

Unremembered Loss

For all the news and information from the world of Rathrae, and for the story Unremembered Loss.

Issue 117

May 2019

Story

Last month on Instagram I did a “Met The Maker” challenge where each day there was a prompt to write about. I had lots of fun, and if you’d like to get to know about me and my writing process, go check it out. Search for @altivecer and scroll back in my feed to the “How I Started” post.

One of the days asked about my range of products. For that prompt, I wrote about the size of a story – from a few words to a hundred thousand. I’m not going to write about that here – at least not directly – so go check that one out, too.

What I want to write about is “story”. What makes a bunch of words into a story instead of just a sentence or paragraph. What are the required parts, and what is optional?

For me, a story has to have some critical things: a protagonist, something that the protagonist wants, something that is keeping the thing out of reach, and a conclusion. Let’s look at what each of those things are and why they’re essential.

The protagonist is the person in the story that you, as the reader, can relate to. In some cases, it might not be a person, it might be an animal or even an idea. In any case, it has to be something you can empathize with; otherwise, there’s no reason for you to read the story.

There needs to be a goal in a story; otherwise, there is nothing to drive the story forward and no way to know when you reach the end. The goal can be positive (I want to meet a nice girl) or negative (I don’t want the aliens to take over), but again it has to be something you as the reader can empathize with. If you can’t see why the protagonist wants this thing, then you won’t care if they get it or not.

There needs to be an obstacle in the way that is keeping the protagonist from getting what they want; otherwise it’s not really something they want, it is something they have. Now the goal could be to not lose something, in which case the obstacle is what is trying to take it away.

Lastly, the story has to have a conclusion. It needs to show that the protagonist got what they wanted (success) or failed to get what they wanted (tragedy). Without a conclusion, what was written is just a scene, just a glimpse into a larger story.

Now a story can have lots of other things in it to make it fuller. An antagonist (to actively fight against the protagonist), a handicap for the protagonist (to make it harder for them to succeed), a sidekick (to support the protagonist), a time limit or option limit (to force the story along), dialogue, description, back story, and sub-stories.

But the four – protagonist, goal, obstacle, and conclusion – have to be there for it to be a story.

Very Short Story

I read once that the world’s shortest story is six words long. Here is the story and my analysis as to whether it is a story or not.

**For Sale.
Baby Shoes.
Never worn.**

Protagonist: In this story, the protagonist is the person selling the shoes. We don’t know anything about them, except that they have something to sell.

Goal: You could be literal here and say, “to sell something”, but that misses the point. And my point that the apparent goal may not be the goal. I put forward that the goal is to have a healthy baby that can run around and be part of a family.

Obstacle: again, the obstacle isn’t that it is hard to sell baby shoes, it is that many things can get in the way of having said healthy baby that can run around and be part of the family.

Conclusion: if the last line was, “slightly worn” we would say they had said healthy baby, but the line, “Never worn”, leaves us with the conclusion that something went wrong (a tragedy).

While much of the story (almost all of it) is left to the reader to imagine, the four essential parts are there.

Here's a longer example of a very short story. I've shared this one before, but it shows the parts of a story well.

A Tweet Story

My son died, and I had to go on. My heart was overwhelmed with feelings, so I wrote to give it peace.

100 blogs

2 novels

Now a tweet story.

In this story, the writer is the protagonist.

The goal is to not be overwhelmed with feelings anymore.

The obstacle is how to deal with the feelings. The writer found that writing about them helped. While the words don't come out and say that, the fact that they wrote so many things points to it helping.

Conclusion: There is not a clear conclusion here, so perhaps it is not a story, but the beginning of a story. But I would say from the words in this story, it shows that the writer is not feeling overwhelmed. We can imagine that if we had lost a child, that even writing the words, "My son died," could be more than one could handle. To be able to write this story, without showing any pain means that things must be getting better.

Here is a long story I posted on Instagram. Look there for lots more short stories.



She woke up this morning and looked at me. I could see the anticipation in her eyes - she wanted to come to me.

But she didn't. She got out of bed, took a shower, I caught her looking at me again, but she turned away and got dressed.

It's alright, I've been waiting weeks for her - what're a few more minutes.

She got some breakfast and walked to the table, but she paused, looked at me, and then walked over and sat down in the chair in front of me.

She reached out a finger and creased my face. Her fingers were so soft - I could feel them tremble. I knew that today was the one I'd been waiting for all my life - she was going to transform me - turn me from something special into some exquisite.

But I would have to wait as she sat back and nibbled on her granola and drank her coffee.

When she started, she started with a flurry, almost throwing paint on me. Long strokes with a big brush, she covered me in white. From corner to corner, she smoothed my rough skin, removing my texture, preparing me.

I was so excited - this foreplay getting us each ready for the main event. I longed for her colors - her life.

She stopped - panting - brush held limply at her side. She looked at me with satisfaction, but I didn't see the spark in her.

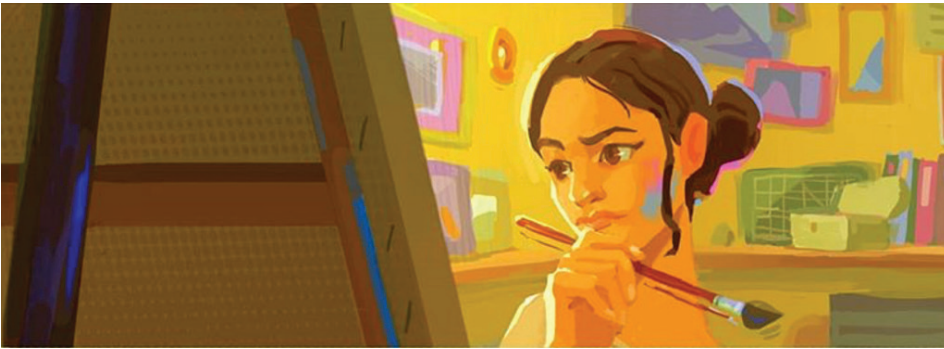
I waited for her. I wondered what would happen next - I've only heard - this is my first time. I dreamed of what I might become. My brother Clyde became a tree. Jimmy a rolling field. Zak got to be a girl on a bike. What would I be?

She picked up her brush and dipped it in brown paint. She touched it to me hesitantly at first. A stroke here and a stroke there. Then she relaxed and drew large circles and smaller ones.

New colors and arcs and lines. Other colors and dabs and smooches.

My heart soared. I was going to be a portrait of a man.

She painted some more - some strokes free, others controlled.



She stopped when the man was still just blobs and lines. She stared at me for an hour. Sometimes moving the brush towards me, only to pull back.

She started again, working on the eyes, the curves of the nose, then she stopped and looked out the window. She watched the birds in the trees, listened to the cars down below.

She would return to me for a minute or two, but then she would be pulled away.

She got more coffee. She played with her cat. She went out to lunch - I was afraid she wouldn't come back.

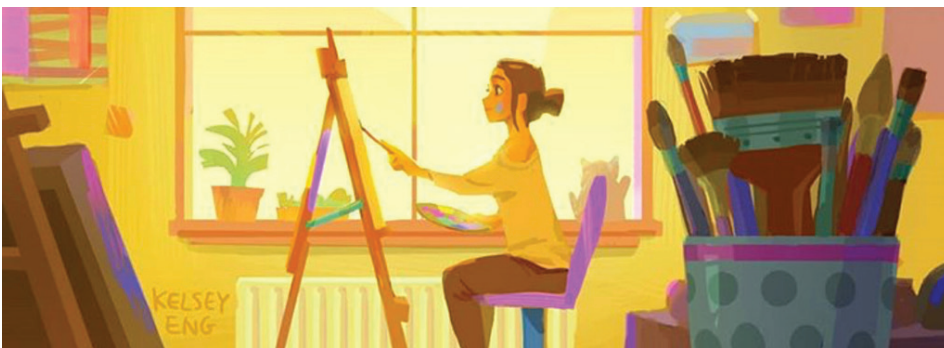
But she did, and she came back with new energy. I could tell she had been thinking of me and she looked at me like she had when she first woke up.

The afternoon was a blur. Her hand never stopped. She mixed new colors and gave me nuances I could not have dreamed of.

I wasn't a masterpiece yet, but I could feel myself growing, maturing. I would be great.

As she finished, I could feel her love. Not for me, but the man who I now reflected. Her heart beat faster, and her touch was gentle - like a feather.

That afternoon, I knew that even unfinished, I had a long and happy life ahead.



In this story, the storyteller is the protagonist, which also happens to be a blank canvas. This is a stretch for a character that the reader can empathize with, but I mitigated some of that by keeping the fact that the main character wasn't alive until the seventh paragraph. Hopefully, by that time, the reader had built a connecting with the storyteller.

The goal is to become something beautiful – something valuable. This is a dream that most people have, and so is relatable.

The obstacle is the fact that the woman is having a hard time finding her muse. The canvas can only wait and hope. It is usually wrong to have a passive main character, but since the struggle was an internal emotional one, I think it still works.

The conclusion is not that the canvas became valuable or beautiful, which is what the original goal seemed to be, but that it feels confident enough in the artist to believe that its future is bright.

Conclusion

So here is a little blurb about story. I'm not sure if I conveyed my thoughts well. Do you feel like you have a bit better understanding of what a story is? Should I give some examples next month of some things that are not stories? That could be fun.

As always, thanks for following me.

Doug