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The Carver--A Life Lesson Story

By Alice Steinbart

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In a provincial city, there lived a woman who carved small wooden statues for a living. Her carvings were from softwood, because it was easy to work with. Most of the other carvers also worked in softwood. A few worked in stone, making large magnificent monuments, but the woman could never do that. Stone was expensive and if she made a bad blow she would ruin the whole statue. She didn't know how to fix a bad strike like some carvers. No one had ever taught her.

Some of her carvings were appreciated, but other times she got complaints. The wood swelled in damp weather and split in dry. The complaints dampened her enthusiasm for her work and ate away at her self-confidence. She decided she was no good at carving, was never meant to be a carver. She looked around at what she could do and at what she liked.

Weaving. The colours were beautiful. The designs intricate. The fabric appealing. Having little money, she bought cheap thread and set up her stall off on one side of the bazaar. No one came. She knew she was too far from the center and her cloth not attractive enough.

One day as she was walking in the woods trying to decide what she should do, she came across some translucent stones lying in a stream bed. Smooth, deep, and beautiful. She gathered up handfuls, filling her pockets.

Returning to the market, she went right to the center, and holding two of the stones to catch the light, showed them to the passer-bys. But they pushed past her, paying her no mind. She was bumped into a post, stopping her in bewilderment. "Why can't they see how beautiful these stones are?" she thought.

She looked across the way, to Safia's stall; Safia, the most successful seller in the market. Safia was buying carrots from one of the farmers. In the farmer's hands they looked ordinary, because the farmer looked ordinary. But Safia displayed them as small, succulent, and rich orange. Safia was full of life, sparkle, and confidence. Buyers felt self-assured, smart, safe buying such good quality foods from her.

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"I can do that", the woman thought. The next day she put on her best clothes, practiced what she would say and marched up to Safia.

"Safia, I have discovered these fine gems that will bring more people to your stall." Here she displayed some of the most spectacular stones on a piece of black velvet she had, rocking them gently to catch the light.

Safia pick one up and held it to the sun. "See how smooth, almost magical they are", said the woman. "You can set them in gold rings, string them into prayer beads, or simply roll them in your hand. They'll bring a good price and attract a new clientele for you."

Safia saw immediately these would sell well. "I'll give you 100 ringas for each stone", she offered.

"Safia, I will rent this section of your stall", countered the woman pointing to a spot next to the sweetmeats. "I'll give you 10 spas a month plus 10% of my profits. This way you do what you do best, selling foods, while I give my full attention to these jewels. We will both make more sales."

Safia could see the woman wasn't going to budge on this. It was either let her sell the stones or she would go elsewhere. "All right", sighed Safia.

The woman set up her display immediately. Safia told all her customers of her new wares. Curious they came over to see. The woman, by watching Safia, learned how to sell. She was a success and both Safia and her thrived. And from that day forward, the woman trusted herself. She knew she was worthy, valuable, and good enough. She grew in confidence and stature. Her demeanour changed. She had an aura about her that attracted people. She became as we all do, what she thought she was.

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Beginnings

By Rita Marie Keller

Just about everyone is familiar with this beginning: "In the beginning God created the heavens and earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep . . ." (Genesis 1: 1–2 RSV) In a sense we're playing God when we write a story. We create the characters, plot, and setting, turning a blank page—nothingness—into a compelling story.

Not only is your first scene the first impression of a story, it is the doorway that invites your reader on a journey. First scenes are what determine whether or not your reader is going to follow your characters to the end.

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Your beginning must accomplish several things:

Introduce your characters

Establish the place and time the story occurs

Introduce the conflict or point at which change begins.

Your opening sets the tone, mood, situation or problem. It actually begins in the middle of things.

Looking at the first lines of Genesis from a purely literary standpoint, the first lines introduce God as the protagonist. The time and setting (simply) is the moment of Creation, same as the point of change. Before God created the world there was nothing. For the purpose of this illustration from a literary standpoint, Nothing was what happened before the story begins. It starts in *medius res*—in the middle of things.

Let's look at a few opening lines of other stories.

I could tell the minute I got in the door and dropped my bag, I wasn't staying. "Medley" by Toni Cade Bambara

This blind man, an old friend of my wife's, he was on his way to spend the night. "Cathedral" by Raymond Carver

She told him with a little gesture he had never seen her use before. "Gesturing" by John Updike

Something has already happened before the opening line. The first line is actually the middle of the story. Each story has its own history. The plot is affected by something that happened before the first sentence on the first page. In Anne Bernays and Pamela Painter's book, *What If?* They describe story beginnings: ". . . think of the story as a straight line with sentence one appearing somewhere beyond the start of the line—ideally near the middle. At some point, most stories or novels dip back into the past, to the beginning of the straight line and catch the reader up on the situation—how and why X has

gotten himself into such a pickle with character Y."

Take out an old story, or one you've been working on. Look at the opening scene. As yourself: Does the story have a past? Is the current conflict grounded in the history of the story? If you answer no, then you don't know your story's past well enough.

John Irving said: "Know the story—as much of the story as you can possibly know, if not the whole story—before you commit yourself to the first paragraph. Know the story—the whole story, if possible—before you fall in love with your first sentence, not to mention your first chapter."

Rita Marie Keller has written and published numerous short stories, articles, and essays. Her novel, *Living in the City* was released September 2002 by

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, Inc. She founded the Cacoethes

Scribendi Creative Writing Workshop in 1999.

Beginnings

A Lesson From The Trenches

Lesson from An Old Guitar

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Lesson Learned

How to play a Guitar

The First and Second Adam

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