

The Write Detail

Mairi Neil

Jan opened her notepad and stared out the cafe window. Traffic on Main Street lighter today. No road rage from the drivers shuffling in and out of car spaces to pop into the florist or bakery. Nothing to excite the imagination. Damn these observation exercises the writing teacher insists improve creative writing.

‘Detail, be specific, detail,’ Donna intoned every Thursday morning. ‘Sit in a cafe; write what you see. Don’t forget the senses: the sweetness of the muffins, the aroma of the coffee...’

Jan tapped her pen on the paper while she let her coffee cool. If it was any hotter, she’d need an asbestos tongue. Perhaps she could have a character get burned? She flicked through the pages of journal notes: blue cars, red cars, Fords, Holdens, Mazdas, shiny duco, ugly dent, tyres needing air, grimy windscreens, stinky exhausts, funny number plates: SHE, MPIRE, 4YOU.

6TI...the personalised plate from an olive green MG, still with showroom gloss, driven by a silver-haired Lothario, tanned and gym-toned. A thirty-something blonde preened herself in the passenger seat.

Goodness, Jan clucked, getting judgemental like Mum! She sipped her coffee, twirling a pen in frustration comparing today’s blank page with yesterday’s scrawl. She heard, the voice of old Jonesy, her last English teacher complaining a trained spider wrote her essay. Jan bit her lip, the attempt at mind-mapping pathetic too. Characters boring and where was the conflict? Story ideas failed the cliché test and only 24 hours until the deadline for the class anthology.

‘Please,’ she whispered to the steam-stained ceiling, ‘help me.’

On cue, loud voices spat insults at each other and a customer with a jagged scar disfiguring his left cheek, charged out of the door with such force Jan cringed, waiting for the glass to shatter. ‘You’ll get the dry-cleaning bill,’ he yelled, slamming the door with, ‘and you’ll definitely pay!’ The woman behind the counter screeched, ‘Never come back here again!’

Mesmerised, Jan watched the woman’s face change from fuchsia to purple and all shades in-between. Dark eyes bulged and lips shrank as she picked up a coffee cup. Would she throw it at the empty doorway?

Jan held her breath. Memories of childhood triggered and she remembered her mother throwing cup after plate and then aiming the cutlery at her husband because he’d sneered at the meal she’d cooked. For several nights in a row his dinner shrivelled in the oven while he sat in the pub with workmates instead of coming home. The dollars in his pay packet dwindling along with the hours he sculled beer. Jan still avoided get-togethers in a pub and recalled the criticism she used to cop from co-workers when she refused to go

on pay night binges. She never confided in anyone, too ashamed at her parents' behaviour.

The woman at the counter's anger palpable as she swiped the cup in her hand and slapped the counter with a gingham tea towel. The biro Jan clutched, clicked and snapped. She forced herself to focus on the scene just witnessed and rummaged in her handbag for a new pen. Here was the conflict the writing teacher demanded. Jan must answer the who, what, where, why questions.

Why had the man reacted so violently to a spilled coffee? Was the spill deliberate? The scar on his face raw — was the trauma recent? Perhaps a burn? She searched her memory of the last couple of weeks. Although, concentrating on the outdoors, Jan did recall seeing the man in the cafe before. He and the waitress seemed on good terms. The woman often laughed at things he said, leaning across the counter, arms folded, thick dark curls almost brushing his face. Was it scarred then? Surely, she would have noticed! The man bent his head conspiratorially as if passing on confidential information. *For Your Eyes Only*, a romantic scenario perhaps? Start off like Mills and Boon but develop into a mystery or thriller. Why had their flirtatious relationship turned sour?

Jan chewed the end of her pen. Maybe he wanted more from the relationship than she was prepared to give? She wore a silver ring on her left hand but who gets married formally nowadays? Maybe she's with someone else and just flirts at work to help pass the time? Is Scarface an admirer? Did he really think an attractive woman like the waitress would entertain a relationship with a middle-aged man looking as if he worked for Al Capone? Maybe, if he owned the MG and looked like Adonis, but then he wouldn't be in this cafe for coffee...

Jan laid back in the chair, closing her eyes, concentrating on several possibilities; the assignment not too hard after all. Ideas flowed but not many hours to shape a meaningful story. Thoughts on her own failed marriage surfaced. She'd always blamed her parents because experts say children learn what they live. The horrible relationship of her parents replicated when she married Tony. He never lived at the pub but golf and football his obsessions. Upset at being neglected she reacted like her mother. It took two dinner sets to be rid of Tony.

Eyes closed, Jan continued to reminisce... and never saw or heard the black Pajero. The car crashed through the cafe window splintering glass, tables, and Jan's bones as efficiently as a bomb blast.

The paramedics extracted Jan from the rubble, along with the body of the waitress; a lucky couple trapped near the corner escaped with minor injuries. Attended to at the scene, Jan overheard police officers speculating on the crash. The Pajero driven by a middle-aged man who they assumed accelerated by mistake.

A passerby demanded the officers' attention, wanting to give a statement. 'That driver looked determined, even angry. A large scar may have distorted his expression but his eyes looked...well, they looked demonic. I don't think it was an accident, Officer.'

The ambulance doors slammed shut and Jan relaxed as the morphine injection did its job. Her broken arms stopped throbbing and she breathed deeply as ordered by the paramedic adjusting her oxygen mask.

Thoughts of characters, romance, conflict, mystery... murder — the detail her writing teacher demanded swirled in a jumble... tears stung eyes fighting to remain open... a page-turner someone else will write.

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