

# Recollections in the Present Tense

by

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*Fiction* -- Webster: "A making up of imaginary happenings,... as in a statement or a story using imaginary characters and events....

Any lover of fiction, particularly what is sometimes called literary fiction, is going to find that definition seriously lacking. The term literary fiction is a designation that has been used to separate more so-called serious creations from the popular thrillers, romances, sci fi, and lawyer stories that you see being opened by the lady next to you on the airplane or by the man flopped on a blanket at the beach. It's an idea that Oprah's bad boy, Jonathon Franzen, used, and got in a lot of trouble when he did, to distinguish his fiction from others in Oprah's stable of writers for her book club.

Lovers of fiction know it's much more than made up occurrences. Fiction can cause inquiries in us as readers and writers that go beyond simply wanting to know what happens next. Fiction stirs recognition of a common condition. It ignites memory. It recalls fears. It can suggest something in the life of a reader that the reader never suspected and the writer could never have known. How this happens is a mystery. My guess is that it has to do with a writer's use of two tools: *time* and *memory*.

Fiction writers write from experience. Either their own experience, or the experience of having heard the experience of another. They comb their recollections. Whether it's the recollection of something that happened yesterday or fifty years ago whether it happened to them or to someone else matters not one bit.

It's about memory. We might think of memory as the DNA of fiction. But, what really makes those memories matter, is the way the story is told. At the center, story telling is all about language and

character and knowing what to leave out. But for me, another key is immediacy. It's the currency of the telling. It's the present concern you hear in the voice of the narrator.

The telling of depth time in the present time puts long past events under a kind of pressure. In the hands of the best storytellers -- like Carver or Hemingway, or Faulkner -- it's the kind of pressure that yields diamonds. In the hands of lesser writers there is rarely a gem but nonetheless there is a certain pressing together of occurrences, a kind of lamination in the telling of stories that moves the reader to nod and say silently to himself, yes, I know what your talking about. I've been there.

What I'd like to read tonight are three pieces that I hope you'll at least find amusing. And if I'm real lucky there may be something here that stirs in you a moment of vague recognition. These brief stories are built on things I've seen and that I've heard others talk about, all of it twisted mercilessly for my own purposes. They are recollections, if not in the grammatical present tense, recollections from different layers of time laminated into what is a telling in the present moment.

I don't have the power to bring you any of those diamonds that I talked about. Instead, think of the following little stories as three pieces of quarter inch plywood.

## Tough Guy

I can't wait to meet your Grandad," Luanne said to David after some miles of driving during which they'd said nothing. "What did he do? What was your Granddad's job?"

"In my family we call them Grandfathers," David said -- or Grandpa, or Gramps if you're talking right to them."

She smiled at him, "Does it make a difference?" she said.

"I just thought you should know how we do it." David said. He waited to see if she wanted to talk anymore about that and then he went on.

"He was a machinist. He worked his whole life for a big paint company. I never really knew much about him. All I ever saw from his working life was the pocket watch he got when he retired. And that he would wear one of those blue factory shirts when he worked in the garden. That's all I know. I guess I also know that he was a tough guy. I guess I know that too, even though he was a small man, just a little guy. But, that's about it.

"Was he nice to you? Did he take you places," Luanne said. "My granddad took me places, she said -- to the circus, to concerts. He would buy books and then read them to me. He would sit still and let me have tea parties with him. He'd drink plain water and smack his lips and say it was delicious"

David said, "Mine mostly came for dinner on Sunday and sat by himself and read the newspaper. He was so deaf that most of the time he didn't want to have anything that was like a conversation. He didn't give me much."

"Can he hear now?" Luanne said.

He blinked a couple of times, "Why would he be able to hear now if he couldn't hear fifteen years ago?" David stared at the road and then went on.

"I heard he was a tough guy when he was younger, before I was born. He could handle himself in a fight. At least that's what I've been told. When I was a kid he wanted to teach me to fight. He would stand up and hunch over like a boxer and roll his fists in front of me to show me how to deliver a punch. He always told me the same story over and over again, about this one fight he had -- the fight with the Dago.

"I don't like that." Luanne said. "That's not a nice word,"

"I'm sorry, that's what he was called. That's all I ever heard him called. He got in a fight with the Dago, in a bar in a part of the neighborhood he wasn't supposed to be in. It was on a Sunday morning and he was with my father. I've heard the story from both of them -- but my father told it a little differently." Luanne was looking out the window at the passing farmland. David didn't know if she was listening. "They had been to church," he said, "and afterward my father and grandfather took a trolley to pick up some shingles that grandpa was going to nail to the roof that afternoon. They took the streetcar right from church and went to Kimmelman's Hardware."

“Would a hardware store be open on a Sunday morning back then,” she said.

David breathed air out like he was lifting something heavy. He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. “I don’t know, maybe he’d ordered them and they left them out. I don’t know?”

“Anyway, they were walking back to the trolley stop and my father, who was only about eight years old at the time, was parched and there were no stores open so they went into this bar down the street from the hardware store called Pesavento’s. There was no one inside except the bartender who was talking to the Dago at the far end of the bar. The Dago had a sleeveless shirt on and his back and shoulders were full of black hair. They said he was huge. My father ordered a bottle of orange pop and grandpa got a beer. And they were being quiet and drinking their drinks when my dad had to go to the toilet and to get to the toilet he had to pass by the Dago and the bartender. When he passed by he heard them talking about something to do with the Dago’s wife and the Dago was pounding his fist on the bar.”

“Do you have to keep saying Dago?” Luanne said.

“Just what do you want me to call him?” David said. She didn’t answer.

“According to Grandpa, the guy was out to make some trouble. He said that he kept looking over at my grandfather and finally asked him what he was doing with a stack of shingles? Grandpa would do this accent, it was the only time he was ever funny -- he said, ‘*Ay, lidle guy. Waddya you weetha shingles? You getta you lidle suit dirty.*’ Grandpa told him that he would worry about his suit and that he, the Dago, should not be concerned. Grandpa said that then he turned to look out the window at

the street. He said that it was a sunny morning and that he turned all the way around and put his back to the other men. And then my father comes out of the toilet and starts to walk past the two of them at the end of the bar and my grandfather still has his back turned. The Dago picked up my dad under the arms and held him up in the air and shouted, *'You gonna helpa daddy on the roof? You daddy e'sa no bigger then a you. You daddy canna do man work.'* He had picked up my dad up under the arms. My dad kicked in the air and started shouting to be put down. Grandpa turned around and the Dago put my father down and my father ran back beside my grandfather. Grandpa told him to finish the orange soda. My father said he had to drink it slow because the cold gave him a headache and all the while the Dago is shouting across the bar, *"My sonna esa seven. Esa bigger in both of you."* Grandpa took my dad by the hand. My dad was still working on the orange drink though a straw. They walked him over to where the Dago was with the bartender. According to Grandpa, Grandpa came only up to about his chin. Grandpa took the bottle of orange pop from my dad and removed the straw and then broke the bottle right across the Dago's forehead and when he went down my Dad said that he kicked over two stools that clattered loud and that you could feel the whole floor shake and the bottle of orange pop was smashed to pieces all except the neck, which my Grandfather was still carrying when they got home that day. The Dago took a big cut across the forehead. My dad said that the blood came down in sheets over his his face.

About ten years ago the Dago died. My grandfather saw something about it in the paper and he told my father to bring me along and the three of us visited the funeral home. I had no idea why we had to be there. But the three of us had to walk up there, with all these strangers not knowing us, Grandpa leading the parade, to look inside the box at this old Italian guy who didn't look nearly as big as I'd imagined from the

times I heard the story. He still had thick hair that had gone gray and wirey. His head lay on the little silk pillow. Then my grandfather, with all these strangers watching, reached in the box and lifted the hair away from the Dago's forehead and showed me the scar that was still red, even with the funeral make up. He pulled me close and made sure I got a good look at it and then he turned and we walked right out of the place without saying a word to anybody.

"My grandfather would tell that story over and over again. Every time he would put in a little more detail about how hot it was that day and the sawdust on the floor and how it soaked red and about what the bottle felt like in his hands as it was braking across the man's skull."

"But your dad told to story too," Luanne said.

"Not as much." David said. "My father didn't like the story as much as my grandfather did. He said that a few years after it happened he was himself being pushed around in the school yard by a bully who as a head taller than him. So my dad reached up and gave the bully a fist hard in the jaw and the bully didn't flinch. And then the bully beat the hell out of my dad. My father would laugh when he told that story, but he never told it when my grandfather was around."

"Did you fight much?" Luanne said. Have you been in lots of fights?"

"Not a one, if you can believe it. Not a one."

Luanne became quiet and watched the road. After a little while she said, "But what would you do if you got in a situation like your granddad? You would fight. Wouldn't you?"

“I wouldn’t get myself in that kind of a situation, David said.” She waited for him to say more, but nothing more came.

## “Joey”

So, I was meeting with Joey today, just before I came here. I'm was telling Joey about a little incident with Louise over the weekend and he's with me, you know, boring in with his eyeballs and we're almost knee-to-knee.

"There's nothing much going on," I tell him. "There was only this one thing." Joey wants to know, usually right from the start, was there anything that made me feel bad at all in the past week?

"It's probably Louise being just thirteen," I said, "probably the hormones, but with all the other stuff that's going on I get a little concerned."

You know I've told you how Joey rocks back and forth on the cheeks of his butt and it looks like he's waiting for me to say something really poignant. When he gets interested like that I get worried I'm going to disappoint him. He's got that long curly red hair. You know, I've told you how he looks like a big strawberry layer cake when he combs it all up on top of his head. He's a big strawberry cake with sad blue eyes and I figure I better make it interesting.

"Louise was all over me Saturday morning about driving her and a friend to a movie and she's trying to get me to commit," I tell him, "and I want to help her out but with things the way they are --that the judge wants me out by the end of the week. I've got to be out of there. I say, "Louise, honey, I've got a lot of packing to do." And then she looks at me and I know I've said the wrong thing cause when I talk about packing she gets bunched up and you can hear weepy things in her voice. So without even ending the sentence I tell her to check the Tribune for the exact time and I'd love to take her. "Who's your friend?" I say. "Felecia," she says. Now she's happy again.

Joey sips his coffee from a mug that says "Joey". He makes a face like it's too hot and that he doesn't like the taste. He smacks his lips together and makes little clicking noises and it strikes me that it's not very good listening that he's doing. He looks around to find a place to put the cup. It's like he wants to put the coffee out of reach, to show that he's rejected it somehow. "This coffee has offended me," he seems to say. "Away with it." And then he's back to listening. I've already told you that I have a hard time laying it out for him, and it's for the dumbest reason -- that his name is Joey. Joey is like someone who pushed you around as a kid in your neighborhood. Joey is a name for a choirboy or for a bulldog.

So, Joey says, "What did it feel like when she got bunched up --when you talked about moving?" I said I think she was using the situation to get what she wanted. "Do you think she's penalizing you for what's happening?" he says. Then my mind starts to really take off. I mean I'm starting to have some real doubt. I've been seeing this guy for four months --and it's his business not mine --but I'm starting to feel like -- what if, I'm thinking to myself, while I'm trying to give him a thoughtful response and trying to show him that I'm not editing, what if I'm spending ninety bucks an hour on a guy who takes everything he hears and channels it into some groove that *he's* comfortable with. Like eroded soil, you know, and when it floods all the water funnels in the same tracks. No matter where else it could go, it can't. What if Joey has a specialty and he's taking everything I say and fitting it into his specialty?

Anyway, I'm driving Louise and we're going to pick up Felecia and Louise is giving me directions, "go left," she says; "go right," she says, and we're getting into the colored neighborhood and I think, this is good. I like it that Louise is having multi racial friendships. It's good I say, and Joey squints a little and I get the feeling that he's going to take this somewhere, or that he's not going to let me pass over this and go someplace else. You know, no matter where the rain falls he's going to keep it channeled.

We pick up Felecia and head for the movies. Louise and Felecia are sitting in the back seat and I reach back and hand Louise money for tickets and candy --a new twenty folded long ways. Just after we picked up Felecia I stopped at the cash station, the drive up, and gotten ten crisp bills. I know this is crazy but it went through my mind: Louise and Felecia are in the back seat and as I reach out the window at the cash station to punch in the code, I make sure my head is in the way of Felecia's line of sight. The minute I do it I feel very small. Can you believe that I think this little kid in the back seat is going to cop my code number? So I'm telling Joey but I don't go into that part because if I do I know here we're going to be on it for the next couple of sessions and there is really other stuff that I want to get out. Stuff that I know is relevant.

Then I'm looking at this little digital clock that Joey has on the end table and it says 10:16. My sessions ends at 10:30 and he always starts summing up around twenty-five after, so I figure I've only got about nine good minutes left and I'm still feeling some tension in my neck. Then I glance over to his desk and see this other clock and it says 10:19. Well, I stopped right there. And then I guess I got a little goofy.

Digital clocks drive me nuts. He should never have two digitals in the same room. I had to get rid of the one in my office. It would flop over

another number with a little click and right away I'd be looking out the window at the time and temperature clock on IBM Building and they would never match up. Sometimes there's a five-minute difference. At home there are three digital clocks in the kitchen. The microwave never matches the range and the one on the video machine is only the same as either of them about half the time. I used to look out my office window down the river at the clock on the Wrigley Building. From my angle I could see the west and the south face. You could always count on them matching. And even if they were off a minute or two they were dial clocks so it didn't matter. Well, one day about a year ago the Wrigley Building clocks didn't match at all. They got some men working up there and day after day they were like little ants walking back and forth on this scaffolding that dangled in front of the big white clock faces. They must have worked on them for a month then one Monday I came in the office and they were lowering the hands from all four sides with a crane onto a flat bed truck.

Like I said, I got a little goofy with Joey. I stood up and I said, "Well, which is it?" I guess I was a little loud. This made him shrink back into his chair. He pulled his knees in and he started to rub the back of his neck. "Which is it? Is it three minutes earlier or is it three minutes later?" He looked a little frightened and kind of sad, just like Louise did when I told her that I couldn't take her to the movie -- that I had to pack. So I

sat down and told him that it really didn't matter and that I wasn't going to get all tightened up about him trying to trim our session by three minutes. Then he said what makes you think I'm trimming the session. I told him that everyone is trying to get a little edge and I don't begrudge them that. I don't hold that against them. And I say to myself, what the hell, I tell him about how Felecia was trying to steal my pin number and how I was onto it. Maybe this will spill over into the next few sessions. So what! What the hell!

Anyway, it's a nice day so when I finished at Joey's I took a stroll. I think it's good to slow down a little now and then. A slow walk can do you some good is what I'm saying. I browsed the shop windows. They have new clocks on the Wrigley Building and they seem to be in synch. I sat on one of those stone benches by the river and watched them for a while. I kept remembering that day and how the workmen loaded those big hands and those little hands on that truck. They tied red flags on the end of those clock hands and drove them away. I remember I watched the truck drive away all the way down Michigan Avenue until those red flags disappeared. Anyway, the clocks seem to be running just fine now. I checked them. Then I came here.

So, what do you think? Should I keep talking with Joey? Do you think it's okay that I'm talking to Joey *and* to you? Please, don't look at your watch

## The Thing You Have to Remember is This

“We’re out of diapers. You need to get some,” Joanie told him. She was in the bathroom, in her exercise singlet. She was shaving under her arms, getting ready to go. Chuck was leaning in the doorjamb. He pushed the little perfume bottles around on her glass table with his fingertip. “Do it now. We’re completely out.” she said. Chuck sprayed some mist into the air from a bottle that looked like it had scotch in it.

“That’s really unattractive,” he said. “Do you know that? You doing that. Right in front of me.” He made battle formations with the little bottles. “You steal the mystery.” He picked them up and put them back down like chess pieces. “Why do you have to get all shaved and showered before you go to work out? Why do you ladies need to get so nice looking for each other?”

“Look Chuck, just get the hell out of here will you. We have nothing more to talk about. You and I have said it all.”

He leaned on his other shoulder on the other side of the doorway. She was really getting in shape he thought. She was really looking good. “Are these contact workouts?” he said. “Do you wrestle with each other?”

She dabbed Gillette Foamy under the other arm and it hung like snow suspended under a tree branch. “When are you going Chuck? When are your movers coming?” She banged her razor sharply on the side of the sink bowl. “How about today!”

“In good time,” he said. He went into his nose, did a brief search and when he was sure she was looking away dragged his finger on the underside of the little table. “When I’m ready,” he said as he walked away. She smacked the razor again three times on the edge of the sink. “In good time,” he said more loudly. He gave the bedroom door a little extra muscle when he left.

Chuck sat in the TV room and poked through the channels with the clicker to find the game. It was still early. On the TV, some guy in a suit was talking to an interviewer about relationships. The guy had a pointed beard. Chuck thought he looked like a pretty smart guy. He said all that he had to say in very soft tones, very soothing, looking back and forth between the interviewer and the camera. “The thing you have to remember is this,” he said. “Everything that people do they do because they are trying to solve a problem. When you know that, it all becomes a lot easier.” The smart guy smiled for a long time and the interviewer smiled a lot too as he pumped his hand. After that there were a couple of brokerage commercials about how you should be making better investments and then pretty soon they were introducing the Bulls.

Joanie came down the stairs and passed through the kitchen behind him and headed for the garage. “Diapers,” she shouted without stopping. Don’t forget. Do this one thing right.” She slammed the door.

“She can shit on the floor for all I care,” Chuck shouted at Joanie loud enough so that she still might hear.

Shit on the floor. That’s what she did last week. Right on the carpet. Chuck stepped in it and had to clean it of his sneakers. He held them under the faucet in the basement where he used to wash out his

paintbrushes. It took toilet paper and a toothpick to get the mess out of the grooves, all the while he was flinching away from the smell the same way he did when he smelled turpentine.

Joanie has a restored MGB. It runs very smoothly and handles well, only there a hole in the muffler that makes it roar like a snowblower. Chuck heard the garage door open and then close. The whole neighborhood could hear Joanie pulling away. The dog had followed Chuck into the TV room. She started to circle the floor in front of him, sniffing up a storm. “No,” he said. “No, don’t! Outside, girl!” The dog ran away from him, out of the room, its toenail skidding on the tiles in the kitchen. Chuck watched a couple minutes of the game but he couldn’t stay with it. He got up, took the stairs two at a time and went into Joanie’s room and into her closet. He fumbled through the panties drawer and pulled out a pair of silk baby blues. He found a scissors and with two quick snips cut a diamond out of the rear end. Back downstairs, he cornered the dog and fished her tail through the hole and fastened her up with a couple of safety pins and quickly got back in front of the TV. The dog walked to her bowl for a drink of water. Chuck watched her butt sway in the blue panties, her tail wagging in quick little strokes as she lapped the water.

At halftime he went to the Seven-Eleven. He picked up a package of plastic diapers and decided to add a six-pack of Budweiser. A handsome display of Ho-Ho’s stood beside the check out counter and figured he was deserving an additional treat. At the register the counter girl was busy with the lottery, punching out some numbers for a very large black woman who was wearing construction clothes. She had arms like a lineman and a yellow helmet that said “Top Cat.” A layer of concrete dust covered her – neck, arms, hands and canvas overalls. Chuck dropped the diapers on the counter and it made a whoosh loud enough that the counter kid looked at him and canted her head like a puzzled

dog and then went back to punching up the Pot O' Gold. The clerk was about sixteen. She had a nose ring and an adolescent boy's body. On her tee shirt, written in large red letters it said, *Speak English!!!* There were a half a dozen translations underneath – in Spanish, Italian, probably Korean and a couple of squiggly languages he couldn't name. She continued drumming the numbers for the Top Cat who read from pencil notes on a torn paper bag. Chuck banged the six-pack down on the counter and crinkled the cellophane on the Ho-Ho' to make some additional noise but neither of the women looked up at him. "Is this a food store or is it a casino," he said and starred up into the ductwork on the ceiling. The big woman turned to Chuck, "Brother," she said, "Honey man," her voice was soft and melodic, "Now there's no reason to believe your business is any bigger than mine." The counter girl looked at Chuck, up and down. She looked at his diapers, his beer and his Ho-Ho's and she went back to tapping the numbers that the Top Cat's sweet voice made sound like scripture or a Sunday hymn.

Back in the car he rolled down the window for a cigarette. He watched the people on foot cross in front of him at the stoplights. He watched people coming in cars coming the other direction – two men, two women, a man alone, a car with a back seat full of laughing kids. He knocked the ash off his cigarette with his little finger and decided to pay a call on Mickey and Theresa. Mickey would be watching the game. He would be good company.

Chuck went up the walk with the six-pack swinging beside him. Theresa opened the door and she told him that Mickey was in the living room. She took the sixer from Chuck and pointed with her thumb. Mickey is on the couch watching the Bulls and reaches back over his head to shake Chuck's hand without turning around. In a few minutes Theresa comes back with a tray of snacks and three pilsner glasses, each frosty from the

freezer and each poured with a perfect head of foam. Theresa is looking good. She's still pretty. She takes care with her make up. She's grown a little tummy, but there's something that's homey and comfortable about that Chuck thinks. She's wearing one of those bulky sweaters. There's a picture of Rudolph the reindeer winking and his nose is a big red ball of cotton. Theresa serves the boys their beer and sits close to Mickey on the couch. She bumps Mickey's shoulder every time she takes a sip of her beer. They watch the game. They talk about the Bulls and they talk about the Knicks. Theresa holds her own with the two of them in knowing the players and the strategy of the game. At the commercial she turns to Chuck and says, "I heard about your situation." She looks into Chuck's eyes and he can feel some real concern for him. "I always thought that Joanie never really knew what she had."

Pretty soon the Bulls put the game out of reach and Theresa picks up the empty bowls of dip and chips and heads for the kitchen. She disappears. Chuck can hear her feet walking back and forth on the floor upstairs. Her steps sound friendly, making little clicks and creaks. She's back at the work of the household.

Mickey runs the stations with the clicker and then turns away from the TV. He squares his shoulders to Chuck. "So, how ya' doin', Buddy?"

Chuck said, "I'm okay. I really am. I try to think about what's next. What's around the corner?"

"That's the boy," Mickey said.

"How 'ya doin' for...you know." and Mickey gets that innocent and dopey look and lets his head swing loose on his shoulders the way he might if he were dancing.

Chuck shook his head to say no. "What I really wonder is why. I mean we were as good as you two. Maybe better. Then pretty soon some things stop happening and then some other things start happening." Mickey stretched his hands behind his head. Mickey was a good listener. Mickey liked to be thought of as a good listener. "We start to battle," Chuck said. "She ups her time at the gym. She sleeps on the couch in the attic. The dog can't control its business and needs diapers. It all falls in. One thing after another. I'll kill the goddam dog. I don't care."

Mickey waited and then he waited some more. He left a lot of room for Chuck to get it out. Then he leaned forward and put his fingertips together and said, "The thing you have to remember is this. Everything that people do they do because they are trying to solve a problem. When you know that, it all becomes a lot easier. Think about that. It makes things better. That's what I always try to do," Mickey said and nodded in his own agreement that there was indeed wisdom in his words. He patted Chuck on the knee.

When Chuck got home the MG was parked in the driveway. He walked into the kitchen and dropped the package of diapers next to the sink. Joanie was on him in a second. "You dumb bastard," she said. "You lazy prick." She held the blue silk panties by the dry end and she slapped the heavy part across his chest. "Just get the hell out!" she said. "Just go!!!" She double-timed it up the stairs; her athletic shoes squeaking like a couple of finches.

A month later, Chuck was out and had moved into a new place. He managed to get a little of the furniture that Joanie didn't want. He loaded

his clothes into his car, hanging them off a rod stretched across the back seat. It made him feel like some kid going off to college. One Saturday, he took a package, a big padded envelope, from out of his mailbox. Inside was tied a bundle of letters and catalogues and offers for credit cards and telephone deals. All the addresses, typed or hand written, or bills where his name and address were positioned behind a plastic window --- all of them, Joanie had X'd out with a thick black marker. One other letter was addressed to her. It was from Robbie, the Foreign Car Doctor. On the outside of Robbie's envelope Joanie had written, "PAY THIS!" with an exclamation point. It was a bill for \$270 to remove what Robbie described as "a baby blue rag from the exhaust system." Chuck had gotten it wadded four feet up the exhaust pipe, pushing it tight with a broom handle. He remembered that when he did it he felt like he one of those old Civil War soldiers loading an old cannon. Robbie's price seemed a little steep. Chuck suspected that Joanie was nicking him for a new muffler as a part of the deal.