

Stephen Sink
stephen@stephensink.com

Alligators

(This story has won the 1st-Place Award for KSU Graduate Creative Writing for Fiction, 2003)

“It shimmered in the hot sun; the jittering evil eye bent down to keep time with the breaking of nations. I looked out across the shores of Sheol; a little man lived out his life in hiding; a rusty train lurched into mildew.”

We all laughed at that beginning passage, even though each of us knew that deep inside—in that little part of everyone that still remembered what it felt like to crane your neck to snatch a glance of little Jamie’s biology test, or sneak a peek down Miss Gracie’s shirt (booby!) while she leans over to get you hooked on phonics—each of us knew what it was: those little-people sins, the tiny things gone wrong when the flesh was still mostly wet that keep us from ever feeling completely sane. We had unshriven transgressions from our wayward youths lying in wait for our adult consciences and we knew even then that we were guilty: the crumbcookie of the busted pilfer belied the snotball of the little thief’s snuffle-wuffling. Even when we got caught, the guilt never cathartically melted away with the slow swing of the leather belt the way that Daddy always said it would.

A G.I. Joe with the kung-fu grip or the pair of gym socks in the stockings for Christmas:
Which was love to a six-year-old?

Focus waning . . .

Try again: lather, rinse, repeat.

“Because Uncle Sam was sent here to protectorate us; the shimmering in the sun, musty-dusty certainly is the glint in the Adam’s apple of our eye. With interminable posturings and stoppings of force—oh, see the brainblow-rainbow—”

The words were spat into the desert mike to the asymmetrical rhythms of a fat beat, a beat that had wanted to be “phat” ever since it was little, but couldn’t quite make it, as if somehow the phat-with-a-ph ones were just a little more in touch with some cosmic beat-groove—

“Get to the alligators, already!” an unseen voice shouted out from the back.

Assassin! Stay off-scene until called for!

“But you must know what it’s all supposed to mean?” asked the little man, in a desperate effort to get things back on topic, little realizing that this was not the topic of the beginning of the story, which was, in fact, something about a thingy shimmering in the hot sun and evil eyes lurching mildew and someone trying to use a little bit of stolen Yiddish for the forces of evil—and their accountants, assuming they could come. And phat beats.

A cultured, clipped British man’s voice rang out clearly across the hills and dales in that most droll way that only Brits can be droll: “But I see you’ve decided to change tone in the middle way through, now, have you?”

There was no response while this was mulled over. In the pause, somewhere in a far-off forest, a tree fell on Schrödinger’s cat in its black box. Did the quantum cat make a noise?

Realization *clicked*.

“Oh, is he writing about writing?” that someone from the back yelled, finally seeing the purpose amidst all the crap while somehow managing to look a bit like an amentiferous weasel—although more sure about the weasel part than the other word.

We all knew it had to mean something, by golly, even if we weren’t sure what.

The crowd grew deathly hushed as they all thought as one, somehow still sounding distinctly British: *Oh. Writing writing. That’s been done before. Not very exciting, old chap, really. Also, a random word, that “amentiferous.” Perhaps with some deeper significance—but come now, the reader will wonder, and we can’t have that, now can we?*

“Bearing catkins,” says *The American Heritage Dictionary*, explaining all with a quick crack-like rush of the proverbial Michael Valentinian grok—

“Excuse me?” a voice asks.

At this point nothing is known about the voice.

“Excuse me. Allow me to introduce myself—I mean, it’s rather late and all . . . already page three/part three, and I haven’t even come in with a very good transition . . .”

And?

“Well, I think I’m supposed to be your main character. You need me for this bit to work.”

But now you’re directly addressing the author, and that’s a little farther out than I wanted to go with this. Think of the reader.

“Well,” said *Biff* quickly, as if giving himself a name would ensure some lasting permanence in the mind of his creator, “I could be rather useful to your plot.”

“Eh? Sorry, ah . . . *Mark*,” I say, killing off Biff before we even really get to know him, to be replaced by this new “Mark” guy, looking so tan and trim. Only he’s a . . . a . . . a paraplegic. In love with his mother. Who only speaks French, for some ungodly reason, but then, this is serious literature, so somehow, the French have to be in it. Just for culture, you understand.

But anyway. About the plot: “Don’t have none of those nowhere ‘round these here parts,” a very rustic, folksy kind of guy says in a manner which, although completely unlike Barney Fife,

nevertheless would have made him feel right at home. “Perhaps if we look behind that cabinet that never seems to move.” Rustling sounds are heard, as if unaware that passive sentence structure is to be avoided.

“Here it is.” The faint brown sounds of smoking plot. “Sssssomething about a guy. And a girl. And the guy loves the girl but the girl doesn’t love the guy. Only, she really does, but he’s just so rough and wild, and he’s the department’s loose cannon that no one can handle except his soon-to-retire robotic canine partner . . .”

“I could—I could probably do something with that. Yeah.”

But, back to the evil-eye thingy again, the author says, deciding to drop the quotes and first-person point of view. “But I’m not exactly sure why,” I say.

But maybe it’s already too late for that. Maybe that beginning evil eye already broke its nations, or whatever, anyway.

Yeah, maybe it did.

That’s it, then.

The significance of all of this starts to fade after a bit.

“@&*’ ,,,~^,~^ \!”¹ he shouts, as the reader struggles to find meaning in the groundbreaking use of punctuation and symbols. Ho!

Hum.

And the clever *parenthetication* (quickly uses spellchecker . . . not a real word . . . okay, made the damn thing up).

Well then, Mark, come over here and help me to develop your character.

¹ “At-mark, ampersand, asterisk, apostrophe; comma-comma tilde-carat, comma tilde-carat backtick BACKSLASH!”

Mark comes slowly, reluctantly dragging his heels. Heels? Yes, he wore heels. Rather long heels, in fact. Red stiletto pumps, to be specific.

Mark instantly protests. “Wot, am I to be a transvestite now? Have you forgotten that I’m a *paraplegic*? I have no *bloody* legs! How c’n I be into red stiletto pumps if’n I don’t have any bleedin’ *legs*?” wonders Mark crossly, unaware that there was no reason for him to sound British, too, and a very bad attempt at a Cockney, at that.

“An editor would have caught it eventually,” the author responds, wishing he would have left out this unnecessary tagline and remembering that he had decided to not put his own dialogue in quotes.

I just thought it would be interesting if you were into ladies’ clothing. You know, a little *titillation* for the readers.

“Not another word like ‘amentiferous’?”

I always did think that titillation had something to do with breasts. All right, let’s be honest. By show of hands, who ever thought “titillation” might have something to do with breasts?

Those in the back, you lie...

“So, is there to be some change in store for me? I mean, can’t have a story without change, eh?” asks Mark, deciding to scratch his blond hair just to give us some concrete details of his world. Mark was momentarily thankful that he was only para-, and not quadra-, plegic. He hated the quads.

I can’t tell you what’s in store. You’ll just up and spoil it. That’s what you characters do.

Mark *slammed* his fist hard onto the table, sending notebooks and coffee cups flying everywhere in the pregnant pause. “Damn it, Jim! I won’t let you do to her what you did to me, playing God in your horrible experiments!”

Taking it up a notch, are we?

“Just showing you how versatile I can be. Just until you figure out where the story’s going. You mentioned something in the beginning about a shimmering, and an evil eye... Well?”

Well, what?

“Where are they? You’ve established setting, characters, and already warned us about the lack of plot—”

‘Us’? Are you now the reader in some way?

“Well, you’re the sicko talking to himself while he types, not me. I’m just a paraplegic who likes women’s pumps, lives with his mother, and speaks French. Or is it my mother who speaks French? You weren’t very clear about that a few passages ago.”

It’s got to be your mother. I don’t speak French.

“So, *I* can’t either? We’re gonna limit me to just *your* knowledge? I know you’re supposed to be dead and all, but, what, it wouldn’t take your Omniscientness thirty seconds to find some French on the Internet or something?”

Curiously enough, it took about three minutes before Marceau spun around at the baguette store. “*Merde!*” he swore, unsure if there was supposed to be an *accent grave* somewhere. A vein throbbed quickly in his sweaty French forehead. “*L’enferno c’est outres!*”

Very nice. Sartre and all that. But, to be honest . . . if you were Japanese, it might be a little easier. I can actually speak that.

“*Japanese?*” asked Mark, just barely dodging the name-change to Kintaro. Marceau had been bad enough.

One more attempt. No good. “Mark” stuck. It was the blond hair and the French. Just couldn’t turn him into an Asian at this late stage.

Unless...

日本語を話せるの？

Mark frowned and waved his hand in front of his nose as if something smelt bad. “Ha! Nice try, but I’m sorry. I’d like to help you but I *don’t* speak Japanese.” He winced, lowered his voice, and muttered, “Try to trick *me*”

Somewhere, a collective readership of three or four people harrumphed. “Can’t really be expected to read kanji, now, can we? It’s not really fair. Oh, Greek and Latin are okay—everybody reads those—but using real languages that half the Asian world speaks? What’s a billion Chinamen to—”

“*Tsubekoube yuu na!*¹” Mark yelled, losing his temper momentarily in romaji instead of kanji, just to aid the reader. He couldn’t stand when people complained, which was alluded to in his character in the beginning, in the part about the tiny-things-gone-wrong-when-the-flesh-was-still-mostly-wet section.

Which made sense, considering the pain of the cancer eating Mark up from the inside.

“That’s not fair! You can’t just *machina* your *deus ex*-ness around like that. And quit coding me, anyway. I’m not the Signifier!”

I know it’s not fair but we’ve got to move the story along, now. Mark/Marceau/Kintaro will deal heroically with his cancer and his stiletto fetishes, or he won’t. Whichever serves.

Dragging . . .

Perhaps going to the fourth section would do the trick.

¹“Quit ya bitchin’ !”

In Shakespeare’s time, they often showed alligators between plays. The alligators would fight with dogs and bears and people would watch(,) while Othello changed his bodkin in the back.

There! There are your stupid alligators. Now shut up and let me finish this thing!

But then, it could only end in one way, if foreshadowing was to be employed, even if it was actually only back-foreshadowing—“back-shadowing,” if you will. Or maybe just shadowing: writing the final scene as if the first scene had somehow foreshadowed it.

And so it returns full circle.

It shimmered in the hot sun; the jittering evil eye bent down to keep time with the breaking of nations. I looked out across the shores of Sheol; a little Mark lived out his life in hiding, with cancer, no legs, a bad accent, and his mother; a rusty train lurched into mildew.

And Mark died happily ever after.

Or he didn’t—if that’s a stronger ending.