

“Some Other, Better Otto” by Deborah Eisenberg from her collection “Twilight of the Superheroes,” Published by Farrar, Strauss, Giroux © 2006

“ I don’t know why I committed us to any of those things,” Otto said. “I’d much prefer to be working or reading, and you’ll want all the time you can get this week to practice.”

“It’s fine with me,” William said. “I always like to see Sharon. And we’ll survive the evening with your- ”

Otto winced.

“Well, we will,” William said. “ And don’t you want to see Naomi and Margaret and the baby as soon as they get back?”

“Everyone always says, ‘ Don’t you want to see the baby, don’t you want to see the baby,’ but if I did want to see a fat, bald, confused person, Obviously I’d have only to look in the mirror.”

“I was reading a remarkable article in the paper this morning about holiday depression,” William said. “Should I clip it for you? The statistics are amazing.”

“The statistics cannot have been amazing, the article cannot have been remarkable, and I am not ‘depressed.’ I just happen to be bored sick by these inane- Waving our little antennae, joining our little paws in indication of - Oh, what is the point? Why did I agree to any of this?”

"Well," William said. " I mean, this is what we do."

Hmmmm. Well, true. And the further truth was, Otto saw, that he himself wanted, in some way, to see Sharon; he himself wanted, in some way, to see Naomi and Margaret and the baby as soon as possible. And it was even he himself who had agreed to join his family for Thanksgiving. It would be straining some concept - possibly the concept of "wanted," possibly the concept of "self" - to say that he himself wanted to join them, and yet there clearly must have been an implicit alternative to joining them that was even less desirable, or he would not, after all, have agreed to it.

It had taken him - how long? - years and years to establish a viable, of not pristine, degree of estrangement from his family. Which was no doubt why, he once explained to William, he had tended, over the decades, to be so irascible and easily exhausted. The sustained effort, the subliminal concentration that was required to detach the stubborn prehensile hold was enough to wear a person right out and keep him from every getting down to anything of real substance.

Weddings had lapsed entirely, birthdays where a phone call at the most, and at Christmas, Otto and William, sent lavish gifts of out-of-season fruits, in the wake of which

would arrive recriminatory little thank-you notes. From mid-December to mid-January they would absent themselves, not merely from the perilous vicinity of Otto's family, but from the entire country, to frolic in blue water under sunny skies.

When his mother died, Otto experienced an exhilarating melancholy; most of the painful encounters and obligations would now be a thing of the past. Life, with its humorous theatricality, had bestowed and revoked with one gesture, and there he abruptly was, in the position he felt he'd been born for: he was alone in the world.

Or alone in the world, anyway, with William. Marching ahead of his sisters and brother - Corinne, Martin, and Sharon - Otto was in the front ranks now, death's cannon fodder and so on' he had become old overnight and free.

Old and free! Old and free..

Still, he made himself available to provide legal advice or to arrange a summer internship for some child or nephew. He saw Sharon from time to time. From time to time there were calls: "Of course you're too busy, but.." Of course you're not interested, but..." was how they began. This was one thing Corrine and her husband and Martin and whichever wife were always all in accord about - that Otto

seemed to feel he was too good for the rest of them, despite obvious indications to the contrary.

Who was too good for whom? It often came down to a show of force. When Corrine called a week or so earlier about Thanksgiving, Otto, addled by alarm, said, "We're having people ourselves, I'm afraid."

Corrine's silence was like a mirror, flashing his tiny, harmless lie back to him in huge magnification, all covered with sticky hairs and microbes.

"Well, I'll see what I can do," he said.

"Please try," Corrine said. The phrase had the unassailable authority of a road sign appearing suddenly around the bend: FALLING ROCK. "Otto, the children are growing up."

"Children! What children? Your children grew up years ago, Corrine. Your children are old, like us."

"I meant of course Martin's. The new ones. Martin and Laurie's. And there's Portia."

Portia? Oh, yes. The little girl. The sole, thank heavens issue, of Martin's marriage to that crazy Viola.

Ahh, the holidays. That period of the year where we are reunited with our families and reminded that they just may well be our greatest source of material.

In a way this exercise almost takes us full circle. Although Deborah Eisenberg is using a third person persona narrator, look at how similar this piece is to first person. Remember when we worked with first person how one of the objectives was to create a quirky entertaining first person personality, someone who would hook the reader. Eisenberg, with her portrait of Otto, seems to be following that mandate with her use of a close third person narrator.

So, here is Otto, pungent, opinionated, charming after a fashion. This is a story where plot (and there isn't much) comes from the character.

So let's look at what Eisenberg does to give us this character and get this story started. To me the critical moment in the opening of this is the point where Otto says - *but if I did want to see a fat, bald, confused person, Obviously I'd have only to look in the mirror.*" For all his crankiness and misanthropy it is going to be hard for us totally dislike a character who can say that about themselves. The second thing that Eisenberg is doing is

giving us a character with a clearly defined desire. Otto, even though he has agreed to it (under psychological pressure) does not want to have to spend Thanksgiving with his family. How often do you stop and consider what your character wants?

Let's break down the Persona Narrator. Obviously as stated this is a close third. The story begins in media res with a conversation between Otto and his boyfriend William. We don't know where we are but it's an interesting conversation driven in large measure by Otto's prickly personality. William, it is clear, is unlike Otto. Notice that the narrator doesn't step in to give us any markers about what is going on. Exposition is less important than a sense that we are coming in at the middle of something, something that it turns out that has been going on for a long time - Otto's attempts to avoid his family. We saw something similar in Susan Straight's piece, which also featured a large cast.

After an unresolved give and take, the narrator shifts into an interior monolog. Now we have looked previously at similar shifts and sometimes it is the narrator coming in from the outside but this time it is clearly Otto's thoughts. How do we know? Well, "Hmmm" is a clue and then

there is the distinctive phrasing to Otto's thoughts (it is not surprise he is a lawyer). A character who can say "The statistics cannot have been amazing, the article cannot have been remarkable, and I am not 'depressed.' I just happen to be bored sick by these inane- Waving our little antennae, joining our little paws in indication of - Oh, what is the point? Why did I agree to any of this?"

Sounds a lot like the interior monologist who says :

The sustained effort, the subliminal concentration that was required to detach the stubborn prehensile hold was enough to wear a person right out and keep him from every getting down to anything of real substance. Also Eisenberg uses other conversational features in the monolog - It had taken _ how long? Etc.

The scene continues but Eisenberg's narrator plants us firmly in Otto's thoughts for a considerable amount of time while he ruminates on what he is facing and what he has done and through this monolog we begin to get the exposition needed for us to understand where Otto is coming from. We are being set up for the Thanksgiving scene where the better Otto may emerge.

While the mood may seem buried in fact Eisenberg spells it out. Otto's mother has died. He is the oldest,

the cannon fodder as he puts it and yet it is put so humorously it would be easy to miss. Otto must see his family because in the back of his mind, it may be his last time. And Otto goodness knows is self dramatizing.

Exercise : Think of a story that is based upon a character someone with some spunk or verve. Follow Eisenberg's example by beginning in a scene. Don't worry too much about us following everything, instead look for ways to hook the reader and most of all strive to show the reader that the character has something they desire. I think using the holidays would be a great idea. They are upon us after all. Then move to an interior monolog that tries to indicate a similarity of style with the character so that it is clear who is thinking these thoughts. The mood is loss (look at Otto's reaction to his mother's death - he is next!) and the tone is conversational.

As always remember that the narrator is there to keep this from being about you or your family however much you might "borrow" from what you know. Feel free to exaggerate traits and above all have fun.

Thanks, Joel

