

BERLIN

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Point of View

Imagine Chekhov's story "Grief" in the first person. An old man telling us his son has just died. We would feel embarrassed, uncomfortable, even bored, reacting precisely as the cabman's fares in the story did. But Chekhov's impartial voice imbues the man with dignity. We absorb the author's compassion for him and are deeply moved, if not by the son's death, by the old man talking to his horse.

I think it's because we are all pretty insecure.

I mean if I just presented to you this woman I'm writing about now . . .

"I'm a single woman in her late fifties. I work in a doctor's office. I ride home on the bus. Every Saturday I do my laundry and then I shop at Lucky's and buy the *Sunday Chronicle* and go home." You'd say, Give me a break.

But my story opens with "Every Saturday, after the laundromat and the grocery store, she bought the *Sunday Chronicle*." You'll listen to all the compulsive, obsessive boring little details of this woman's, Henrietta's, life only because it is written in the third person. You'll feel, hell if the narrator thinks there is something in this dreary creature worth writing about there must be. I'll read on and see what happens.

Nothing happens, actually. In fact the story isn't even written yet. What I hope to do is, by the use of intricate detail, to make this woman so believable you can't help but feel for her.

Most writers use props and scenery from their own lives. For example, my Henrietta eats her meager little dinner every night on a blue place mat, using exquisite heavy Italian stainless cutlery. An odd detail, inconsistent, it may seem, with this woman who cuts out coupons for Brawny towels, but it engages the reader's curiosity. At least I hope it will.

I don't think I'll give any explanation in the story. I myself eat with such elegant cutlery. Last year I ordered six place settings from the Museum of Modern Art Christmas catalog. Very expensive, a hundred dollars, but worth it, it seemed. I have six plates and six chairs. Maybe I'll give a dinner party, I thought at the time. It turned out to be, however, a hundred for six pieces. Two forks, two knives, two spoons. One place setting. I was embarrassed to send them back, figured well maybe next year I'd order another one.

Henrietta eats with her pretty cutlery and drinks Calistoga from a goblet. She has salad in a wooden bowl and a Lean Cuisine on a dinner plate. While she eats she reads the *This World* section where all the articles seem to have been written by the same first person.

Henrietta can't wait for Monday. She is in love with Dr. B., the nephrologist. Many nurse/secretaries are in love with "their" doctors. Sort of a Della Street syndrome.

Dr. B. is based upon the nephrologist I used to work for. I certainly wasn't in love with him. I'd joke sometimes and say we had a love/hate relationship. He was so hateful it must have reminded me of how love affairs get, sometimes.

Shirley, my predecessor, was in love with him, though. She pointed out all the birthday presents she had given him. The planter with the ivy and the little brass bicycle. The mirror with the frosted koala bear. The pen set. She said he just loved all his presents except for the furry sheepskin bicycle seat. She had to exchange it for biking gloves.

In my story Dr. B. laughs at Henrietta about the seat, is really mocking and cruel, as he most certainly could be. This will actually be the climax of the story, when she realizes the disdain he feels for her, how pitiful her love is.

The day I started working there I ordered paper gowns. Shirley used cotton ones: "Blue plaid for boys, pink roses for girls." (Most of our patients were so old they used walkers.) Every weekend she'd lug the laundry home on the bus and not only wash it but starch and iron it. I have my Henrietta doing this too . . . ironing on Sunday, after she cleans her apartment.

Of course a lot of my story is about Henrietta's habits. Habits. Not even that they are so bad in themselves, but they go on for so long. Every Saturday, year after year.

Every Sunday Henrietta reads the pink section. The horoscope first, always on page 16, the paper's habit. Usually the stars have racy things to say about Henrietta. "Full moon, sexy Scorp, and you know what that means! Get set to sizzle!"

On Sundays, after cleaning and ironing, Henrietta makes something special for dinner. A Cornish game hen. Stove Top stuffing and cranberry sauce. Creamed peas. A Forever Yours for dessert.

After she washes the dishes she watches *60 Minutes*. It's not that she is particularly interested in the program. She likes the staff. Diane Sawyer so well-bred and pretty and the men are all solid and reliable and concerned. She likes it when they look worried and shake their heads or when it's a funny story they smile and shake their heads. Most of all she likes the shots of the big watch. The minute hand and the click click click of the time.

Then she watches *Murder, She Wrote*, which she doesn't like but there is nothing else on.

I'm having a hard time writing about Sunday. Getting the long hollow feeling of Sundays. No mail and faraway lawn mowers, the hopelessness.

Or how to describe Henrietta's eagerness for Monday morning. The tick tick of his bicycle pedals and the click when he locks his door to change into his blue suit.

"Have a nice weekend?" she asks. He never answers. He never says hello or good-bye.

At night she holds the door open for him, as he is walking out with his bike.

"Good-bye! Have a good one!" she smiles.

"A good *what*? For Christ's sake, stop saying that."

But no matter how nasty he is to her Henrietta believes there is a bond between them. He has a clubfoot, a severe limp, whereas she has scoliosis, a curvature. A hunchback, in fact. She is self-conscious and shy but understands how he can be so caustic. Once he told her she had the two qualifications for being a nurse . . . "stupid and servile."

After *Murder, She Wrote*, Henrietta takes a bath, pampering herself with floral-scented bath beads.

She watches the news then as she smooths lotion on her face and hands. She has put water on for tea. She likes the weather report. The little suns above Nebraska and North Dakota. Rain clouds over Florida and Louisiana.

She lies in bed, sipping Sleepytime tea. She wishes she had her old electric blanket with the switch LO-MED-HOT. The new blanket was advertised as the Intelligent Electric Blanket. The blanket knows it isn't cold so it doesn't get hot. She wishes it would get hot, comforting. It's too smart for its own good! She laughs out loud. The sound is startling in the little room.

She turns off the TV and sips her tea, listening to cars pulling in and out of the Arco station across the street. Sometimes a car stops with a screech at the telephone booth. A car door slams and soon the car speeds away.

She hears someone drive up slowly to the phones. Loud jazz music comes from the car. Henrietta turns off the light, raises the

blind by her bed, just a little. The window is steamed. The car radio plays Lester Young. The man talking on the phone holds it with his chin. He wipes his forehead with a handkerchief. I lean against the cool windowsill and watch him. I listen to the sweet saxophone play "Polka Dots and Moonbeams." In the steam of the glass I write a word. What? My name? A man's name? Henrietta? Love? Whatever it is I erase it quickly before anyone can see.