

W.R. Iter
714 Literary Avenue
Bardstown
VA
24201
276 837-5309
writ3r@gmail.com

3117 words.

BELLEVILLE

by W.R. Iter

CHAPTER ONE

Of Dogs, Fires, and Daughters

April, 2004

I'll tell you the first thing I learned as an artist:
Painting anything, drawing anything, starts with the line.
Without the line there's space, and space is nothing, its
undefined. The Bible says that the earth was void, a blank
canvas, nothing; God said let there be light, and there was--but
still nothing, a lighted nothing. But the very next thing he
said was "let there be a division between light and darkness."

God drew a line; God started making. The first command was
about lighting; the second was about art.

My Dad used to talk about that story and warn us about teachers who taught evolution. He'd say that evolution made us less than human, that God was creator. I think that's true, but I'm not a theologian like my dad. My mind lacks the furniture. I draw because I'm good at it, but my mind has always been tangled with more questions than answers.

So I straighten the tangle, and draw a line. Many times when I sketch, I'm not sure what I'm sketching until I've drawn the first line. But as I continue to draw, something takes shape, and I follow it.

Is that evolution? I don't know.

I'll draw a line on this page: my name is Greg DeLuca. Let that divide the chaos, let it limit the other people I might be. I am Greg DeLuca, not anyone else, and I do live in Old North St. Louis, and I am an artist. I do have a daughter, Lydia: there, another line. I am no longer married. I am a quiet, broken man.

Here is my sketch; here is my story.

#

Brooke Harrison 1/27/15 2:43 PM

Comment [1]: I really like this analogy. I think this is a very poetic way to introduce oneself.

Brooke Harrison 1/27/15 2:20 PM

Comment [2]: Love the simplicity of this statement!

Brooke Harrison 1/27/15 2:49 PM

Comment [3]: This is a great introduction – I already have a pretty clear idea of the narrator's character – but I think it could be stronger/tighter if condensed.

The plum 1967 **Corvair** stayed at my father's house, **first of all,** until the house was sold, and the car was towed. The new owners were kind enough to tow it in front of my apartment. It sat there for three days until someone smashed the driver's side window, noticed the stereo was **40** years old, slashed the upholstery of the driver's seat in frustration, and left the car. This morning, I drive the Corvair over to **Jack and Robin's** house and park it in the fenced backyard.

Brooke Harrison 1/27/15 3:02 PM

Comment [4]: Not entirely sure this phrase is necessary... sentence can stand alone without it

Brooke Harrison 1/27/15 2:24 PM

Comment [5]: Who are Jack and Robin? Is it important for the reader to know who they are now, or will they be introduced later?

The car smells like my father: **Old Spice** and cigar smoke. I sit in it for a few minutes with my eyes closed. Finally, I get out of the Corvair, walk around to the front of the house, and drop the keys into the mail slot in the door. Then I walk home.

Jack and Robin's house is only a block from mine, so it is not much of a walk. I pass the community garden on the way, and stop to see how my herbs **were** doing. The mint is already growing, but the cilantro has yet to take. I pick a couple of mint leaves, put them in my mouth, and chew them as I walk.

Brooke Harrison 1/27/15 2:25 PM

Comment [6]: Should be present tense to be consistent with the rest of the piece

"how my herbs ARE doing"

Old North is about contrasts. Most of the houses in the neighborhood were built around the turn of the century for good, German and Polish immigrant stock. The streets are full of

sturdy brick townhouses in New England style with slate roofs and carved stone cornices. After the **Second World War**, though, gang warfare and drug use proliferated. Weeds grew in the cracks of the sidewalk; townhouses were abandoned, condemned, or used as crack houses.

I moved into the neighborhood in 1989, but most of my friends had been here for ten years at that point. They were Christian idealists. People were moving away from the city; they meant to move into it. Most were highly educated and underemployed, and they bought townhouses for peanuts apiece, gutted them, and started over. The neighborhood people eventually and grudgingly accepted them.

When I came to Old North, I was broke and newly divorced. I had a job illustrating newspaper inserts for a grocery store chain. I drew bags of flour, steaks, bell peppers, bottles of beer for the Post-Dispatch every week. Eventually, though, I ran out of things to draw. I had drawn almost everything, and they archived the illustrations and owned the rights to them. Everything else, they pulled from stock illustration, so I was out of the job. My wife was having an affair, someone she met at the **theatre**, and my daughter was a toddler, and I was unemployed. I came to Old North for want of a better idea, and my friends got me this apartment.

I check my mail on the way in. The mailboxes are recessed into the wall of the main hallway of the apartment building. Many are missing doors and, from the looks of them, have not been checked for months. I usually check my mail every day. I just don't always empty it out. Even if I get something I need to make a decision about, I'm bad about putting it back in the mailbox. The mailbox is jammed tight.

There is one mailbox that has a good, working door and a combination lock. I open it: right, forty, left, 11, right, 42. This is my landlord's mailbox, and I place the rent check in the box, shut the door, and spin the combination. I'm one of the remaining tenants who still pays rent every month. Our landlord lives in Creve Coeur and rarely comes out this way.

I open the door to my apartment. I never lock it, because I got tired of fixing the lock when the neighborhood teenagers forced the door. After a few weeks of coming and going as they pleased, they realized I had very little worth stealing, and left me alone.

I shut the door and clear some old newspapers off the sofa. I can hear sirens somewhere off in the distance, the window unit laboring. The sounds of a spring day in the city.

#

There's a knock at my door. I get up and look through the peephole. A thin man dressed in coveralls stands on the other side, fiddling with his cell phone. My down-the-street neighbor, Junebug. Junebug has never explained his nickname. I assume it is a riff on "Junior." I open the door.

"Greg," he says, seemingly relieved. "You got time to help me load some stuff from the house? Won't take but a minute."

I glance back at the letter on the sofa, then shrug. "Sure. Let me change pants."

I shut the door and I don't invite Junebug in. No one, except me and Big Joe, has seen the inside of this apartment in over ten years. Even Lydia stayed with Jack and Robin when I had her some weekends. Joyce would have it no other way.

Junebug's house burned down the same day my father died. The events leading up to it are a typical story in our neighborhood: first, the roof sprung a leak last fall. Junebug called his landlord to fix it. The landlord made excuses. Junebug withheld the rent, one month, two. He caught the water from the roof in buckets but withheld the rent. This went on for weeks. Occasionally the landlord would send a letter about the rent. Junebug would return it with a note about the roof.

A couple of months ago, it rained and water hit exposed wires in the attic. The way I heard it, the wire sparked and ignited some old newspapers, which ignited some cardboard boxes. My neighbor, Luis, who got his undergraduate degree in electrical engineering, said that wouldn't be enough to start the fire. He said the electrical box must have been getting wet for weeks.

Junebug and his roommate, at any rate, lived on the second floor. It was late February, and Junebug was at work in the warehouse where he drove a forklift. His roommate heard the fire, felt the heat, and jumped from the second-story window, hitting the two-inch thick layer of ice on the sidewalk below and breaking his back. When I walked out of my apartment that

morning, the street was covered with gawkers, reporters, and paramedics, and there was a ball of flame erupting from the attic window.

#

When Junebug and I enter the ruins of his house, the first thing I notice is the smell. It is like burnt plastic, but something else also, something deeper, like wet earth. The smell is overpowering. The color palette is a study in gray.

#

The olive green Bakelite phone rang for a long time before the answering machine picked up, and a man's voice said, "Leave a message for Davis or DeLuca." There was a beat. "If you leave a message for DeLuca, it might be a while. Tomorrow he's going on some kind of quest. That's his word, not mine." The beep sounded and a tired woman's voice sounded on tape.

"Greg," she said. "Dad. Pick up. I need your social for a form I'm filling out. Pick up. What's this about a quest?"

A fly buzzed around the hot apartment and lighted on the machine.

"When is tomorrow? Today? Dammit. I don't know what that means about a quest," the woman's voice went on. "Men your age don't go on quests. They go on walks or they go on errands. I don't think I've ever heard that word outside of Brit lit. Are you there? Get up and answer the phone, Greg. I mean it."

Brooke Harrison 1/27/15 2:53 PM

Comment [7]: There is such great detail in this story.

Brooke Harrison 1/27/15 2:55 PM

Comment [8]: This is the first time the piece changes perspectives (first person to third person)
I think it would be helpful to indicate this in some way – the pound symbol would work but it has not indicated a change in perspective prior to this point.

*Should the reader understand what DeLuca's "quest" is about?

Brooke Harrison 1/27/15 2:34 PM

Comment [9]: I think it's interesting she calls him by his first name before she calls him "dad." This says a lot about her character.

Brooke Harrison 1/27/15 2:33 PM

Comment [10]: Ha, ha ☺

There was a long pause. "Mr. Davis? Are you there? Ok, I've got a work call, I've got to go," the voice said. "Call me as soon as you get this. Don't wait around. As soon as you get this, I mean it. I'm starting to worry about you." The line went dead.

The morning broke high and bright through the apartment windows.

Big Joe Davis rolled over in his bed, yawned, reached over on his nightstand for his glasses, found them, and limped into the living room in his underwear. He listened to the message, shook his head, and hit the Delete button. The tape whirred as it reversed, and the machine clicked as the head made contact with the tape.

Four miles away, at the Greyhound station in Old North St. Louis, Greg DeLuca sat on a bench. The grocery bag beside him contained an apple, a newspaper, a 3 liter soda bottle filled with tap water, a map of the United States, a one-way bus ticket to Phoenix, Arizona, and a peanut butter sandwich.

The air was already thick and hot, and the station was mostly empty. One man lay asleep on the bench across from DeLuca. The other overnight occupants had already started toward the air-conditioned public library, he knew, where they would spend the rest of the day.

A man in a driver's uniform walked past the bench.

Brooke Harrison 1/27/15 2:59 PM

Comment [11]: Why is Greg no longer telling the story in first person narrative?

*I just feel like I'm missing something – how did Greg get here? Last I read, he was with Junebug.

Easy fix (multiple options!):

1. If the scene w/ Junebug isn't important, consider cutting it.

OR

2. Insert a sentence or two here to indicate the lapse in time.

"Where are you going?" he asked DeLuca.

"Arizona. Phoenix." DeLuca answered.

"You've got a layover in Oklahoma City, then," the driver said. "You're with me. Got your ticket?"

DeLuca fished it out of his brown bag and held it up.

The man on the opposite bench was sitting up now.

"Greg," he said, rubbing his eyes. "Who the hell do you know in Arizona?"

"You overslept, Tom," Greg said. "I'm going to find somebody in Phoenix." He fished a five-dollar bill out of his pocket and handed it to the man. "Here, get a pastry and a cup of coffee."

Tom took the money and smiled, and Greg DeLuca picked up his bag and followed the driver to the bus. By early afternoon, he was heading into Oklahoma City.

Meanwhile, at the apartment, the phone was ringing every hour or so, with the messages becoming more and more demanding. By early afternoon, Big Joe Davis unplugged the answering machine, so he never heard Lydia DeLuca vow to come to St. Louis to find out exactly what was going on.

Lydia drove up I-75 with the windows down, listening to the Pixies. Sitting on her passenger seat was a new copy of Napoleon

Brooke Harrison 1/27/15 2:36 PM

Comment [12]: I like Big Joe Davis 😊

Hill's *Think and Grow Rich* and *Right and Wrong Thinking* by

Kenneth Hagin. She hung one arm out the window and felt the sun on it.

"That'll be burned by the time I get home," she said to no one in particular.

A moment later, she scolded herself: "I'm being negative again."

She left the arm where it was and pointed the Ford sedan at St. Louis.

On the Greyhound bus, Greg DeLuca was riding through Oklahoma. He was tired of looking out the window at flat fields, so he began watching people on the bus. The woman in the row beside him asked where he was going, and he told her.

"You ever been to Phoenix?" she asked.

"No," Greg admitted. "You?"

The woman scowled. "Lived there for ten years. Couldn't get out fast enough."

"Ten years is not very fast," Greg observed.

"I'm a slow decision-maker," the woman snapped. "What do you want?"

It was dark when Lydia DeLuca stopped at a gas station in Paducah. She filled up the tank and then went into the station

to get a candy bar and a strong cup of coffee. Two older men in overalls sat in the yellow light behind the counter. When she put her purchases on the counter, one rang them up, reached for her money, and then handed her the change. Neither of them spoke. They watched her leave without smiling.

She heard one of them say, "Was that a sissy-looking man or an homely girl?"

"Sissy boy," the other one said.

Greg couldn't sleep. He could never sleep in moving vehicles. They were driving through the desert, and he could see shadows of saguaro zipping by, looking like giants in threatening poses. He remembered his idea of monsters when he was a child, standing behind his bedroom doors, arms overhead, bearing down on him.

He had no plan for finding the boy. He imagined Phoenix was large. He figured he would ask the homeless people for information; they were usually motivated to give it, especially if it resulted in spending money. They could at least point him in a general direction.

He'd heard of this new thing called Internet, but no one could afford it.

He ate half his peanut butter sandwich. He wondered what Lydia was doing.

Lydia was passing into St. Louis. She could see the Gateway to the West on her right, lit up in lights. She'd only been here

Brooke Harrison 1/27/15 2:38 PM
Comment [13]: I think there needs to be some kind of transition here – we're no longer reading about Lydia but about Greg.

Brooke Harrison 1/27/15 2:39 PM
Comment [14]: Oh, this is intriguing.

Brooke Harrison 1/27/15 2:39 PM
Comment [15]: Love this!

a few times before. The arch always struck her as an odd monument, more at home on Star Trek uniforms than in a major American city.

Whatever. She sipped her (now cold) coffee, cranked the radio, and headed toward Old North St. Louis.

Just as DeLuca was getting weary enough to consider sleeping on the bus, the Phoenix-no-more lady woke up and wanted to have a conversation.

"What are you doing in Phoenix?" she wanted to know. "Flagstaff is much nicer. Wouldn't be that far out of your way. I have family there."

"I know a guy there," DeLuca said vaguely.

"Family? Friend? Daughter's boyfriend?" the lady demanded, ignoring the hint. "What?"

"Former business partner," said DeLuca firmly, wadded up his jacket, and laid his head against the window.

Lydia stopped the car in front of the crumbling Victorian house on Destrehan Street that contained her father's apartment. It was after midnight, but Big Joe Davis sat on the porch, smoking a cigar.

"Lyddie," he said when he saw her. He rose to his feet, limped over, and awkwardly gave her a hug. "What are you doing all the way up here?"

"Looking for Greg, Mr. Davis," she said firmly. "I need his

help with something.”

“Well,” Big Joe said, sitting back down and motioning her to a chair next to him, “you just missed him. Your daddy left for Arizona early this morning.”

Bella nodded. “I guess he drove.”

Big Joe shook his head. “Took a Greyhound, I think.”

Lydia looked at him sharply. “Why would he do that? He’s got the Corvair.”

“Not anymore,” Big Joe said. “That’s part of his quest.”

“I don’t understand.”

Big Joe ground out his cigar. “Well, get comfortable,” he said. “I should probably bring you up to speed about the last couple of weeks.”

It was dawn by the time Big Joe Davis finished filling Lydia in about her father’s actions of the last two weeks.

Lydia rubbed her eyes.

“Let me get this straight. I want to repeat this back to you so there is no miscommunication. Item one: my father traded his Corvair. Affirm or deny?”

“Yes,” said Davis. “Affirm.”

“Item two: he traded it to a college student, for a funeral plot in Belleville. Affirm or deny?”

“Affirm.”

“And he traded his car to this college student for this funeral plot with no paperwork at all. True?”

Brooke Harrison 1/27/15 2:41 PM

Comment [16]: Is this supposed to be Lydia? (Maybe “Bella” was Lydia’s name in an earlier draft and accidentally wasn’t changed?)

Brooke Harrison 1/27/15 2:41 PM

Comment [17]: When exactly did this happen??

"Yes," said Big Joe. "But he had never traded anything before."

"Fine. And now he can't remember where the plot is located."

"True."

"And so he followed this kid to Phoenix in a bus, so he could figure out where his funeral plot is located?"

"I think," said Big Joe in a warning tone of voice, "that you've got it."

"Fuck," said Lydia DeLuca. She got up, stretched, and walked down the stairs toward her car.

"If he calls," she called over her shoulder, "tell him to stay where he is."

She got in the Ford and peeled off.

Greg De Luca slept right through Texas. He missed Amarillo, the chatty woman's departure, the whole thing.

Lydia DeLuca fell asleep in a parking lot in Oklahoma City, her head against the steering wheel. She slept for hours. When she woke up, it was getting dark again, and a bored security guard was rapping on her window with a nightstick. "You can't sleep here," he said through the glass. "Sorry."

She stuck her tongue out at him as she cranked the car.

Brooke Harrison 1/27/15 3:00 PM

Comment [18]: Like father like daughter – reminds me of Greg's impatience with the nosy bus passenger!

Big Joe Davis sat on the front porch of the apartment in

St. Louis, smoking a cigar and talking to Annie Zanakis.

"I saw that girl once, Lydia. Not much to work with in the looks department, but she could at least try."

"Well, she favors her daddy," said Big Joe.

"What do you think she wants from him this time?"

"What does she always want from him?" Big Joe asked.

"Whatever he's got."

"Well," Annie said, "I'm glad he got rid of that Corvair before she got her hands on it."

Big Joe shook his head. "It was like he lost his mind."