Table of Contents

The Act of Vengeance

“Saboteur”

“The Necklace”

When Warmth Lacks

“Two Kinds”

Fried Barbie Dolls

“Harrison Bergeron”

“The Cask of Amontillado”

“The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas”

“I Stand Here Ironing”

The Act of Vengeance

The story “An Act of Vengeance” – written by Isabel Allende – is about a young woman named Dulce Rosa Orellano, the daughter and only child of a senator in their little town. She watches her dad die, is raped, and gives a promise of vengeance all on the same day. When the time finally comes for her to get vengeance on the man, Tadeo, she cannot and ends up committing suicide.

When I first read the story, I wasn’t quite sure what to make of it. My middle and high school Spanish lessons, however, key me into something I think many others missed. The word “*dulce*” in Spanish means “sweet”. Her name is literally “Sweet Rosa Orellano”. This kind of on the nose name for a character makes me cringe inside. Granted, she’s not sickly sweet, but she’s sweet enough to deserve that name.

Naming a character is quite the process; there is a lot that goes into picking a name for characters. When I’m naming them, anyway. I take into account what kind of story I’m writing (science fiction requires a different caliber of name than, say, romance), what gender, what their age is, what the setting of the story is, how it sounds, the heritage, etc. One of my favorite characters is named Elvira, and that has a bit of a loaded history. The name belongs to the heroine of a song that was released in the 1980s, and it was quite popular. However, it wasn’t the history behind the name that finalized the choice for me. It was actually the spelling. The book I wrote was a fantasy book, and “El-” names and names with a “V” somewhere in them are often good bets for fantasy.

However, I have named characters out of revenge. This is a weird thing writers tend to do. Often, the phrase “be careful of what you do to a writer; it’ll end up in a novel” is on a cup, a shirt, or something of the like. It’s very true. One of the first pieces I ever wrote was a mystery, where the culprit was one of the girls bullying me. Petty, I know, but it helped me. I felt like I could confront her in writing without the backlash. It later helped me when I realized that the issues weren’t going to go away after a couple of years.

“Saboteur”

The story “Saboteur”, by Ha Jin, is about a young man named Mr. Chiu and how he is taken to prison for ‘disturbing the peace’. It all starts with a policeman that dumps tea – rather indiscreetly – on Mr. and Mrs. Chiu’s wife as they’re waiting for the train to take them home after their honeymoon. Mr. Chiu confronts the policeman, and then the policeman starts to disagree. It ends with him going to the prison, being there for three days, and then ‘confessing’ to the crime – which he didn’t do.

This story was actually interesting to read. I took the course ‘China’ last semester, which was a humanities crash course on the history of China. This story presumably takes place sometime after Mao Zedong took control of the Communist Party and rose to power. The tip off is the fact that there is a statue of Mao Zedong in the story, and one of his sayings. I’d guess it comes from his “little red book” that’s so popular in the country. (The “little red book” is basically a book of quotes from Mao Zedong.)

What makes this story that much *more* interesting is that stuff like this actually happened. A lot of it also happened since the Cultural Revolution (also mentioned in the story) and since Mao Zedong took leadership in the Communist Party. The way the Cultural Revolution worked is basically played out in the story, which brings an interesting aspect to the story. Stories of people who went through these so-called “struggle sessions” aren’t seen often in the United States, so we don’t have a feel for how bad it was. Mr. Chiu is lucky that he didn’t lose his job, as far as we’re aware. Many who were in these “struggle sessions” ended up losing their jobs because of the implications of distrust.

This story is almost a fictional representation of the various things that happened during the Cultural Revolution. It makes me wonder what would have happened if there wasn’t a Cultural Revolution in China in the 1980s. Would this story still exist without that backstory? I don’t think so.

“The Necklace”

The short story “The Necklace”, written by Guy de Maupassant, is about a couple – the Loisels. Madame Loisel doesn’t feel like she belongs in the social class she was born into; she’s more into jewels, beautiful gowns, and glitzy gowns. She’s invited to a party, the whole sha-bang – and gets a new dress. Then, she borrows a necklace from her friend. And, plot-twist, she lost the necklace! They spend the next 10 years in debt to repay for the necklace they bought to replace it. When she sees her friend again, she finds out that the original necklace was worth only about five hundred francs.

I feel like in this time period, the story can be an analogy for credit card debt. To be honest, I don’t have *any* credit card debt at the moment. However, I’m always warned about what the debt could be if I let it get away from me. I see it here in the story, although it’s only a necklace and they could’ve simply come clean.

The husband – which is never given a name – draws eighteen *thousand* francs in loans, half the price of the necklace. He already had the rest. This means they spend 10 years trying to pay off the debt, including the interest. The wife even gets ‘down and dirty’, doing what she can to help her husband pull together the rest of the money.

I honestly think it is like credit debt for one reason: the husband pulls the loans from various sources. Of course no one was going to give him a full eighteen thousand francs loan. It’s like trying to get a credit card with eighteen thousand dollars of credit. It’s just not possible for most of the middle class – which is where the Loisel family was. To manage to pull that off in as many different places as they had to is difficult. Granted, if their equivalent of credit was good, it wouldn’t have been bad.

This is honestly a good example of what can happen if you let credit card debt spiral. The family worked *ten* years – not one, not two, not three, but ten years – to work it off in a timely manner. *Without* default. If that’s not a lesson in how to handle credit card debt, I don’t know what is.

When Warmth Lacks

The story “To Build a Fire” by Jack London is about a man never named that tries to get to a camp in the Yukon. The man has to cross a few hundred miles to get to the camp, and only a day to get there. It is quite cold, and he knows how to survive that. Until his feet get wet, and then it all goes downhill. The man freezes to death.

The key piece to the reason he freezes is that he is unable to build a fire fast enough. I feel this is a wake-up call for the way we complain about being “freezing” in the winter – with our heating systems. The man in the story literally freezes to death because he cannot build a fire fast enough. We simply cannot fathom how cold he was to freeze like that – with his dog nearby.

I have been guilty of complaining of being “freezing” when it wasn’t even near the temperatures mentioned in the short story. At one point, it mentions that the temperature was at least *fifty* below zero. The coldest I’ve ever been in was thirteen below zero this past winter here in Idaho; it was my first time being in the Rexburg cold. There was a learning curve.

This is an example of when it is okay to feel cold, but not “freezing” – unless it’s the first time you’ve been there, in my opinion. It was my first time, and I got used to the cold. I found ways to deal with it, and I feel bad for the man in the story. My goodness, what would’ve happened if the man had had a friend with him?

The story mentions an older man that had given him the advice not to travel alone. I think he should’ve followed the man’s advice. This is including the fact that he had the right kind of equipment to deal with the cold to begin with, and I didn’t. If he had followed the man’s advice, maybe he wouldn’t have died.

So, I think the main point of the story – disregarding the idea that I couldn’t work with the cold without the right clothes – is that you have to have the right materials to tackle your problems. If he had gone with a friend, he might have survived.

“Two Kinds”

Amy Tan’s “Two Kinds” is a short story about a Chinese girl who is never named. Her mother wants her to be a prodigy – like Shirley Temple – but she doesn’t want to try. She doesn’t really think she *can* be a prodigy, however, and doesn’t try. This all culminates in a failed recital where she doesn’t place, and an argument the next day over her piano lessons. After the mother dies, the daughter has the piano tuned and plays the song she played in that contest. And the right-hand side song is the same song, under a different name.

I can relate to this young woman’s struggles. My mother was a bit like the mother in the story when I was in sixth and seventh grade. I took up flute because I had to take one of three music classes, and band is the only one that interested me at that point. So, she diligently made sure I was practicing; she even bought me a foldable music stand so I could practice in my room.

In sixth grade, this wasn’t much of an issue. I *wanted* to be in band class my sixth-grade year. Seventh grade was a different story. My enthusiasm for the class had plummeted, mainly because of my chronic migraines. I couldn’t practice as much as I needed to because I couldn’t handle the noise on migraine days. Oddly, I did practice on our mutual days more often than not. Mother’s rule was that I couldn’t go if I didn’t get my homework done – including my flute practice.

After seventh grade, my mother didn’t bug me about the flute. She said it was my choice to continue or not in band, and I was done. I only had to take two years to graduate at the end of eighth grade, and that was done. I got off easier than this Chinese girl did in the end. My mom doesn’t bug me about not continuing in flute because I’ve found my passion, and I’ve been working at that for eight years.

I relate more to the girl because of this experience. Though, I also relate to her prodigy cousin Waverly a bit too. I’m the only one in my family that can write well. Everyone else is good at math. So, in some ways, I am a writing prodigy when compared to my family.

Fried Barbie Dolls

“Barbie-Q” by Sandra Cisneros is a short story about two young girls – probably sisters – who have one Barbie doll a piece, two outfits – the ones the dolls came with and an extra one – each, and a sock they’ve made into a dress. The story conveys a certain sense of excitement as they find a large toy sale because the warehouse caught fire, so the Barbie dolls won’t sell in the store.

The scene at the end, where the two girls are pleading for the new outfits and things at this sale, reminds me of going to yard sales with my grandma. She taught me all kinds of tricks before we moved too far away to be able to go as regularly as I want to. There aren’t many yard sales down in North Carolina.

The “please please please please” scene reminds me of begging for things in the Dollar Store, or at the dollar center in Target. Kids can be so stubborn when they have their mind set on something. I was the same way as a kid. Those giant Tootsie Rolls in the dollar center in Target have always been one of the things I plead for if I don’t have money. Two for $1? Score!

Anyway, back to the yard sales. My grandmother taught how to bargain for lower prices than they were asking for. I got two bobbleheads for $2 apiece at one yard sale. At the same yard sale, I got a brand-new necklace for $2 two years in a row. (Two is a very popular number at yard sales for some reason.)

However, my favorite yard sale find is not the necklaces or the bobbleheads. It’s actually a set of purple beaded candle holders. We don’t light candles at home, but we do use electric tea lights. They make good lights for jack-o-lanterns at Halloween time. Anyway, one of the candle holders is a little lamp meant to hold a tea candle. The other two are deeper and taller – meant to hold bigger candles. I use them as containers in my American Girl collection. (Yes. I’m a 20-year-old woman with three American Girl dolls at home. I’m still a child at heart.)

“Harrison Bergeron”

Kurt Vonnegut Jr.’s short story “Harrison Bergeron” is about a young man named Harrison Bergeron who has the heaviest handicaps of anyone else in the world. It is set in 2081, and everyone is, as the story puts it, equal. They are made equal by using handicaps such as ear radios, weights, sashes, and masks to drag everyone down to a certain, average level. That all shatters when Harrison appears on television. He is able to easily rip all the handicaps off, and rips the handicaps off a ballerina to be his empress. They dance, but are shot down by the Handicapper General – Diana Moon Glampers.

I can’t imagine what it’d be like to live in that kind of world. My ability to write would be considered something I would need to be handicapped for. What would they do for that? Tape my fingers together to make it harder to type? Keep me away from computers? From pen and paper?

I shudder at the thought. I’d probably get one of the little radios meant as a mental handicap; authors have some notoriously overworked brains.

However, there is something in the writing world that reminds me of these handicaps. I don’t write erotica – the proper word for sex scenes in writing. For most romances to sell to any audience – even young adult these days – it seems there has to be at least one scene like this to please them. It’s the equivalent of a mental handicap for me. It’s numbing to write because you have to have a certain gusto to do so, in my opinion. I don’t have that gusto or do I have the wish to do so.

That said, I am happy it’s only a story. I don’t like to think about what might happen if I lost my ability to write. It does bring up an interesting point that is not discussed in the story, though. What do they do to handicap those who have untraditional talents – like writing, knitting, etc.?

“The Cask of Amontillado”

Edgar Allen Poe’s short story “The Cask of Amontillado” is about a man named Montresor who feels he has been wronged by his friend – though he probably doesn’t consider him a close friend – named Fortunato. The whole plot hinges on a fake cask of a very expensive Spanish wine by the name of amontillado. Montresor tricks Fortunato into thinking he has a cask of the wine, and ‘leads’ him down to it in his vaults. Then, he chains Fortunato to the wall, and walls him in. Fortunato dies, and the reader is left to wonder what in the world made Montresor so mad at him.

This story is one of the creepiest I have read. Easily among the creepiest and by far one of the most interesting. The use of the first-person narrative is something I admire. It’s something I have trouble with in my own writing, and haven’t quite mastered the ability to change up the way sentences start unless I’m describing scenery. Poe masterfully keeps the use of ‘I’ and ‘we’ at the beginning of sentences to when he *has* to use them. Most of this is accomplished by talking about what Fortunato is doing in relation to Montresor, and by describing what they pass.

What really strikes me funny is – in the middle of all of this masterful writing – that he has a line of nothing but “ugh”. He literally writes Fortunato’s coughing as dialogue. And no one questions it – even when the next line seems to be a continuation of the coughing, as it points out that Fortunato was unable to respond to Montresor for a few minutes. That is some coughing fit!

A narrator is one of the most important aspects of any story. By using Montresor – a drunk, vengeful man – as his narrator for this story, Poe has given us a storyline that we might not be able to trust. However, since Montresor is the only survivor of the events in the vault, we have to take his word for it. Using the first person to create this account almost allows me to relate to Montresor. Almost.

The last two lines are what give the narrator some credibility to the reader. It seems as though Montresor has gone to visit his friend’s bones for fifty years – meaning his memory of the event has distorted with time.

I don’t know what’s worse: the fact that we can already tell Montresor was drunk when he committed the act, or that he’s telling the story fifty years later.

“The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas”

Ursula K. Le Guin’s story “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” is about a fictional city called Omelas. In this city, there is no sadness. The life people here lead is rather perfect. And dull, but that is up for debate. However, there is a reason everyone can live such happy lives. There is a child living in a dank basement, shown no mercy or kindness. Some have visited it to scorn and sneer at it, but some will simply let it live in misery. If it was to be shown kindness, everything would fall apart. So, some leave the city to find some better way to have a happy life.

This story honestly reminded me of *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins. The way the child is treated could be likened to the way some of the children behave in the Games the books derive their name from. It is a cruel existence for the child. The Games are quite cruel to the children drawn for them each year.

However, I think the fact that no one dares to stand up for the child – even at the risk of losing their happy life – is what sets the two stories apart. The child protests its fate at first. It cries and yells, but as time goes by, Le Guin describes its half-hearted attempts to cry and whine. And when people come to see the child, she relates to the readers that no one speaks to the child. They don’t come near him unless it’s the one who is to give it its food and water for the day.

The fact that the reader never gets to know if the child is a boy or a girl is rather demeaning to the child. Unlike in Collins’ book, the child is meant to be held at a distance. It’s almost like a knick-knack on the shelf. It is meant to be admired as a paradox, pitied even, but not considered part of the city’s populace. It’s meant to be part of the government. I’d say it’s the *entire* government.

This interesting paradox is something that everyone broods over, and some walk away from it because they cannot abide letting that child suffer but don’t want to ruin it for others.

“I Stand Here Ironing”

Tillie Olsen’s short story “I Stand Here Ironing” is about a mother – whom is never named – worrying about her daughter Emily. She is told that Emily “needs help” and spends the time she’s ironing clothes wondering if she did something wrong. Eventually, she comes to the conclusion that she did nothing wrong. She concludes that Emily just needs some time to bloom, and decides that she won’t take her to the people who say they can “help” her.

I can relate to Emily more than I can the mother in this story. Emily has a talent that others don’t have without years of honing, and she is often singling herself out to do so. I found my passion for writing in 7th grade.

Since then, I have tried to carve out time every day to write. Emily often went to her room to practice her comedy. On the stage, she became loose and showed more of herself than she would without the safety of that stage. My writing serves as the stage does for Emily in the story. When I write, I often bare my soul to the reader. It doesn’t always work, but that’s my goal when I write. It’s a way for me to be myself without having to worry about impressing others.

Well, that’s how it started. And I have a feeling that’s how comedy started for Emily. Now, I make a living off of my writing. I’m already living the dream, but it’s a hard dream to make come true. I’ve been doing this for two years and I’ve only just begun to get more jobs out of those that I apply for.

As for Emily, the story doesn’t give us more information about her future. I wonder what becomes of her after the time frame of the story. Does she take her comedy professional? Or does it remain a hobby she does on the side for a side job? Is she happy with her life?

I’ll always be left to wonder about that. As for my own writing, I will continue to work at it and will continue to make it what I can in terms of a living. I will keep working at chiseling my way into that market.