

Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

Volume 4 | Issue 2

Article 17

January 2005

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Recommended Citation

Rado, Dani (2005) "A Response to Your Story, "An Iris in the Mail"," *Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal*: Vol. 4: Iss. 2, Article 17.

Available at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate/vol4/iss2/17>

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A RESPONSE TO YOUR STORY, "AN IRIS IN THE MAIL"

Dani Rado

I like the title, a phrase you use at the bottom of page 7. Though the card with the iris on it should come back in a more significant way later in the story, maybe even be a central metaphor for the piece. Your character should try to compose something on it, or even, after her appointment at the salon, imagine composing something on it. Something more than, Dear Mom, I know you like to grow irises, so I thought you'd like to get one in the mail. Something like, Dear Mom, Saw this iris and thought of you. I see other things sometimes and think of you, but I can't send them in the mail. Some of them aren't even tangible things, but moments I see of other people's lives when I'm in the grocery store or post office or salon. Sometimes it's that woman with her head set in curlers and buried in the dryer, who's reading an article about the Secret Sex Lives of Celebrities, or Feng Shui: Old House, New Look, or One Woman's Incredible Survival (it does matter what through); and when I'm looking at her I can't think of why she reminds me of you unless it's for the fact that if I were to need something from her right then she wouldn't be able to hear me.

Writing the letter is a good device because it allows you to compose within the composition.

I think you should use that.

If you want to stick with a strictly chronological narrative and avoid all the complications of the flashback, then the reader needs more information in order to determine the significance of the every day events we walk through with the main character. For instance, why mention Pete's Japanese Restaurant even though she has never been there? She's an executive, and would certainly eat at a classier place; a place that has, at the very least, cloth napkins and does not advertise a lunch buffet for \$6.99.

Does the restaurant remind her of how her parents go to

the Chinese Buffet near their house once a week and come home with pockets full of fortune cookies that they then leave out in a little dish on their coffee table? Or does it remind her specifically of that time she visited them and wanted to take them out to dinner (some place nice) but they refused, saying that a single girl can't afford fancy dinners, and instead took her to the Chinese Buffet and insisted on stuffing her purse with stale fortunes; the cookies lying like packaged babies' fists curled next to lipstick, blush, breath mints, an electronic organizer, pens without caps and loose change?

I understand that this is attempting to be a subtle piece that revolves around mundane events like going to the bookstore or salon after work, but why are they important to this character in this life on this day? At times the subtlety verges on vague, and that detracts from the necessary tension. I want to know why these little moments clutch her consciousness. I want to know why your character feels such anxiety as she walks through the bookstore parking lot trying to avoid the patches of ice ("Just a few more steps, she noted. But was it safe to put her foot there? Or there?"), yet all the tension seems to dissipate by the time she interacts with the store clerk ("She said, 'I wish you would salt those walkways. It's dangerous.' He looked at her from underneath his hair. She could not read his expression and began to hate the shabby hairdos that younger people wore these days. 'There's a bag of salt in back,' he said, and dumped the change in her hand"). Why does she choose heels on a day that's this cold, when snow has been accumulating and black ice lies in wait on the ground? Is it because the heels are the only way to give her calves definition, to allow the small muscles to flex under skin showing its first signs of sag? Is it because it's the only way, when she looks in the full-length mirror in her apartment as she gets ready on this precipitous morning, to imagine herself with enough strength to propel forward, to get to her car, to the parking garage, to the elevator, to her office, to click on the intercom button from the safety of her leather chair (a new one that came with the

promotion), and say to her secretary Sylvia, Bring me some coffee? And with the coffee the day begins, not because its aroma perks her up or anything commercial like that, but because it's the first order she gives and has the pleasure of having it carried out forthwith.

Also, there's only the slightest mention of how she tweezes her gray hair in the morning while getting ready for work. Think about specific things like the lighting in her bathroom—the fluorescent light in two long strips of bulb beaming overhead, emitting a low buzz that builds as she pulls the hair from its follicle (moving through dermis and epidermis), the hair bulb squeaking through the microscopic opening—whose circumference stretches to pass the bulb, then closes back up after the exit—ending in a crescendo at the final moment of exit, and leaving a dull twinge resonating in her scalp. Done again and again until the only residents of her head are auburn strands. At this point does she hate or love the mother who gave her this hair color and its gray tendencies?

Her self-consciousness in these situations has to stem from more than anxiety over getting old or looking silly. What's beyond that, deeper than that? What happened last week at work? How did she feel when she had to fire Jimmy Johnson, who had just bought a house and had a baby (or his wife did, rather) and he stood in her office, his suit neatly pressed and pressed against his trim solid body, his face almost crumbling, (or did she just imagine that?) as she explained the nature of cutbacks, of the economy, and of how she had to let the fledglings go. But she didn't use the word fledglings. She said newer employers; she said recent hires; she said those men who no longer want to look at her in bars.

If she did call her mother (as mentioned in passing on page 4: "While waiting in line at the bookstore she made a list in her head of things to do. Water Plants. Finish Report. Call Mother. Abbreviate Day in Memory"), how did that phone call go? Did her mother ramble on about her father, his prostate cancer and

the medications her mother has to feed him every day; how at times he will forget he has cancer and when he remembers to ask what this pill is for and her mother tells him Your prostate cancer, he starts to cry until her mother says Harry, Harry stop that? Then he opens his mouth, which may or may not have its teeth in yet, which may or may not have pink gums like skinned fingers smacking together to taste their own flesh, but which definitely have two cracked lips that open just enough to allow the tongue to slip out and create a puffy shelf on which her mother can drop the orange pill, then hand him a glass of water.

Or did her mother just sigh and say Oh, your father, and your character wondered how many times her mother has said that about her, her daughter? Or was it more of a groan of impatience, the kind given when the person you're talking to still hasn't figured out how the world works and you can't explain it to them again; the kind her mother let out when she, the daughter, said No, I'm going there to get my MBA so it won't matter whether or not I get a husband.

Why did that last love affair end?

These types of things are always hard to figure out.

You can expand the celebration of your character's most recent promotion. Stress how difficult it was for her to maintain her composure when the other executives, the ones she likes to refer to as The Good Ol' Boys to no one in particular, didn't show up at the LaSalle Grill on 8th Street after work and she sat there drinking apple martini after apple martini with her secretary Sylvia, who showed pictures of her two-year-old fraternal twins while your character held the glossy wallet photos between her sticky fingers (the drinks were sweet) and rambled about being an only child. Sylvia finally broke out the three by five photos of the two children sitting on either side of the family's golden retriever, a wide dog named Sparky (or something like that, your character can never remember) and stared at her staring at the picture until she finally said to her secretary Sylvia, Well then, we

should call it a night, and let Sylvia go home to the dowdy photographed children.

These are just some ideas for where a few more windows can be placed. A few more places where the readers can have access to a character that seems to (pardon the metaphor) draw the blinds on herself every chance she gets. At least that's what this recent boyfriend, Allen, says. But he fancies himself a part-time poet (and a full-time ad exec.) For a poet, he's remarkably unobservant, sending her irises on her birthday because she had mentioned them once (though only to say that her mother liked them) and buying her red silk sheets when she has no red in her apartment. For an ad exec, he's a good catch (or her mother would say so if she were to ever introduce them.)

How and why do the shopping centers she passes affect her? And why does she frequent them so much in this middling city where she now lives? Surely the downtown, though Spartan, has better (or at least more interesting) shops than the strip malls described on page 6.

So why is she drawn to them? How has she come to see their uniformity as a plus, a constant in that sea of change (no, not a poet) that moves her from city to town to city, as she watches the waves crash against the port windows and hopes to see a tiny archipelago—stores lumped in their shopping centers along the main roads of every place she docks.

Allen the ad exec would say, "A brave new world."

Allen the ad exec says, "What the fuck did you expect?"

What is her job, exactly? What does she do besides hire and fire people, tell them to get the Simmons report done and sign off on it, sit in her office chair and feel the leather squeak beneath her flabbing ass and recall the safety words given to her by Allen the ad exec—soufflé, widget, evanescence—and say to herself Yes, I belong here, surely I do?

I want to know this because I want to know why a senior

executive has so little confidence. In order to get to a position like that it seems one would need to be decisive and little aggressive. Maybe bossy. Maybe a bitch. She should dress in smart clean business suits that exaggerate her shoulder line and draw attention away from her waist. The skirt should drop just below her knees, the length of a skirt running in proportion to a woman's age (an equation written by her mother). Two-inch heels, the same style in beige and black, and a chic handbag. Make-up, subtle autumn tones dusting her cheeks, lining her eyes, dressing her lips. Not austere, just well put together.

I'd like to see how and why that facade is wiped away.
Your character would like to see that too.

The note on the iris could read: Dear Mom, I know you like to grow irises, so I thought you'd like to get an iris in the mail. I want to send you other things in the mail sometimes, but I know you won't know how to receive them. I want to send you money to pay for Dad's medications, but you think I don't have enough because I'm poor in the husband sense. I want to send you pictures of me skiing with friends in Aspen, at a café in Rome, in front of the Eiffel Tower, but I don't have time for such vacations and no one to take them with. Though, I do have photos that Allen the ad exec took—my wrists and ankles tied with leather rope, all four appendages bound in front of me, the skin puffing on either side of the cords, pinkening; me on my back, my glasses perched on the knob of my nose, my eyes aimed at the camera, my lips trying to purse. His lips trembling saying "Beautiful. Beautiful." But you can't see him in the picture.

I won't send you that. Instead I'll send you the tiny beating heart of me as a child. It will soak the envelope and fall through the sopping paper, splattering on your doorstep as the mailman tries to place it in your wrinkled palm. I could put it in a box and mark it fragile, but if you didn't know that then, why tell you now?

I like your sentences, but simple things in them often get

confused. For instance at the top of pages 4 and 5 the pronouns get mixed up because there are too many "she's." This can be cleared up by giving her a name, since she is the main character, the one the reader is supposed to know the most about, to care about, to empathize with. Why is she given anonymity when she may not want it?

No, she doesn't want it at all.

I think this story has a lot of potential, but you still need to be more critical of your character. Let's not forget her self-consciousness stems from pure ego. Let's not forget how she treated Jimmy Johnson. Let's not forget that Sylvia is her employee and nothing more.

You need to answer one or more of these questions. What was the father like before his illness overran his mind? What does she wish her mother protected her from? How does she feel about being an only child? What did she originally go into the bookstore for? Why does she stay with Allen the ad exec?

Why does she still maintain that each promotion is getting her closer to the life she wants?

Why does she take such abuse from the clerk at the bookstore? Why does she allow such curt remarks when all she suggested was that they salt the ice patch in front of the entrance, the one she almost slipped on, the one she encountered on her way into the bookstore, the store in which she saw the card resting idly on its wire shelf, the painted iris facing her like—like maybe—an accusation?

Why, at the moment the clerk with a mop of dark hair dangling in front of his eyes dumps the change on top of the wrinkles in her outstretched palm, does she remember how her father used to hold her screaming struggling self down on the couch and pop her blackheads between his fingernails with grease-stained cuticles?

Then there are practical concerns: how long does she wait at the salon for her appointment? Does she get a trim, a perm,

highlights? Does she chat with the beautician? Does she regard him or her as she regards Sylvia? Are people like that interchangeable for her, like Japanese and Chinese food? Why doesn't she just dye her hair?

What does Allen the ad exec look like? Did she choose him, and others like him, because the nice suits and nice face (nice being the word you use when you have nothing else to say) contrasted nicely with her father's stubbled jowl and working class hands? Does she choose these men because their hearing is near perfect and her father's was damaged by years of machines pounding bolts into metal sheets, so that they are able to hear her choke out that safety word, Effulgence (or something), from under the coy rubber of the gag.

Does she realize that this is not what difference is made of?

When is the point in the story that your character begs the author, Say my name. Say my name; and the author refuses, dangling the nomenclature in front of her like a box at the end of a silver string descending through cumulus, rising up and down respectively, her leaps propelling her up and down prospectively.

How does she manage to jump in those heels?

I tell you all this because an outside reader can see problems the author cannot. An outside reader can see the character flaws, the lack of development, the textual flaws, the improper punctuation. The outside reader is not so caught up in creation that they can't see the cracks in its facade (still not a poet), and so can recommend practical solutions.

The reader can say, Confront the father, even if it's only in some indirect fashion. They are not concerned with the fact that the father is old and would not understand. The reader would respond, The mother then, confront the mother, because a reader won't believe that there can be such things as useless gestures in a text.

Why Allen the ad exec then? Why do you let me—why

do you let your character be with him? Can't you see the obvious patterns?

The reader will say, Let the character speak for herself, and myself, and themselves. Then you'll have to step aside.

Then where will we be?