

Anatomy of a Flashback by Peter Selgin

"We are all like Scheherazade's husband," E.M. Forster reminds us, "in that we all like to know what happens next." What *happens next* in a story is called a *scene*. The word comes from the Latin "scena," or stage, by way of the Greek word for a temporary tent or shelter forming the background for a dramatic performance. Without scenes to house them, our stories remain at best synoptic, at worst naked abstractions. They are left out in the cold.

Strung like beads along a thread of causation, scenes add up to plot. There are two methods of relating scenes, summary being the narrative method, scene the dramatic one. Summary is expedient, scene elaborate; summary tells, scene shows. Gatsby flinging his silk shirts "in many colored disarray" across his bed to impress Daisy, that's a scene. Rose of Sharon breastfeeding the dying man at the close of *The Grapes of Wrath*—that's a scene. What we remember most in great stories are the scenes. They are what Scheherazade spins under threat of death.

Narrative's suitcases, scenes hold not only action and dialogue—the prime elements of dramatic writing—but summary, description, background, stream of conscience—even other scenes, or flashbacks. Dislodged from scene, even our most "vivid" descriptions go begging, while our characters wander the stage like actors in search of a play. Like gangrenous limbs, our narratives go cold, shrivel, and die. When narrative detaches itself in this way from scene the result is called a *digression*: a passage that snatches us so irrevocably out of a moment that, like lovers interrupted mid-coitus, we never return to it intact.

A flashback is a digression that works. And very often they don't; they break the backs of the scenes they're meant to ride on. If after four pages chronicling the origins of the gin blossoms on Aunt Stonemaiden's nose, we've entirely forgotten her storming into the parlor with a meat cleaver to castrate her dissolute nephew, something has gone wrong. Like the caboose on a train, the flashback has come uncoupled. It is no longer part of the scene, but a distraction from it.

Yet when handled expertly even long flashbacks holding not just one but multiple scenes can work, and not just well, but superbly. Why and how do they work? What keeps them from being digressive?

To find out, let's tour through one gorgeous flashback, with how-to steps along the way. Step one being:

Have a strong scene to depart from.

In his brilliant early novel, *The Centaur*, John Updike interrupts a tense, carefully built-up scene in which Peter, his adolescent narrator-protagonist, is being driven to school on an icy winter morning by his self-deprecatory father (who teaches history there) to take readers on a side-trip to New York. The detour burns up 750 words (or roughly three pages), and bores through no fewer than six distinct layers of time.

Such long, complicated flashbacks are often called “portmanteau,” after those Victorian suitcases of leather or cloth that carried so much. But before we get to the flashback, let’s dip into the main scene itself, in which, despite their tardiness, Peter’s father picks up a hitchhiker. Space prevents my quoting Updike whole. Here’s my truncation:

“I was living with a guy up in Albany,” the hitchhiker said reluctantly.

. . . “A friend?” [my father] asked.

“Yeah. Kinda.”

“What happened? He pull the old double-cross?”

In his delight the hitchhiker lurched forward behind me. “That’s right, buddy,” he told my father. “That’s just what the fucking sucker did. Sorry, boy.”

On behalf of his son dad accepts the apology, adding that Peter “hears more horrible stuff in a day than I have in a lifetime.” We are still in the main or “primary” scene. Updike has gone to great pains to construct a tense situation in which the consequences of his characters’ tardiness are well established. With the reader’s involvement thus secure, Updike has not only bought himself some narrative “slack,” he’s obliged to milk things a bit. Hence the hitchhiker, a “benevolent digression”—benevolent for the reader, but not to poor Peter:

. . . I vividly resented that [my father] should even speak of me to this man, that he should dip the shadow of my personality into this reservoir of slime. That my existence at one extremity should be tangent to Vermeer [Peter is smitten with this artist] and at the other to the hitchhiker seemed an unendurable strain.

Will the hitchhiker turn out to be truly evil? Will Peter and his father get to school on time? If not, will Peter be suspended? Will his father get fired? All

this Updike gives us to chew on. As if our teeth aren't busy enough, he tosses us a flashback. But unlike dogs, readers are fussy: they won't chase any bone. Our flashbacks should have some meat on them, and more: they should be motivated.

2. Make sure flashbacks are motivated.

Since long before Proust bit into that tea-soaked cookie, authors have used mnemonics—sensory phenomenon that assist or help to assist memory—to motivate flashbacks. Rather than write (in essence), “For no good reason at all, Jack remembered the time when. . .” they use material within the primary scene as kindling to fuel their flashbacks. Updike being Updike, he does so brilliantly:

. . . But relief was approaching. . . We passed a trailer truck laboring toward the crest so slowly its peeling paint seemed to have weathered in transit. Well back from the road, Rudy Essick's great brown mansion sluggishly climbed through the downslipping trees.

Here comes the flashback. Note how deftly Updike slips into it by means of not one but two mnemonics, first a sign, then a smell. The best flashbacks are always motivated by sensory stimulus.

Coughdrop Hill took its name from its owner, whose cough drops (“SICK? Suck an ESSICK!”) were congealed by the million in an Alton factory that flavored whole blocks of the city with the smell of menthol. They sold, in their little tangerine-colored boxes, throughout the East; the one time in my life I had been to Manhattan, I had been astonished to find, right in the throat of Paradise, on a counter in Grand Central Station, a homely ruddy row of them.

From a strip of wintry Pennsylvania road we're transported to Grand Central Terminal, and to what I'll call “Level II” of Updike's scene, “Level I” being the primary ride to school scene in which the flashback is embedded. Note the sly insertion of that “had been,” the past perfect tense, which tells us, lest there be any confusion, that we've dipped into another layer of time.

When writing in past tense, to obviate a flashback, dip into the past perfect.

Once having established the temporal shift, you can drop the perfect tense—as Updike does promptly. From here the flashback descends, elevator-like, through layers of scene. The same paragraph continues:

In disbelief I bought a box. Sure enough, on the back, beneath an imposing

miniature portrait of the factory, the fine print stated MADE IN ALTON, PA. And the box, opened, released the chill, ectoplasmic smell of Brubaker Street. The two cities of my life, the imaginary and the actual, were superimposed . . . a hollow mile beneath the ceiling that one an aqua sky displayed the constellations with sallow electric stars . . .

The elevator has dropped to Level III, to a scene in which father waits as son buys cough drops in Grand Central Station. A minor scene, true, but a scene, leading us deeper into the flashback. Same paragraph.

Up to this moment my father had failed me. Throughout our trip, an overnight visit to his sister, he had been frightened and frustrated. He city was bigger than the kind he understood. The money in his pocket dwindled without our buying anything.

This brings us to Level IV, wherein the New York trip is first broadly summarized. From there the focus tightens on Peter's devoutly wished-for encounter with his two favorite paintings by Vermeer.

. . . That these paintings, which I had worshipped in reproduction, had a simple physical existence seemed a profound mystery to me: to come within touching distance of their surfaces, to see with my eyes the truth of their color, the tracery of the cracks whereby time had inserted itself like a mystery within a mystery, would have been for me to enter a Real Presence so ultimate I would not have been surprised to die in the encounter.

Arguably we've descended to Level V, Updike having sketched a conjectural scene in which boy confronts Dutch Master. On this illusion the next short, blunt sentence comes down like a sledgehammer:

My father's blundering blocked it.

If the rules of Fiction 101 say, "never put a flashback in a flashback," Updike's hammer does a good job of smashing that, too. Having paid this hypothetical visit to Vermeer's masterpieces, we're now reeled back to the hotel room where Peter's been stuck the whole time.

We never entered the museums; I never saw the paintings. Instead I saw the inside of my father's sister's hotel room [Level VI]. . . Aunt Alma sipped a yellow drink and dribbled the smoke of Kools from her very thin red lips. She had white, white skin and her eyes were absolutely transparent with intelligence.

Though they belong to a flashback, the details here are as rich as can be;

nothing is spared.

Well, almost nothing.

They talked all evening of pranks and crises in a vanished Passaic parsonage whose very mention made me sick and giddy, as if I were suspended over a canyon of time . . .

Summarize dialogue.

Within a flashback, it's best to avoid *direct* dialogue in favor of summarized or *indirect* dialogue. Dialogue broken into paragraphs undermines not only a flashback's integrity but its humility, suggesting that the flashback has staged a palace coup and usurped the primary scene.

. . . During the day, Aunt Alma, here as an out-of-town children's clothes buyer, left us to ourselves. The strangers my father stopped on the street resisted entanglement in his earnest, circular questioning.

Here (still in the same paragraph) Updike switches gears again, backtracking to the day that has led to this evening in the hotel. The elevator goes express, ascending up through generalities—

Their rudeness and his ignorance humiliated me, and my irritation had been building toward a tantrum that the cough drop dissolved.

—back to the scene in Grand Central Terminal. Did your ears pop? No wonder, since we're suddenly back on Level II!

I forgave him. In a temple of pale brown marble I forgave him and wanted to thank him for conceiving me to be born in a county that could insert its candy into the throat of Paradise. . .and even now, two years later, whenever in our daily journey we went up or down Coughdrop Hill, there was for me an undercurrent of New York and the constellations that seemed to let us soar, free together of the local earth.

Now, with a new paragraph of but two sentences, the flashback literally screeches to a halt, landing us back on Level I:

Instead of breaking, my father by some mistake plunged past the Olinger turnoff. I cried, "Hey!"

From here the primary scene takes over again and continues for nine more pages to its resolution. Updike knows he has exhausted the good faith (read:

tension) accrued within the primary scene; he has milked it to the limit, and possibly beyond. Does he get away with it? I say yes, but then I've read the scene in its entirety and in its proper context; you haven't. That Updike writes some of the best prose in any language doesn't hurt, either.

Keep flashbacks to one paragraph.

Yet while in flashback even Mr. Updike doesn't risk breaking into full-blown dramatic scene. We remain listeners, not spectators. Nor does he allow himself more than a single paragraph, however long.

Which brings me to my final breakable rule, one that embraces nearly all I've said. *Within flashback, summarize, don't dramatize.* Once transported via flashback into a new scene containing action and dialogue, the reader typically either forgets the primary scene or resents the "bait and switch." When flashbacks take over, it sometimes indicates that our primary scene is in fact a *framing device*, a vessel into which we've poured the story we *really* wanted to tell. Such framing devices tend to be both awkward and unnecessary, suggesting two remedies: a) get rid of the frame, or b) lose the painting and make the frame the subject.

Avoid flashbacks.

Not to discourage, I've saved this advice for last. But the burden of our narratives—and on Scheherazade's head — is one of *forward movement*. By all means use flashbacks, but for good reason, not because you want to use them, but because your story demands them. Ask: does the flashback deepen our understanding of a character, or a relationship? Does it provide needed background? In the end, it comes down to what a story needs.

And what will keep King Schariar's sword off our necks.

This article originally appeared in *The Writer* magazine. This information, and much more, can also be found in Peter Selgin's book [By Cunning and Craft](#).

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