

Across the Mississippi
2450 words
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Karen said to Ed out in the hallway, ‘She expects us to write a story on *that*?’

They were in a night class in the adult division at the state college. They'd become friendly during the breaks.

‘Doesn't have to be made up,’ Ed said. ‘It can be something that really *happened*. We've been over this.’

‘I get that,’ Karen said. ‘What's her problem though? It's like she enjoys it.’

‘Yeah I'll admit,’ Ed said, ‘pretty idiotic last topic too. Woman needs some new material.’

‘How about the one before?’ Karen said. ‘Someone's New Year's resolution doesn't last? Excuse me? I mean so the frig *what*.’

‘Take it easy, Jeez. I made that, my guy renting his beach house has the tenant from hell . . . or wait I'm mixing it up.’

‘You are. That one we had to work in the dogs on the sand. I made mine the Outer Banks, where one of 'em

runs into the water chasing a stick? And gets bit by the shark.'

'Yeah yours tend to have grim parts. I've been meaning to ask you about that, was there something in your childhood you didn't tell people about?'

'And you're a riot.'

'I was in an argument on Twitter, silly sports one, and some guy asks me *Who hurt you?* Another guy piles on *Did they bully you a lot?* All because I disagreed with the Padres bullpen rotation.'

'How do you know they were men?'

'That's it? That's your reaction?'

'I mean *The flood waters receded to reveal a yellow Labrador mother and her six newborn puppies . . .* Are you freaking kidding me?'

'Pretty theatrical. Plus that's two dog ones now. She doesn't care.'

'What *was* the last one?' Karen said. 'Now you have *me* confused.'

'Dog one?'

'No, the one you thought was the beach house.'

'New Year's. I've got a family get-together, guy comes in from the barbeque with the platter and they ridicule him.'

‘Oh yes I remember that. It wasn’t clear if they were being sarcastic. That’s the one that’s a bit too long and finally ends in Maui?’

‘No. Come on. That’s the one, they all start opening up--not New Year’s stuff anymore so much but admitting to things. The brother admits he poked a guy’s eye out once.’

‘For real? I don’t believe it was clarified. But it’s a little hazy, maybe it was.’

‘Fine, not sure if he did or not. He *said* he did, what can I tell you.’

Karen was looking through her notes. ‘Let’s see. *It felt like the end of good times?* What do you have there?’

‘That was last week right? Reason I can’t keep ‘em straight, I like to stick the topic sentence in where it doesn’t hurt me too much.’

‘I know what you mean. So you can write it the way you want.’

‘Which is typically going a different direction. That one I kinda cheated, I took a theme I’d tried before, tweaked it, reversed it into the first person for more impact. Guy internet dates, meets the woman in Pocatello. She’s 300 pounds and sent him a fake picture.’

‘I’ve noticed that thread elsewhere from you. You’re obsessed with women’s weight.’

‘What was yours?’

‘I have a hairdresser who works out of her house. Customers tend to drop their guard with her. She starts to think one of them has committed financial fraud.’

‘I’m spacing out on that one. Paperwork? Or worse?’

‘No, has been embezzling money. The customer chairs a non-profit children’s charity.’

‘That’s a good set-up. How do you work it?’

‘I have the husband turn her in, he can’t take it anymore, but before the police finish investigating they disappear to Mexico with the cash and the charity collapses.’

‘Ending sounds a little dramatic.’

‘I know. And a bit too convenient.’

Ed said, ‘I like mine jumping off a cliff. The endings. She gave me a C on my best one, she said the ending left her in limbo.’

‘Which was that?’

‘That was the DJ late-night request one.’

‘Oh I liked that one. One of her few topics with some direction.’

‘Probably my favorite. I’ve got the drummer telling the DJ the Janis Joplin story after the backyard gig. She wants to hear more but he falls asleep during her show.’

‘That was good,’ Karen said. ‘Then you bring in her dedication, where the long lost people meet again after 50 years, right? Then it doesn’t work though, right?’

‘Yeah, it got written up in *People Magazine* when it happened. They met for 5 minutes at a rodeo in Cody, Wyoming, when they were like 13 years old in the 70’s. It seemed like good karma, but no.’

‘It did boost the radio show as I remember. How’d you conclude that one again?’

‘I didn’t. I left ‘em sitting over coffee in a diner at 4 in the morning. The drummer and the DJ.’

‘See now I’d have to agree with her there, Ed. Plenty of build-up, different directions it could go--and then poof.’

‘Whadjew have for that one? Was that the KFRC guy?’

‘Correct. That was the one I set in the 1960’s. She wins a record--back then they gave away vinyl, the 45’s--by calling in and naming it and she goes to the station to pick it up. The disc jockey likes her and dedicates it to her.’

‘That’s right, then she gets a job at the station. What else happened?’

‘Not much else. They get married and move to Sausalito. They have a lot of parties and the DJ is late for work a bunch and gets fired.’

Ed said, ‘How about the world traveler one?’

‘Let me think. Okay that one I title *Iron Curtain*. She goes to the airport, she’s bitten the bullet and is flying to Istanbul, but after they board there’s a mechanical problem. So they de-plane. She heads to the cocktail lounge and gets too sloshed and misses the re-planing.’

‘So she never goes anywhere . . . might have been more effective if you saved the mechanical problem until they were in the air.’

‘Very funny. I’m not writing for the movies here. What was yours?’

‘My guy’s cheating on his wife,’ Ed said, ‘but doesn’t want to break it to her until he comes back from Maui.’

‘That was decent. Then the girlfriend cheats on him over there, right?’

‘Not cheats on him necessarily but she’s into another married guy. My guy made the mistake of

getting there late, and she'd already been in the water with the new guy.'

'But then your character meets the new man's wife, so it evens out.'

'Yeah I liked the way I handled that one.'

'Again you left it wide open. They may or may not go to Florida together. It's like the story just stops in its tracks.'

'Nova Scotia. Prince Edward Island. How 'bout I left room for the sequel.'

'Let's see what else,' Karen said . . . 'the woman who can't get the job?'

'That was dumb, so I dumbed it down worse . . . Except can't remember anymore to be honest. That was one of the early ones.'

'The first one. I have her on Wall Street getting rejected. I enjoy bringing in New York when it fits.'

'Drawing a total blank,' Ed said.

'She applies to three firms. Only because that was the assignment. She moves to Brooklyn and becomes a Chinese translator.'

'She's Asian? Or no. Or she learned Mandarin in college?'

'No she just picks it up online. Enough of it.'

‘Hmm . . . okay I got mine now, guy comes home, his girlfriend’s watching *The Price is Right*--not much motivation--and he encourages her to apply for a cocktail waitress job.’

‘Okay. At the Indian Casino.’

‘Which she has to dress provocative for. The interview. He’s not sure how he feels about that.’

‘Except they need the money since he’s a screw-up himself.’

‘Right,’ Ed said. ‘That one I honestly can’t remember, did I resolve it? All right . . . she gets it but doesn’t take it because there are too many drunks.’

‘Degenerate gamblers.’

‘Yeah lot of ‘em don’t tip.’

‘I think you ended it they move to New Orleans, but it feels like Seattle.’

‘Other way around, but I don’t think they move yet.’

‘What did she give you on that one?’

‘Pretty sure another C. She seemed to like it okay but said I needed to clarify the setting better, since half the states don’t have Indian casinos.’

‘I like to leave out the state,’ Karen said. ‘Let the reader fill it in.’

‘Yeah. Maybe I’m shortchanging her, something else might have bothered her too . . . That wrap it up pretty much? To date?’

‘The one, *The day started off wrong.*’

‘That one I have Pete, I’ve used Pete before. He has to pay back 10 thousand to a guy he borrowed it from in the hot tub in Arizona.’

‘Oh yes. You made that place up, right? Was it supposed to be Phoenix?’

‘North of there. One of those plastic planned communities where I wouldn’t mind living myself.’

‘Me too,’ Karen said. ‘I like where everything’s taken care of and it’s safe.’

‘Not exactly taken care of, that’s the point, I’m not sure you read my story right.’

‘I see. You’re contrasting the two, the perfect artificial suburb with the evil underbelly.’

‘That’s not bad. Maybe I should have taken it further. I have it where the hot tub guy gets a terminal disease and is deciding who to take with.’

‘Have to say that was probably your worst one Ed. I mean too outrageous making the reader buy in. What did you get on that one?’

‘She gave me an A.’

‘So there you go. She’s been duping us.’

‘What was yours for that?’

‘Mine fell apart. It starts off, a woman notices a mountain lion crossing her driveway while she’s in the kitchen having a late night snack. She sees him on the surveillance camera.’

‘Oh yeah. I liked that one, one of your best. The animal control guy is pressing her for stock tips, right?’

‘Investments, yes. She lives on upper Broadway with all the billionaires.’

‘The Gold Coast. So he’s more interested in her deal than the mountain lion.’

‘Most definitely. She gives him a cup of coffee, shows him around.’

‘Then what happens again?’

‘He puts a move on her, but she hits him with a frying pan.’

‘Oh yeah,’ Ed said.

‘But tells him nothing personal, if he wants to stop by some time on better terms. Does that work for you?’

‘It actually does . . . You didn’t give me *your* New Year’s resolution one.’

Karen said, 'So there, a man and wife are driving to Bodega Bay on a curvy road. Someone tails them too closely.'

'Okay right. The guy just made his resolution that morning.'

'Unh huh. To be more civil to other drivers. So it escalates but luckily the wife realizes she went to high school with the person. So they end up having dungeness crab together out at the coast. You know the restaurant I'm talking about? Down by the boats? Toward Bodega Head? By the time they finish, the two guys are almost best buddies.'

'Fine. Once again a little vanilla. I might have had the guy, middle of the meal, inform the husband that she ran around bad back in high school, like did it with the football team.'

'But she didn't, she wasn't like that.'

'I get that,' Ed said, 'but you throw it in. Your problem with a lot of these, you give your characters too much credit.'

'Your opinion,' Karen said. 'What about this final one?'

'Tonight's?'

‘Yes. I suppose you could bring it current. South Florida, the hurricane.’

‘Ian, dumb,’ Ed said. ‘Sounds like a British guy sitting in front of a fireplace reading. But nah I wouldn’t go there. Have them watching a movie, and it happens in a scene. Then you don’t have to handle anything.’

‘I see,’ Karen said. ‘So the story is about the people. After the movie ends. Maybe they trash the apartment because they’re being evicted on Monday.’

‘I think I’ve got them watching it in a real theater,’ Ed said. ‘In downtown Minneapolis. A matinee. They ride bicycles there from Hudson, across the bridge.’

‘Wait, is that the Mississippi?’

‘Tributary. The Saint Croix.’

‘Then what?’

‘Then nothing, how do I know? Maybe there’s a strip club next door.’

‘Here we go.’

‘Course the other way you can work it, you have them survive the flood--the dogs--but then attack.’

‘Ooh boy. The rescuers?’

‘No, the owner. For getting ‘em in the jam.’

Karen said, ‘Do you want to skip the second half of class, or what.’

Ed said, 'I'm always up for that. But if I get home early, my wife questions why I'm even taking it.'

'So don't get home early.'

'Oh . . . But for real? Real life?'

'With a twist,' Karen said.

'Hmm,' Ed said.

'What?'

'No nothing.'

'But there is. I don't do it for you?'

'Funny thing is, you sort of do. I'm trying to run back through your stories.'

'To what, see if I'm creative enough?'

'Something like that.'

Karen said, 'The Outer Banks one?'

'Yeah?'

'I was an au pair one summer. For a family from Shaker Heights.'

'Big bucks then. But aren't au pairs foreign?'

'I stole from them.'

'You didn't put that in.'

'I just *gave* you the story . . . Is that better?'

Ed thought about it. 'It could be.'

'Except.'

'If I'm going to use up an episode of infidelity . . .
you know . . . '

'You're not going to waste it on *me*. Now I've heard
everything.'

'I like the way you engage my thoughts,' Ed said.
'There's a story in there somewhere.'