

CHAPTER FOUR

The Shapely Story

what possible definition can we come up with that includes stories we love by Anton Chekhov, Donald Barthelme, Alice Munro, Jorge Luis Borges, Henry James, Grace Paley, and others?

Here are just a few of the definitions you can find:

"A short piece of prose fiction having few characters and aiming at unity of effect." —*The American Heritage Dictionary*

"A shaft driven straight into the heart of human experience." —Edith Wharton

"An account of a character struggling to reach a goal." —Steven Schoen

"What you see when you look out the window." —Mavis Gallant

"A dramatic event that involves a person because he is a person, and a particular person—that is, because he shares in the general human condition and in some specific human situation." —Flannery O'Connor

Many people base their definition of a story on Aristotle's admonition that it must have a beginning, middle, and end. This is generally assumed to mean that a story follows the three-part shape of conflict, crisis, and resolution. (More on this shortly.)

Other definitions center on Edgar Allan Poe's theory that a story must achieve "a certain unique or single effect" and be readable in one sitting, "a half hour to one or two hours in its perusal." This view of the short story is perhaps best summed up by Brander Matthews in his introduction to *The Short Story*, a 1907 anthology of short fiction:

This is definite and precise beyond all misunderstanding, the short story must do one thing only, and it must do this completely and perfectly; it must not loiter or digress; it must have unity of action, unity of temper, unity of tone, unity of color, unity of effect; and it must vigilantly exclude everything that might interfere with its singleness of intention.

Former *Esquire* fiction editor Rust Hills says that "a short story tells of something that happened to someone" but modifies it to say that as a result of that "something" the character is significantly changed, or "moved," to use Hills's term. Indeed, this notion that a change must occur in a character is commonly viewed as "required" by many teachers and students of writing alike.

Before you throw up your hands in frustration, just wait: help is on the way. There is no better commentary on this issue than Francine Prose's essay, "What Makes a Short Story?" In this piece, Prose debunks most of

"But is it a story?" is one of the main questions you hear in student creative writing workshops. Very frequently, it isn't—yet. Much of what we first see in early short story drafts from beginning writers are rough character sketches, theories about life, abstract ideas, anecdotes, or morality tales that fail to deliver the emotional satisfaction we expect from a completely rendered piece of short fiction.

So what is a short story? It's not as easy a question to answer as you might think. Indeed, a great deal of debate has taken place on what makes a story a story, and some very learned and intelligent people disagree—or have agreed to disagree—on a number of key points.

In this chapter we will focus on the shape of fiction, specifically the short story. First we'll try to define what makes a short story, and discuss some of the key narrative conventions that have accrued over the years (some of which you may have picked up from other sources). Finally, we'll have a chance to practice some of the concepts we have talked about in exercises specifically designed to help you get started on writing short fiction.

For this chapter, it is best to do one of the readings ahead of time: Francine Prose's "What Makes a Short Story?" (pp. 167–78). It will help you better understand the concepts introduced in this chapter.

Some Basic Definitions

Perhaps nothing is as daunting as reading any of the very fine books on writing and then trying to reconcile exactly what a short story is. After all,

the common platitudes regarding the short story. "The real problem is that the most obvious answer is the most correct," she writes. "We know what a short story is: a work of fiction of a certain length, a length with apparently no minimum."

As Joyce Carol Oates agrees in her introduction to *The Oxford Book of American Short Stories*:

Formal definitions of the short story are commonplace, yet there is none quite democratic enough to accommodate an art that includes so much variety and an art that so readily lends itself to experimentation and idiosyncratic voices. Perhaps length alone should be the sole criterion? Whenever critics try to impose other, more subjective strictures on the genre (as on any genre) too much work is excluded.

Unlike many theorists, neither Prose nor Oates dictates that to be a "real story" a piece must contain easily identifiable components, or fulfill any given form. For Prose, there is one basic requirement other than that of length (Prose writes that some literary critics believe Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" stretches the length of a short story as far as it can go without being considered a novella): a short story cannot be summarized; it contains some irreducible germ at its heart that defies expression. In this, she is echoing the words of Flannery O'Connor and Goethe, as we discussed earlier: that true literature "resists paraphrase" and "finds the general in the particular."

Oates adds another requirement: that "no matter its mysteries or experiential properties, it achieves closure—meaning that, when it ends, the attentive reader understands why." In other words (my words), a story that is a real story delivers a unit of satisfaction to the reader that cannot be delivered by merely summarizing the events of the story. In some cases, this sense of closure might be very subtle. Joyce Carol Oates's own "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" (pp. 72–86) often frustrates readers because it seems to end before the end, yet a careful reading of the work shows that it has indeed reached closure—and very powerful closure indeed.

And then we have Henry James. Although at one point, Henry James seemed to be quite certain that there were rules governing what a story was and wasn't (among other things, he wrote that a short story "can't be a 'story' in the vulgar sense of the word. It must be a picture; it must illustrate something . . ."), in his famous essay, "The Art of Fiction," James says that the "good health" of an art demands that it be "perfectly free." He was talking about novel writing (rebutting an essay that tried to lay out all

the rules a novel must supposedly obey to be a novel), but we can extend what he says to the short story as well. James goes on to write:

[Art] lives upon exercise, and the very meaning of exercise is freedom. The only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel without incurring the accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be interesting. That general responsibility rests upon it, but it is the only one I can think of.

Let's continue building our definition of what a short story is by borrowing this nugget of wisdom as well: the short story has the obligation to be interesting.

So what do we have as our final, composite definition of a short story? A short work of prose, with no minimum number of words and a maximum length of, say, 20,000 words (that should be generous enough). And the only three requirements we will put on it ahead of time are that it be interesting, resist paraphrase, and end up providing some unit of satisfaction, or sense of completeness, to the reader.

The Conflict–Crisis–Resolution Model

One of the first things we must address in a section on story is the conflict–crisis–resolution model. It is so predominant that many young writers—as well as a good number of experienced teachers—feel that a story is not a real story unless it fits into this model.

According to this definition of a short story, there is always an "arc" to a narrative that looks like the diagram below:



Called the Freitrag triangle after the nineteenth-century literary critic who first formulated this theory, the idea is that every story has conflict that gradually intensifies and culminates in a crisis, after which there is a resolution.

We can be even more specific and label no less than five different stages of a short story, according to Freitrag: the beginning is called the *exposition*, which provides background on the characters, the setting, the situation, etc.; the next stage is called the *rising action*, during which the character(s) face increasingly intensive conflict; then the *climax*, or culmination of the conflict; after that the *falling action*, or denouement, during which the tension is palpably eased; and, finally, the *resolution*, or ending.

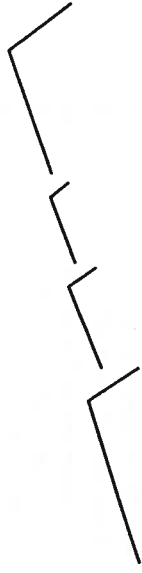
You can find this diagram, or one like it, in just about every book on fic-

tion. (If you paid attention in high school, you might even remember categorizing the three kinds of conflict that are possible: man against man, man against nature, man against himself.) But while this concept might be useful when dissecting a certain type of story, it is certainly not a way of reading *all* stories. A good number of very fine stories—including many included in this book—simply do not fit into the conflict-crisis-resolution model. Moreover, even though the conflict-crisis-resolution model might fit the majority of stories we read, I am hard-pressed to use it as an example of how to *write* them.

So this is the question: While theories like this probably cover the narrative bases in a neat, abstracted way, in what way do they help us write? How do we take an abstract model like this and make it useful for our purpose, creating art?

Let's first backtrack and look at an example of a story that *does* fit fairly well into the crisis-conflict-resolution model: John Cheever's "The Swimmer" (pp. 330–40). You'll notice that the conflict in this story would probably better be described as a series of "complications" (another word used in conjunction with the Freitrag triangle), but in all other respects it conforms nicely to our needs.

We start with the *exposition*: Neddy Merrill, who "seemed to have the especial slenderness of youth," is at the Westerhazys' pool, at a Sunday afternoon party. This is the setting of the scene, the introduction of the character and his particular situation. We learn a bit about the Westerhazys and the kind of WASPY social community Neddy belongs to. Then Neddy has a brilliant idea: he is going to swim home! His idea is to swim his way home through the "Lucinda River," as he calls the network of backyard pools in his affluent suburb (after his wife). The *rising action* begins as he sets out across the various backyards. One of the first complications is manifested in the shape of a storm; Neddy must take shelter until it passes. After that, the conflicts (complications) intensify. Difficulties begin to befall Neddy; he faces, among other obstacles, a drained pool and a busy highway. ("Had you gone for a Sunday afternoon ride that day you might have seen him, close to naked, standing on the shoulders of Route 424, waiting for a chance to cross.") Then he swims through the public pool—an unpleasant experience—and indeed the whole adventure is becoming increasingly distasteful to him (the *rising action* continues to rise). People begin treating him rudely. The tension increases until he meets his *crisis*: he is rejected by an ex-mistress, who treats him scornfully at a time when he finds his physical strength has oddly dissipated. Finally, reaching home, the *falling action*: he finds his own house boarded up and abandoned, and the *resolution*: he is left alone, aged and bereft.



I've oversimplified (and, by the way, proven that you can't tell a story by summarizing the plot), but you can see how this fits roughly into the Freitrag model. A good number of stories can be analyzed thus, and although none follows the formula exactly, you can make the case that this is the form most short stories take.

But now let's look at another famous story included in this book: "The Things They Carried" (pp. 131–46).

There is no exposition: the story starts abruptly with a description of what Lieutenant Jimmy Cross, an officer in Vietnam commanding a platoon, carried (love letters). This is rapidly followed by lists of what the other soldiers in the platoon carried (pocket knives, heat tabs, lighters, matches, C rations, water). We hear about the central event of the story halfway through the second paragraph: one of the men, Lavender, is shot. This would arguably be considered the climax in a traditional story. But rather than building up to it, we are told about it upfront, quite casually. The narrative then circles around and around, revisiting the shooting incident in a number of ways, all the while being periodically interrupted by the lists of the things the men carried, which gradually change from real, physical things to more abstract things, such as fear and anguish and guilt. We're put into the mind of characters other than Jimmy Cross (which complicates the story). Finally, the story ends with Jimmy Cross burning his love letters and determining to repudiate love and human emotion in favor of what he considers the more worthy goal of taking care of his men.

To try to chart this story along the conflict-crisis-resolution model is silly—and I would even venture to say that this story couldn't have been written if O'Brien had been thinking in such simplistic terms.

Linear vs. Modular Stories

Madison Smartt Bell, in his exemplary work, *Narrative Design*, makes a distinction between linear and modular story structures. In his view, "linear" stories follow the conflict-crisis-resolution model of the Freitrag triangle; "modular" stories are composed as a mosaic, a design made up of component parts:

If linear design can be understood as somehow subtractive, a process of removing the less essential material so as to reveal the movement of narrative

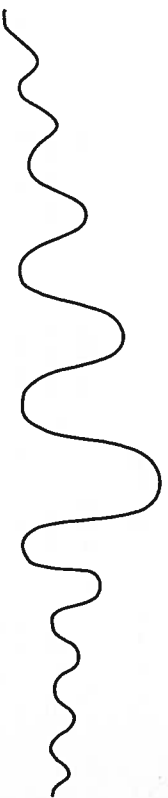
vectors more clearly and cleanly, then modular design is additive. The writer adds and arranges more and more modular units which may be attractive in themselves for all sorts of different reasons, but which also must serve the purpose of clarifying the overall design of the text as a whole. . . .

What modular design can do is liberate the writer from linear logic, those chains of cause and effect, strings of dominoes always falling forward.

One of the most famous examples of modular design is the story "In the Heart of the Heart of the Country" by William Gass. Although you might be able to piece together a sort of narrative (English professor has affair with student that ends, leaving him heartbroken) that's hardly what the story is *about*. (If it were, why include all the other matter in there? There is a lot of geography in there, a lot of details about the town, about the weather, the neighbors, and so on.) The material is modular: none of it depends for causality on anything else. You could conceivably move the different modules around, although there are doubtless some very specific reasons that the author arranged them precisely as he did.

Even with so-called linear stories, there are a number of reasons why thinking conflict-crisis-resolution might not be helpful. First of all is the language used: "conflict" and "rising action" bring to mind fistfights and guns and rather melodramatic events. Yet think of stories like Grace Paley's "Mother" (p. 126) or Anton Chekhov's "The Lady with the Little Dog" (pp. 284-98); to use the word "conflict" to describe how they capture and hold our attention seems incongruous. These characters desire things, *yearn* for things; they do not fight or otherwise clash in any obvious or simplistic way.

Second of all, even stories that follow this model seldom have a steady rising action that never falters. Instead, there are ebbs and flows in the story: pockets of tension built up and tension released, all of which contribute to the story's culmination. Indeed, I prefer to use a diagram I call the "earthquake model" to indicate how tension can build, subside, then build again, before arriving at the pivotal moment, or climax.



Third, and finally, abstract theory is simply not where stories come from. They come from some dark, secretive place, and from material that

doesn't raise its head and jump through hoops when bidden. Knowing the so-called rules about conflict, crisis, and resolution doesn't help one *write* a good story. It may even impede you, if you feel you have to write by some formula.

Still, knowing about the conflict-crisis-resolution model can be very helpful *after* a story has been written. If the story does seem to want to fit into this general form (and most stories written today do fall within this domain), knowing the general shape of stories of this kind can be very useful in editing it.

As Madison Smartt Bell concludes:

It's easy to get silly with these pictures [the Freytag triangle]. And indeed, most writers can get by very handily without them (or at any rate, without actually chalking them on the board) during the process of writing. The diagrams are no more than crude representations of the shape which the writer's intuition should be giving to the material as the process of composition goes forward. The Freytag triangle is a left brain superimposition over what is for the most part a right brain activity. But if intuition fails or goes astray, the triangle and its variants can be quite useful as diagnostic tools, perhaps even as problem-solving devices.

This is probably the most useful way to think of the Freytag triangle: not as a model to follow, but as a way of going back into a story and seeing how it measures up, structurally, to this conventional view of short fiction. Note my use of "conventional": this works for stories that want to be conventional conflict-crisis-resolution stories, but never, under any circumstances, should it be applied to *all* stories. If you get nothing else out of this chapter, please take this with you: you do not have to write to this conventional model.

To Epiphany or Not to Epiphany?

About that "unit of satisfaction" we talked about in the last section. How are we to achieve it?

Another common presumption about short stories, especially recently, is that a piece is not *really* a short story unless it culminates in a revelation, or "epiphany," as James Joyce described it. The idea is that a character is brought (or forced into) a state of enlightenment, experiencing a moment when he or she realizes something of great importance to his or her life. This is what Aristotle called "recognition" (and which, along with "reversal" and "suffering," made up what he considered the three parts of plot). We can see the epiphany model at work in many stories. Two famous

ones are "Araby" by James Joyce and "A & P" by John Updike. They have very similar plots: a young boy views an (unattainable) object of beauty and wishes to make a gesture, a gift, to her. The effort fails, in both stories, leaving the Joyce hero to lament, "Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger," and the Updike protagonist to conclude, "my stomach kind of fell as I felt how hard the world was going to be to me hereafter." Both are epiphanies, or moments of insight, that the characters achieve as a result of the specific events that transpire in the story. And many, many beautiful stories have been written in which an epiphany is prevalent—not the least of which is "The Things They Carried," which we just analyzed. But in his excellent essay, "Against Epiphanies," Charles Baxter points out that perhaps epiphanies are being overused:

Suddenly I realized . . .

The language of literary epiphanies naturally has something in common with the rhetoric of religious revelation. The veil of appearances is pulled aside and an inner truth is revealed. A moment of radiant vision brings forth the sensation, if not the content, of meaning.

An epiphany, in a traditional religious context, was the showing forth of the divinity of the Christ child. It was, quite literally, an awful moment. Awe governed it. To adapt this solemn moment for literary purposes, as James Joyce wished to do, was a Promethean gesture: It was an attempt to steal the fires of religion and place them, still burning, in literature.

But as Baxter points out, "the loss of innocence, and the arrival of knowingness can become an addiction":

A mode that began with moves of elegant feeling and energy, particularly in stories that have to deal with worlds within worlds of urban or small town or even familial hypocrisy, can get stale. Worse than stale: rotten. The mass production of insight, in fiction or elsewhere, is a dubious phenomenon. But because it is a private experience, it can't be debated or contested. Suddenly, it seems, everyone is having insights. Possibly we have entered the Age of Insight.

Everywhere there is a glut of epiphanies. Radiance rules. But some of the insights have seemed disturbingly untrustworthy. There is a smell about them of recently molded plastic. At the level of discursive rhetoric, it is a bit like the current craze for angels. Perhaps these are not true insights at all. What then?

As Baxter observes, we can name many fine stories that possess literary epiphanies. But to view that as the *only* way to bring a story to fruition is to paint yourself into a very tight creative corner indeed.

The novelist Jim Shepard, also a teacher, noticed the same phenomenon as Baxter in his students' work:

More and more I've been seeing stories in which the protagonists are whooshed along the little conveyor belts of their narratives to that defining moment of insight or clarification that will allow them to see with new eyes the essential emotional or spiritual furniture of their lives. The implication is nearly always that this moment of insight removes one of the last major obstacles on the road to personal fulfillment . . .

Now, as I understand it, a short story, by definition, does have a responsibility, in its closing gestures, to enlarge *our* understanding, but it seems to be increasingly difficult for writers to resist allowing their hapless *protagonist* a new understanding as well—an understanding that will set him or her on the path to a more actualized life.

[from "I Know Myself Real Well. That's the Problem"]

In my own classroom, people seem to feel dissatisfied if this insight has not been provided for the character. They want revelation, they want the possibility of redemption, they want to *fix* things for the characters involved. All wonderful generous bounty to bestow on characters, but perhaps our job isn't to rescue all the characters that come under our care (our own as well as others'). Perhaps our job is simply to *render* what their predicament is, rather than solving their problems for them?

Is Change Necessary? (The Debate Continues)

The notion that *reversal* (as Aristotle called it), or change, is a requirement of a piece of fiction is also a prevalent one. That is, a character must not only realize some truth that had previously been obscure to him or her, he/she must act upon it. The character must grow or somehow be altered in some significant way for it to be considered a "real" story.

Yet in life, we are given opportunities for change all the time, and we fail to make those changes, either out of stupidity, or laziness, or even ignorance—we didn't even know the possibility for change was, well, a possibility.

The novelist John L'Heureux has a way of describing a certain type of story—he doesn't believe that all stories must follow this model—which deals with this question of to-change-or-not-to-change: "Capture a moment after which nothing can ever be the same again," he advises. This is a wonderfully flexible definition of a short story—again, for certain types of stories—because it drives home the fact that change is not necessary. Change can be offered to a character—and declined. The "crisis" of a piece

can be of negative, rather than positive, action: something not done, a sin not committed, an act of grace not performed. But a moment of significance has passed, and things cannot be the same again.

In "Daughters of the Late Colonel" by Katherine Mansfield, the two adult women, mourning the death of their father, refuse to grow up; they have a chance to re-examine their lives, and perhaps determine to live them differently, but in the end are unable to break through the years of habit and repression that have smothered them for so long:

She turned away from the Buddha with one of her vague gestures. She went over to where Josephine was standing. She wanted to say something to Josephine, something frightfully important, about—the future and what . . .

"Don't you think perhaps—" she began.

But Josephine interrupted her. "I was wondering if now—" she murmured. They stopped; they waited for each other.

"Go on, Con," said Josephine.

"No, no, Jug, after you," said Constantia.

"No, say what you were going to say. You began," said Josephine.

"I'd . . . I'd rather hear what you were going to say first," said Constantia.

"Don't be absurd, Con."

"Really, Jug."

"Connie!"

"Oh, Jug!"

A pause. Then Constantia said faintly, "I can't say what I was going to say, Jug, because I've forgotten what it was. . . . that I was going to say."

Josephine was silent for a moment. She stared at a big cloud where the sun had been. Then she replied shortly, "I've forgotten too."

On Not Becoming Slaves to Theory

"I feel that discussing story-writing in terms of plot, character, and theme is like trying to describe the expression on a face by saying where the eyes, nose, and mouth are," Flannery O'Connor wrote in her celebrated essay "Writing Short Stories." She continues:

You want to know how you can actually write a good story, and further, how you can tell when you've done it; and so you want to know what the form of a short story is, as if the form were something that existed outside of each story and could be applied or imposed on the material. Of course, the more you write, the more you will realize that the form is organic; that it is something that grows out of the material, that the form of each story is unique. [. . .] The only way, I think, to learn to write short stories is to write

them, and then to try to discover what you have done. The time to think of technique is when you've actually got the story in front of you.

As we discussed in Chapter 2, one of the things that distinguishes a creative writer from, say, an accountant or a systems analyst is that the writer's process is shrouded in mystery. Writers use their own sense of not-knowing to delve into the heart of some ambiguity of personal interest. From these personal mysteries they generate prose that can then grow and, under the right circumstances, be shaped into a short story, novel, or creative nonfiction piece. But very few writers know what they are going to write beforehand. The creative mind usually doesn't work that way, as Donald Barthelme writes in his essay "Not Knowing":

Let us suppose that someone is writing a story. From the world of conventional signs he takes an azalea bush, plants it in a pleasant park. He takes a gold pocket watch from the world of conventional signs and places it under the azalea bush. He takes from the same rich source a handsome thief and a chastity belt, places the thief in the chastity belt and lays him tenderly under the azalea, not neglecting to wind the gold pocket watch so that its ticking will, at length, awaken the now-sleeping thief. From the Sarah Lawrence campus he borrows a pair of seniors, Jacqueline and Jemima, and sets them to walking into the vicinity of the azalea bush and the handsome, chaste thief. Jacqueline and Jemima have just failed the Graduate Record Examination and are cursing God in colorful Sarah Lawrence language. What happens next?

Of course, I don't know. *It's appropriate to say that the writer is someone who, confronted with a blank page, does not know anything* [emphasis mine].

Willia Cather, alternatively, makes the distinction between writing as an exercise "as safe and commendable as making soap or breakfast foods" and what happens when we attempt to create art, "which is always a search for something for which there is no market demand, something new and untried, *where the values are intrinsic and have nothing to do with standardized values* [emphasis mine]."

So it's always critical to keep in mind that there are no rules in fiction, only *conventions* that have been built up over the years based on the way that writers have crafted their stories. (A convention is "an established technique, practice, or device," according to *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*.) Conventions can be useful, because they provide successful models we can emulate and learn from, and which help guide us in the reading and writing of fiction. But too many beginning writers translate them into hard-core rules that *must* be followed. Among all the other rea-

sons we've stated why this won't work, it's just plain impossible: as you'll see, many of the so-called rules contradict each other. Try to follow them all (just like trying to follow all the advice given in a writing workshop) and you'll either go mad or end up with a chaotic mess, rather than a story or novel.

Much of the theory that is presented in writing books can be useful *after* a story has been written. You can say, "Oh yes, so *that* explains why I was having trouble with this section." But trying to write a story by theory is a bit like trying to obtain all our bodily nourishment from air: we need oxygen, true, but that alone won't suffice for keeping us alive.

There's no doubt that writing short fiction would be easier if there were some hard-set rules. Indeed, some writers cling to the conflict-crisis-resolution model or the change model as a way of avoiding the fear, and the ambiguity of the blank page (or blank computer screen). As we'll say time and time again, any way "in" to a story is a good one, and so if it is helpful for you to think of short fiction in this way, then do it.

But it's wrong-headed to approach the writing of fiction in an overly formulaic way. I was once surprised to hear that a writer giving seminars was actually handing out this formula, ABCDE:

Action
Backstory
Crisis
Denouement
Ending

While it might be a useful *exercise* (you might even want to try it yourself) to begin a story with an action (begin in the middle), only to backtrack and fill in the blanks (we'll talk about this in the chapter on "Raising the Curtain," Chapter 11), we wouldn't want to structure every story like this. We're in the business of exploring material through writing, not filling out formulas. If you wanted formulas, you'd be reading a mathematics or chemistry textbook, not this one.

Rick DeMarinis makes a heart-warming "confession" in his book *The Art and the Craft of the Short Story*:

I don't know how to write a short story even though I've written hundreds of them, published five collections of them, sold them to magazines, both literary and commercial. I have also taught the subject for more than twenty years in various university English departments that hired me for that purpose. But here's the thing: I don't have a set of rules, a formula, a system, that tells me how to set about writing a story of *literary quality*. I don't have a

"how." If I had such a system, one that would fit every interesting human situation, I'd write a prizewinner every day of the week. I'd make Chekhov look like a backslider. I'd make Cheever look like he was working out of laundry lists. I'd make Hemingway look punch-drunk. But the hard truth is that there is no system, no set of rules that guarantee able composition or abundant production. There is no magic formula that will make hard work, commitment, inspiration, taste, and good luck unnecessary.

If in this chapter I seemed to be arguing as much against the conventions as explaining them, it's because all too often I see a wonderfully complex beginning of a story either squashed early on by unsubtle uses of "conflict" or killed off in workshop as not fulfilling, in some obvious way, the conflict-crisis-resolution model.

Part 2: EXERCISES

Trying to assimilate what a short story is has stymied many, many very smart people. There are enough rigid definitions and so-called rules to make your head spin. The exercises in this section are to help you understand the basic concepts of what makes for a story, and to help you see past some of the so-called conventions that may stifle you as you try to write your own story.

Exercise 1: False Epiphanies I Have Had

Goal: To examine your own thoughts and assumptions about epiphanies in fiction, and to understand that sometimes we try to force false epiphanies into our stories in order to fit a preconceived model.

What to do: 1. Think of a time when you (or a character in a story you're working on) had an epiphany—a moment when you believed, finally and absolutely, that you had the answer to something (yes, this is the woman I want to marry; no, I was never meant to be an architect; yes, it's the right thing to move to Columbus), but which turned out to be wrong. If you want, use the phrase "suddenly I realized" as a way of spurring the epiphany on.

2. Write down the precise events that led up to the epiphany (what you were doing, where you were, who you were with, etc.).

3. Now write "the morning after" by capturing a moment of doubt and uncertainty that followed the false epiphany.

