bad words and phrase mistakes were the very same he droned on about in a previous class.

"I never know what to expect from you, and I love it." Not only did I succeed in entertaining my intended audience, Pete, but I influenced him. He added, "You keep me on my toes. Oh no –a cliché!"

## I, ON LY, HAVE EYES FOR YOU

Here is a little tail about righting badly. No, no, before your red pen soldier is marshaled out to mark out grammatical errors and spelling mistakes, consider my intent. It should be 'tale' rather than 'tail,' and 'write' instead of 'right.' Badly is SO bad. These I use as lighthouse beacons blaring at the perilous, craggy trickiness that is the English language.

Verb tense, past-participle, modifiers and more were terms and concepts thrown at us early in life, like the warm, juicy reddish meat delights offered to gluttonous, spry lion pups, to be warped and ignored when the baby fat of our bodies is nothing but a faraway memory and out manes are more salt and pepper than morning sun golden. All the writing strictness goes like the 'don't do this' and 'don't do that' of parent's sovereignty that morphs into 'let's do this' and 'let's try that' of friends once we step out to the real world.

Rules and dictum that covered us at a young age, like the protective, rust-inhibiting fine layer of machine oils on burgeoning tools, wear away jack-rabbit fast by time and use. The world becomes our shower, as we spasm and flail to keep hold of bubbly slick soap of do's and don't. The spoken word, the world of jabs and pokes of ads, jingles, shallow music, and e-communication are the sudsy bar of soap, slipping through our fingers. We will force our bodies, as our minds, to crane, to reach for that frothy, elusive soap, but in doing so, jets of water, the rainforest cascade of perfectly heated cleansing liquid, invades our exposed self.

Aspiring writers will flail and flounder trying to write by rules that swim against the flow of everyday speech and flashbulb text. The speaker uses whatever verb tense suits the conversation. No one at the water cooler or dive bar is tracking subject-verb agreement. Having a tweet using badly conceived adverbs will not crash the internet. Texting showing overused adjectives will not turn your smartphone dumb.

The rules and scholarly principles may make the written word better and proper. Hold too tight, restrict too much, and it is like grasping that precious creature you are trying to protect, snuffing it's life in the process.

Too much strictness, too many rules and demands for adherence can snuff out progress. This is true in writing as it is in business. Too many rules –or following them too strictly— cripples and corrupts. A postal worker needs to work within certain strict rules and regulations, but too much will bog down the wheels of progress.

"Why can't I have my letter?" His words come clipped and hissed through clenched teeth. "What is wrong with it?"

The mail lady does not reply. She simply offers the rejection form through the Tinker Bell size mail office window.

"The letter is right there," the irate patron jabs a white knuckle fist through the window, one rigid digit pointing at the white envelope. "It is right there!" his words are poisoned daggers. Ears crimson of rage and fury slit eyes accentuate his Asian heritage reddish coloration and slanted eyes.

The rejected form hovers between them, untouched in defiance by one and unclaimed by the staunch righteous determination of the other.

"You must sign the form." The mail lady's words quiver with restraint. "What is your name?" She knows his name. She is reaffirming her superior position. She thrusts the form at him again as she pretends to verify information on her computer. "Give me your name."

"We can." This is what she hears. Her eyes rise like a mushroom cloud destruction of a slow motion nuclear detonation.

"If you CAN," she spits back at him, "then what is your name?"

"We can," he repeats, looking sheepish and bewildered.

"Maybe you and the RAT in your pocket can do this all day," she gives special emphasis on the YOU (and rat), "but my time is precious." A boiling rage lies in her eyes like lava kept trapped by an onion skin layer of defiant, hardened crust.

"So, Mr. We Can, give me your ID." Her iced digits appendage protracts out the Tinker Bell window.

The mail lady retracts her featherless wing of an arm, ID in uncaring hand. She gives a lifeless scan of the ID. A glint of ethereal light sparkles in Hue Kahn's eyes. He puts sound to the letter the mail lady is absorbing through glacier cold eyes.

"We Can." A smug grin fills the patron's countenance as he spells out his name. "H-U-E," pause. "K-A-H-N." Each letter snaps at the mail lady like an angry whip.

The chicken skin arm extends again, setting Hue Kahn's ID on the windowsill edge. Fire still blazing within the mail lady, fueled by the ire of her perceived righteousness and superiority.

Cold words ooze out of the mailroom window. "You still cannot receive this letter." A twig of a finger jabs at the white envelope.

"Why can't I have..." Mr. Kahn tries to ask again. He is cut short by the mail lady's fingernail-on-a-chalkboard voice.

"All letters must have return addresses with the sender's full name clearly written." Each word spoken is a stinging wasp. To Hue it is like an army of angry wasps attacking with merciless military precision.

Kahn's lips quiver. Words of retort have formed in his brain, yet signals to muscle cells are zapped into oblivion by the mail lady's scathing utterance.

Seconds tick away as if passing through chilled molasses. A cartoon light bulb appears by the mail lady's head. It lights her hawk irises with a bright, glimmering pinprick illumination.

"What is the sender's name?" she inquires.

With restrained annoyance, Hue cranes his neck and twists his stocky frame to glance into the mailroom to read the envelope. "On Ly," he returns.

The mail lady hears "only" and rushes into a diatribe of rules, requirements, and consequences.

Hue brakes through the barrage and articulates "O-N," pause. "L-Y." The letters are shot through the little window like a prize fighter's last blows at a waning adversary.

"Surely Only cannot be a name?" Her words, like her countenance, express a struggle long failed. "I can only accept properly addressed envelopes." Her words, the absurdity of her choice in words, reverberate like a cry of "no" expressed seconds too late.

"On Ly is her full name." Confidence and strength of a victor permeate Hue Kahn's words. "On is her first name. Ly is her surname." His eyes radiate smug victory. He adds "by your standards," as a final knockout blow.

That wan, featherless wing of an arm extends out the window once again. It deposits the rejected letter on the windowsill's outer edge.

Just as Hue is turning to float away in victory, he pokes his face through the window. His words are sung, clear and loud, "my uncle will soon be writing me." He pauses, smiles, and finishes her off with, "his full name is Fuhk Yu."

# SUBJECT CHARACTER

"Not an autobiography." That is the first note for the first class covering memoir writing.

"List five writing genres, with number one being the one you most like." If this had been a true request, my reply, or at least my (and my friend's) thought would be something like:

"Sci-Fi, fantasy, flash fiction, anime, general fiction." Things like Westerns, Romance, and none fiction would have been way down the list of interest –or not on the list at all.

"Poetry, autobiography, and memoirs below the lowest." Our opinions of these lowly three certainly would have educed those words or thoughts. (Perhaps even harsher.)

The next line in my notes for the first memoir writing class is: "The writer is the subject character but may not be the most featured character."

That distinction registered with me. It must have since my notes for the next three classes are extensive. The idea that "if you lived it, you can write it," struck something within. I was no scholar. I've not solved some long baffling human dilemma. I am not nor expect to ever be some accomplished, renown anything. Maybe I could become president of the United States, because, after all, seems it doesn't take that much. (Last line written during 2025.)

"If you lived it, you can write it." Well, I have lived through something. I like writing. Maybe there is something to this memoir thing.

"You are nobody. What would you write?" My friend may have asked. He may still ask, even if I present this to him.

I probably would have answered, may answer, with a shrug, but "this" would be the meaning. It is the meaning now. I write. I wrote this.

This exchange is more imaginary than real. Our memories can be tricky things. However, I'm sure at some point I would have pointed to a class handout that had an extensive list of "general memoir topics."

Sections in this list included "important in your life?" "life milestones," and just "memories." If someone can write a memoir about "a book or movie that changed your life" or "pregnancy," why couldn't I write about the life changing time my friend and I were living through?

The idea of writing my own memoir stuck with me. It sat in the recesses of my brain, a shadow ignored but not dissolving, not ever gone. I don't recall bringing the idea up to my friend again. I took notes for those three classes, set them aside, and let life move me forward.

Looking through those notes, now, I see the appeal. Memoir writing can follow the "classic narrative arc." Like fiction, there can be a beginning. Easy enough as most

things, well, begin. In a memoir about a milestone like pregnancy, the exposition can be the test confirming a planned effort or a surprise.

Following through the arc, a "rising action" takes the reader to a peak, a climax, followed by a "falling action," the after, and finally, a resolution. A memoir following that patten becomes less me, me, me. It does not have to be preachy, or hit the reader over the head with a lesson or truth.

Books, movies, even some music follow a form of this narrative arc. Maybe it is a patten that follows the natural flow of life. That appeals to me. It resonates and is something I can understand.

"He takes three chapters to describe the cabin in the woods." Not an exact quote, but my friend often quibbled about certain authors who tackle their exposition in infinite detail. "Four paragraphs to say the road was wet." Right. Wordy. But that wet road leads to a crash, let's say, which gives momentum to the rising action.

Well, my memoir's exposition is the place I find myself as I write this –prison. Not a place many are personally familiar with. A wordy memoir could build its beginning with all the gory details of the why's and how's of the getting into prison. It could have lots of "woe's me" and ire of injustice, maybe with examples of corruption, revenge versus justice, etc.

I could write a natural beginning with perhaps an easy and/or logical progress catapulting the narrative into that rising action. Easy. Logical. But, wrong story. I take notes. I don't covet wordy "woe's me," and "pity me" claptrap. My path from ordinary, commonplace "free" citizen to marked, subjugated, caged person is not this story. It certainly could be a story. So much happened between free and unassuming to locked up, striped of rights, and "marked."

Other life changing things have come from my incarceration. Not all "life changing" events or forces that affect a person in a profound way have to be grand, obvious, or easy to identify. One can change in a profound way after an even that is subtle. A deviation from one's "normal" that "life changing" can just as easy come after something that passes with little fanfare.

Little fanfare is this story, this memoir. My memoir, my memories now shared are not a telling of my failure at civic duties, of making bad choices, of navigating a convoluted, intrinsically flawed judiciary system, or the ending up in prison. No. This memoir is about change.

### You take Notes, Fool

"What day is today?" My friend asks. I know what he wants, but I bite.

"Hump day!" I reply with my usual sarcasm.

"Wednesday. Memoir writing." This is not said with a lot of love or enthusiasm. Not this time nor any of the other dozen or more times my friend has brought it up.

"Maybe it'll be okay." I don't feel it, but say it to sound hopeful.

"It is what it is," is all he adds.

This is how I remember the exchange. Maybe not a word for word recalling, but close enough. It is a back and forth we'd done more than once. The point being memoir writing is not high on either of our lists of interests.

"Just nine to go," I say.

"Eight." His correction is even less enthusiastic than my empty comment.

Our attitudes –or at least mine- turns up a notch when the word "videos" fills the air. In my mind I am thinking 'maybe they'll be long.' (In a perfect world I would have been thinking –and saying- maybe they'll be full of useful information.)

I can hardly remember what the first few videos were about. Well, they are about memoir writing. There is advice on turning memories into a story. I remember hearing about the arc –no, not Noah's, but the classic narrative arc, with a beginning, some action that builds up to a climax, and then falling towards some resolution.

Theme. That is one catch word. (I take notes.) Must have a theme. It should grab the reader. It should have a lesson. I have notes on not being preachy. All good stuff. Still, memoir writing? Yikes!

Double yikes. The last video is... something. My friend's squirming next to me says everything I am feeling. I think I actually grimaced once or twice. Probably more, but the number of times I do it isn't important. What matter is that I am thinking, "this woman is weird."

"Why is she making videos?" I can't answer my friend's question when my question is "who would watch them?" Well, WE are watching.

The weird woman says many of the things the people in the other videos have said. Her information, her advice, her insight, it is all good. She is just so... weird.

I think I say she is hard to watch. If I don't voice that to my friend I certainly think it, through every minute of the video.

Like so many things in life that are uncomfortable, hard, or painful to do, this video seems to go on forever. I may have been telling myself every few minutes to keep an open mind, to endure just a little longer. I know I am listening. I am sure I am focusing my eyes on the bookshelf behind the woman rather than looking at her. She has the most disconcerting expressions. Still, I listen.

All good things must come to an end. A hard fact. The flip side to that is that bad things end too. (Not that I would call the class BAD. Memoir writing though, yikes!) But the video ends. The class ends. Another one down. Only... well, whatever. Who's counting? Moving on.

"That was terrible." I make some such comment after class while walking with my friend. I am sure his reply was a tad bit more descriptive. He can be very colorful with four letter words. No point throwing him under the bus with a direct quote. We both are in agreement that the woman in the last video is painful to watch.

"I get it though," I tell my friend.

"What?" he inquires.

"She's deaf." (I have to say this twice because he pretends not to hear. I don't hold a monopoly in sarcasm and dry humor.)

"You know that for a fact?" He likes to challenge my vast knowledge and profound insight.

"Yes," I reply tartly. No. I don't know it for a fact but I must never show weakness to an adversary. Not to THIS adversary. (Adversary or fool?) He looks at me with his usual doubting, unconvinced, 'you're the fool' look of his.

"She said she was hearing impaired." A fact I recall after I declare it a fact.

"Did she? I didn't hear that." Ahha, I have him.

"She mentions it several times, you fool." Well, no, I don't actually say that. Not the 'you fool' bit, at least. "Yeah, towards the end of the video she mentions it several times." He doesn't challenge me again. Points for me!

"I get it," I declare again.

He apparently hasn't 'got it.' "You never listen to a deaf person talk?" My friend's shrug indicates he may or may not have, he's not committing to an answer, and 'but go on, fool!' "They talk funny. They don't generally hear themselves like a hearing person can. They're not aware of their volume or intonations." I like throwing big words at him.

My point to him is that all the woman's odd, dramatic, excessive facial expressions and tone are probably due to her being deaf. Sorry. Hearing impaired. She isn't JUST weird.

My friend has no retort. His lack of sarcastic comeback or challenge says to me he gets it and agrees, and 'move on.'

We keep walking.

"Eight more." One of us breaks the silence with the count. Doesn't matter who says it. We both feel it. Yet we also feel –know- we are learning. I have taken notes, for goodness sake! And my friend hasn't burst into flames. Yet.

"Memoir writing. Yikes!" That is probably said by both of us. (Just minus the 'yikes' for my friend. He doesn't DO 'yikes'.) We have to keep up appearances. Come next class, there will no doubt be more count downs and sarcastic comments –and more notes taken. Then we'll walk away again, talking about the class.

## ARC PEEK

Prison. Now that is a solid "If you lived it, you can write it;" important, life changing event. It would not be unique, but certainly not a common memoir topic. It would be easy to write about the life events and choices made leading to subsequent arrest, judicial process, and ensuing prison time. I'd throw in concepts of best intentions and how they don't always have good outcomes. Maybe work up the fact that doing what seems right does not always mean doing what is accepted by some state's laws.

The process of going from a common citizen to incarcerated felon is full of lessons and strong emotions.

"Put your hands behind your back!"

"Anything in your pockets that might cut me?"

The dead, ice feel of metal on skin and bone chilling sound of handcuffs robbing hands of freedom, when part of the arrest process, are such as to be unforgettable. CB radio shatter also evokes dread and floods the mind with memories of that dreadful day. These become triggers that haunt, that send cold chills, and put the heart to race.

That is just the first day, the first few minutes of the life changing event. It is a colossus collection of specific sounds, scents, sights, and sounds, and the extreme emotions forever linked to them.

Nothing like going from common, nondescript citizen to the vile law breaking scum associated with criminals, merely accused as such or proven truly depraved. Forget that "innocent until proven guilty" concept believed until actually accused; a model best developed on TV and movies. Entertainment. Fiction. Reality is far more stark and poignant. "Pregret," a term from Reader's Digest, December 2018/January 2019, meaning "to know what you're about to do is wrong, wrong, wrong while also knowing you will do it anyway" seems ironic now, but wow! how often we have that feeling, experience that awareness, though not all end up in prison.

There are other lessons. Like, your attorney is not your friend. Not just that. They rarely have your best interest in mind. It is not a personal indifference to you or vendetta. They are doing something to earn a living. They are not out to save the world. At the end of the day, they cross T's and dot I's and wait to collect their pay. (A family friend who happens to be the attorney you turn to, or if you have it like that in life, the one who has been on retainer, is still bound by the underlying motivation of monetary recompense. Again, TV and movies cover the saving the world and seeking true justice thing, while real life works on different grounds.)

The "justice" system's interpretation of justice does not necessarily align with, well, justice. Think revenge or retribution and you may come closer to the truth. It may be even more indifferent, churning along, like some hodgepodge behemoth crawling along, going in circles, just trying to stay in motion. So many pieces to it and so many things wrong with it, it is hard to point at any one part of it and say, "that needs to be fixed." If you have been drawn into it by force, by bad choices, by malice, and want to fight its canker, it is even worse.

Then there is prison itself. Wow! It has been a combination of some of what Hollywood portrays along with things no Hollywood writer could imagine. The idea of a nightmare, a waking nightmare, comes to mind. Depravity of soul is a concept I often have swirling in my head. Words like corruption, acerbity, abomination, and chicanery are but a few I would use to describe people I've come across in prison. Not all of these people I would use these words to describe them have being prisoners.

No way going to prison is not a life changing event. The stripping away one's freedom, forcefully removing someone from their home, caging and treating a human like an animal; these should be strong deterrents to crime. They should be, yet prisons are full. Countless wait to begin their prison incarceration time. And crime goes on.

My choices lead me to the life changing event. My thinking good intentions trump all put me in a cage. My life changed, as did the lives of those near me. Dreams, aspirations, simple future plans all had to adjust to my sudden absence. Many people had to adjust, adapt, accept this change. Some exorcised me out of their lives, unable or unwilling to wait out my absence. However, not all the change has been negative. There was a lot of loss, but also some gain and growth. Change does that –forces growth.

"Human warehousing." Not sure when or from whom I first heard the phrase. I know I've heard it often enough now, and it is true to what I have lived. Another familiar term is "rehabilitation," but it is near insulting. It is not the "business model" of the prison world I have lived in. Both terms probably conjure up different ideas, suggest different things to anyone not personally familiar with prison life. To be fair, my experience is limited to the one state. Other state's systems may be different, perhaps starkly different. My thoughts, my words, my feelings are limited to this life changing experience.

Hate, bitterness, frustration, and abasement. These I have known. I have felt them. I have struggled with their acidity. I've let them direct my actions and govern my state of mind. I've seen many exploding from them too. They are common to the prison world that I know, as are gripes about food, unfair treatment, and staff corruption. With little other stimulation, these can irreparably corrode a soul. (It is easy to get callused to the complaints too, when many of the complainers prove to be just chronic complainers.)

Maybe living through prison is not in the same league as childbirth or a book or movie that changes your life, but change is change. And my experience is modest and mostly benign compared to what I have seen other go through. I have been fortunate. The thing I find fascinating, perhaps inspiring too, is how adaptive we can be. We may avoid and cringe away from change, but we manage it, sometimes without expecting it or noticing, sometimes even for the better of us.

Change need not be that ugly, negative thing. That adaptation can move us forward; pull us out of a detrimental stagnation. Change can help us grow. Change can expose things within us not known or recognized. Our conflict with change may just be part of our want to control or our fear of the unknown. Neither one should limit our forward movement in life or our growth.

Me human. Watch me adapt.

## DISAPPOINTMENT – ACCOMPLISHMENT – VICTORY – FEAR – GRATITUDE

The bus looked as if the rust was the only thing holding it together. Inside, the odor suggested it carried chickens and other livestock when not transporting people.

"More like pigs," says one of the three guys suffering through the transfer with me.

That bus ride, lasting maybe five minutes but might as well have been fifty, set the stage for what the new camp would hold for us.

"We do our required 12 months, then transfer." That was our agreement.

I transfer out 15 months later. I left two of the three guys I had known for years behind. The other, I follow him to a new camp. A better camp. So I thought.

"Different, right?" This or some similar questions come regularly from the many new faces at the new place.

"Yeah, different," I answer. Toilets with zero privacy is different. One shower area for seventy-plus people is different. My different is different from theirs. They are happy. I feel out of place and apprehensive. (Disrespect, selfishness, hubris, and food motivated greed are not different to me, but I thought the transfer to this camp left most of those types behind.)

'What have I gotten myself into?' bounces in my head.

After 15 months this new camp proves better than I first feel. Better than the camp before. Fifteen months at that other place. A pit of hell subdivision, felt like an eternity. Fifteen months here hardly seems like five. What is even better is the fourth from that original transfer is working on his move to join us.

Better isn't perfect. Disappointment seeps in. It happens. It is like a foul odor that invades the lungs. It infiltrates the skin like a sponge sucks in water. Disappointment has become more than a feeling for me. It has become the determining, rousing feeling lying within the shadowy reassess of my soul, competing against all other feelings, pleasures, hopes, and desires, slowly gaining a foothold.

Through all accomplishments, victories, fears, and gratuities in life, disappointment lurks. It lies in wait. It waits to seep out and taint like a rot that starts with one fruit but soon ruins the bushel. It is the morning dew that fills voids and lows, and when dense enough, obscures even the radiance of the sun.

"Make the best of it," I tell my friend. His expectations are as high as mine yet he sees what I see, feels what I'm feeling. Disappointment pulls him down too.

"Find your thing," I advise. "Spin what is here to suit you." Things I say to him with ease yet find difficult to do for myself. Like that rusty bus, as long as one can still get to a destination, serve a purpose, keep at it. I am learning; adapting. 'Onward, with compassion and serenity.'

That sudden camp transfer, that old rusty bus, the pit of hell subdivision camp, all real. The worst kind of change –forced, sudden, into a total unknown. How did I take it? I hated it. I planned for a change as soon as I could initiate it. Mostly though, I adapted. I spun it and made the best of it.

My first 20 or so months of this life changing event were spent in a county jail. Twenty months of whirlwind, of radical adjustment, extreme emotions, and abysmal unknowns. I shared a cell the size of a modest house's second bathroom with two total strangers. Twenty-three hours, seven days a week, in this space. There we were, three adults, strangers, going through our personal hells, all in one small space, including toilet, sink, beds, and personal scant property.

That time was all change, yet I remember finding common ground with people polar opposite to me. I had never been around such a diverse group of people, now I was living with them. I took my introverted and quiet tendencies, applying them well to the "mind your own business" rule of incarceration. Yet I also found myself interpreting documents and verbal communications for stranger. Strangers who would be there one day, gone the next.

"¿Estas bien?" (You okay?) This is my question to a stranger.

"Tengo un dolor..." (I have a pain...) He touches his torso, lower right stomach area. That answer and indication on the body is followed by "tengo una fiebre tambien." (I have a fever too.)

This exchange lasted seconds, maybe. Not more than a minute or two at most. This was just two inmates, strangers, passing each other in some hallway; one of many hallways. I remember though that the man's wan look and classic complaints registered with me.

"Toma. Para que veas el doctor." (Take [this]. To see the doctor.) I wrote him a request to be seen at the clinic. It was deliberate in language and terminology to attract attention.

The man, this total stranger, was seen at the clinic the next day. Emergency surgery followed. A day or two later he was back, looking vibrant, alive. Alone in the prison crowd, he was suffering from appendicitis; near rupture.

The situation, unique but not isolated, brought me out of my comfort zone; forced an action not normal of me, not even prior to the incarceration, that used a skill, talent, an ability in me regularly not openly exercised.

"Tell him to sign the form," some officer tells me.

"¿Que es?" the Spanish-only man asks. He's is asking the officer but I am the one who understands his concern.

"He wants to know what it is," I translate for the officer.

"He just needs to sign," the officer replies.

"Dice que firmes," I tell the man, then I translate the form's main points.  
"Renuncia de derechos a corte y representacion legal."

After I've translated the form, the man, know understanding his position, determines that signing the form is not in his best interest.

This particular man and a few others who face the same papers and pressure to sign make the choice not to sign; to have all documents presented to them translated. Staff eventually start to isolate other individuals, taking them away from others or out of the dorm to present them with forms to sign, without translation.

Another situation had me looking over a plea deal for a cellmate. He didn't even know it was a plea deal. His court-appointed attorney had simply given him the paperwork to "look over and sign."

"Es una oferta," I tell him.

"¿Oferta de que?" he asks.

"Culpabilidad," I answer, a little bewildered and apprehensive at this stranger's countenance. There is an anger brewing within him that I have seen in others. The anger tends to turn into violence. I'm in a confined space, with a stranger of unknown temperament, who has a foot and 100 pounds on me. But I am translating; I am reading words off a paper, not passing judgment.

After some back and forth, some numerous "¿que?" and "¿como" his anger and frustration start to make sense. The forms given to him by his attorney, his advocate, to 'just sign' are for a deal of twenty years, to serve ten incarcerated. About the norm for the stated crime and routine procedure for most attorneys, court appointed or paid.

"Pero ese no soy yo," my cellmate states, over and over. 'But that [he] is not me.'

The man was picked up in a raid common to the country and area he lived in. About a dozen people were arrested together. Three of them, not blood relations or known to each other, had the same or similar surnames. The paperwork to be signed, the plea deal this attorney was requiring my cellmate to sign, were for a different man.

"Yo le dije, pero no me entendio," he states with a glint of relief. (I told him, but he didn't understand.)

Now I understand. Eventually the attorney understands as well. It takes some work, some pleading, but the information, translated for the attorney to comprehend, gets disseminated and applied to the proper cogs in the wheels of justice.

The pit of hell subdivision camp comes years later. Admittedly I am now well jaded by prison life. Minding my own business is my every day. My interactions with others are very limited and mostly superficial. I am caught in a routine, a shell use to navigating the prison environment. There isn't happiness, but I function with content, resigned to my situation. The problem is that too much of that same 'ole, same 'ole

familiarity and contentment can stave growth. Change is hard, it is scary, but no change is boring; nor is it generally healthy or nourishing.

Before the pit of hell subdivision camp but after the 20 month county jail whirlwind was my time to break out of my comfortable cocoon. Hidden or rarely encouraged abilities can, under the right conditions, be like the planted seed turning into a green sprig, reaching for the sun transformation.

"You writing a book?" the stranger asks.

"Notes," I reply.

"You ever teach?"

"No."

"I work in Education, Teacher's Aide. We're looking for someone," he says.

I offer no reply. I dot some I's and check punctuation on my 'notes.' (Not regular notes but a journal, noting things happening to me or around me that seem... note worthy. Also helps keeping track of things when later my fading mind can't recall details.)

"I'd go crazy sitting in here all day," he means staying in the dorm, day in and day out. "A work detail in Education is pretty good. I mean, any detail is better than doing nothing all day, but Education has perks."

I'm not an educator, trained or aspiring, nor have ever thought of teaching.

Not sure how it happened or if this dialogue is more my creative mind filling in voids than real, but I accepted the invitation. Grab change by the ears rather than letting it lead you and all that sagacious stuff to live by. With all the change I was already going through, it seemed I was open to having a role in further change. A surprisingly personal interview with the "free-world" teacher I would be assigned to help came first. It seems he wasn't just interested in my skills but my temperament. Shrewd but smart. Well, not sure how smart I thought he was then because he signed me up. I was in. Me, a teacher. Crazy.

Five years of being a teacher's aide. It was a wild leap into an unknown, with some amazing, unexpected results. There were perks indeed, but not all that I could have imagined.

# RESOLUTION

Prison forces change. There are some who are at ease in the environment, who are familiar and content with what it is. There is a sort of revolving door thing for some, appearing to be more than just okay with prison's restrictions and limited choices. I was not so at ease with having so few choices. I had forfeited my freedom. The consequences of choices made led me here. My life now was dictated by the caprice beat of some other's will. Even those not authorized to subjugate, abase, and fulminate dictated many aspects of my every day activities. Everything goes by the schedule set by others.

That one day a stranger presented me with a choice. At the time it was like being given a choice between walking into a dark room or accepting a known drudgery. The drudgery, probably abhorred and resented, is at least familiar. The unknown is just that, unknown. Natural tendencies lead us away from unknowns.

Ah but the beauty of risk. Sure, take a risk and failure can come at you like some prize fighter's one – two signature knock-out punches. Merciless. No time to block or retreat. But persevere, take on that risk, accept the challenges of change, perhaps succeed in adapting, and the rewards can be life changing in a grand scale. Good change.

"I can read to my grandkids."

"No one took the time."

"Now I understand what the letters mean!"

My teacher's aide risky adventure was not a treasure chest of reward riches. Food is the predominate motivator in prison. The work details that give workers access to food, either to steal or be handed out like table scraps, are coveted... and few. There were some table scraps perks to the teacher's aide position. Most days though it was a dulling monotony. The exceptions however, the "I can read!" moments make it the stuff to kick start dead hearts and overflow empty souls with healing salves.

I took one step out of the comfortable, the contentedness known, bringing the kind of satisfaction, of a sense of fulfillment, many spend their entire life chasing in blind futility. This gamble, this change took me to a place, to places within myself, cultivating growth which would not have happened sitting in contentment.

I would peek around the corner of contentment again, courting more change. It came to be with an offer to do something further with education; something I never imagined doing. I never thought myself capable, but that was my thought of teaching. I was capable; capable and now eager to take on more. Well, so I created my own classes.

Translating legal documents is good. A skill unused is a waste. A talent not shared is a squandered gift. That ideal resulted in my teaching a language class to those in my assigned dorm. Give them enough knowledge to be able to fend for themselves. It follows that idea of teaching one to fish rather than just giving them a fish. Oh, I'm a computer nerd too, so why not share that skill as well?

Me, a docent? Not in my comfort zone. To this day I don't think myself a teacher. Those little things I can do, my little bit of knowledge, deserves to be shared. I believe I

have a responsibility to give to those who don't have. Biblical? I don't know. The gift is worthy of being shared. It sure does feel like the right thing to do. Change was not a perilous darkness but a catharsis, going from the confining chrysalis to butterfly. It is my accepting change that exposed my... excess, my unused or underused skills. I grew.

"Would you write something for the newsletter?"

"Me? But what? I'm not a writer." But I stepped into yet another unknown. Some time later I had the title of Editor in Chief. Lofty. Pretentious? I accepted and wrote. I merely wrote to share. What a rush though. Not the position, the title, but the newsletter work. I was creating things. I was involving others, exposing their talents. I was cultivating change.

Change has forced me to tap into things unrealized. Change beats down fear. It challenges. Change catapults growth. Like failure can teach, embracing change can bring forth a catharsis. The failures can hurt. Running into the unknown of a light devouring dark is not easy. Fearing change to the point of resisting, rejecting, and denouncing it, accepting contentment and comfort of the familiar robs us of growth and the exhilaration of discovery.

I take notes, fool. If I heard it, saw it, lived it, why not take note of it?

My friend's thoughts:

"To question such a choice is not simply useless, but harmful. Such doubts will chain the mind to an endless circle of pointless speculation and self-recrimination. You should prepare yourself to live with the consequences of your decisions, whatever they may be."

Through my years in prison I have taken notes; a journal of notes. I read back through those, finding the adjustments made, the resistance to something new, of transformations. Always, there is change.

"If you lived it, you can write it." To that I add, "I write as I live it." I write to put my thoughts, ideas, and memorable dreams down. The words are part of my life, my world, minute and fleeting, but full of things to share. When written down, I can relive and refresh. Reaching others is not the absolute intent. The point is the sharing. Take note.

"I hate change," my friend declares.

"All the world's a stage," my mind despairs.

"Why do we have to do this?" he does protest.

"Grow or sit in boring bliss," I offer my contest.

"Poetry and your pathetic rhyming suck," he tells me.

"Good brain challenge and to make a buck," I do decree.

"You're annoying and a big fool," is his friendly offer.

"It's what I do. Not trying to be cool." I'm a nerd and gobbler.

"Maybe it won't be so bad," he says.

"My Padawan, you're a fine lad." I'm in a daze.

"Poetry and change still suck though," he cries again.

"Spin it and go with the flow." I feel his pain.

"We never had this conversation," I mouth his rote.

"But we've had this revelation." You take note.

**THE  
END**