

# The Good Story

by J. Kyle Kimberlin

He always tried to be a good story. Through the years, as paragraphs drifted by and settled on his shoulders, he offered no protest. As the wind has gathered words against curbs and gutters, against chain link and picket fences, caught in the weeds that persevere, he simply put them in his pockets, moving on. He is a work of small phrases but that has been his job, to collect these little things and keep them cleared away. He has done it carefully, without complaint. But to take up all of it was just impossible; so much was left behind. It's not his fault. He's just one simple story, after all.

It started well enough, and happily, though he was born on a day when it clouded suddenly, rained and stayed dark, and everyone said it was much too late in the year for that sort of weather. They said the ocean seemed to be thinking about something, deeply. And that maybe someone would go out for abalone, dive down and be caught in one of those thickening blue-black thoughts, and not come home. It was that kind of day. The divers saw it and stood on the dock for a long time drinking coffee and shielding their eyes with their free hands, watching the ocean think about death. Then they put their gear away and tossed the dregs of their coffee into the water and went home.

Looking back on it now, he sees they must have known that he was born that day, that he was probably the context, if not the point of view, of all that earnest brooding air. So he's been held to blame. *Post hoc ergo propter hoc*.

As a child, he learned to put small things together, line them up. Subject, object, verb. And it was all predicated on time, which he saw laid out before him in great galleys, on a table in the morning sun. He wandered here and there through phrases of melody, past periods when everything seemed to stop. And taking a breath, he would rise and fall again. He was a child on a slide that stood shining in damp grass – the sun was barely even up! – and anything was possible if he followed rules, dropped nothing that was given him to hold or let it break away too soon. That's not so much responsibility.

The problem comes with wanting to grow, to take on more of self and life, to be an important story of substance, tinted with green flecks of meaning that glitter across the room. He wanted to be a work like that, a tale to turn heads, drive conversation at parties, be mentioned

more than now and then. “Yes, but you really must read ...” and they would know his name. So he grew, and took on height beyond a single page of pretense and prefigurement.

As he grew, he took on heaviness and years. He had to slow down from a dance to a trot, then to a less readable jog. Before he learned he had to walk – that the only way to make it through, to find a happy way to end, was to lean back in a comfy chair and take his time about it all – a worse thing happened.

His voice changed. Just a little. You probably wouldn’t have noticed. He didn’t reveal his narrator, or anything so bad as that. But he found his vowels creaking now and then, and when he stood and tried to speak, what rattled out was tinged with grief. He had learned to pick up bits of memory, and use them here and there to start a scene. This is something stories do. It can’t be helped, since future tense is conjectural at best.

So he turned one late spring windy afternoon and went to see his grandfather, who had been a long novella about work and holidays and dogs. Grandpa had been built on backstory himself, so he had so much good advice to give: Keep your lines clean and sharp, stand up straight, and always leave them wanting more. And one last thing, boy. Tell the truth.

It helped. It really helped a while, I think. He tried to going on living well. One word after another, that’s the key to happiness. And if you block, just say the next right thing. But all that doesn’t pay the bills, not in a town this small, not for the long and heavy haul, not on page two of any life that drifts through drafts like this. Sooner or later, everybody makes stuff up.

Like the time he met the unformed ghost of no one in particular, which rose up from a warped and dusty hardwood floor and came at him, and moaned. And how he screamed and hit the screen door at a run, and fell out into the yard. The house stood like a dull and dying thing made of trees in the August heat and laughed at him. A story should be more fun than that, and brave enough to stand and face the unseen world in which it lives. I know that you agree.

He wanted peace. He grew weary of page after page of getting up and eating life, then lying down. He knew what everyone thought about him, that he was the story of a rainy day and the pensive sea and how the men could have died, their bodies swept away, dissolved, digested by the churning engine of the world. He knew it was useless to change the subject after all, that it was carved on his synopsis, and it would mark his grave in fading ink.

One day he got up late, after all the writers were gone for espresso and scones, and their computers were idling with screensavers of lost and knotted pipes. He climbed to the top of the hill; the hill that is bald on the top, weedless, a scorched and freckled pate of rock. He stood and looked down on the harmless, mostly useless town. There were no factories, no feedlot, no winery or mill. *What do those people do all day?* Just the houses and the school where he started, waiting in line to climb the slide.

*I am not a story of the sea*, he roared, and the birds scattered from the trees below and all around. *I am not a tale of sad weather, not anymore. I am a story of children at a carnival, with a teacup ride and a Ferris wheel. I can tell you about cotton candy and getting sick in the grass, and ring toss games that aren't quite fair. I know about going from ride to ride with your father, and him buying your ticket for the carousel. I have seen his face grow bright and brighter, every time you come around. And what about the dogs? I could be a story, damn you all, about dogs and how they eat and sleep and play. I could show you a little dog, running in a dream.*

We know that that's not going to happen. We knew from the second paragraph how things would all turn out for him. No easy death, no publishable adventure, no bright turn of phrase to give the reader hope. He's not that kind of guy. We read near the end of the story Rust Abides. He doesn't understand the phrase, but feels persistent truth in it, a sense of doom, an unremitting entropy.

We writers have a place for things like him. It's not an envelope addressed to the big city. Why pay for the postage, just to buy rejection slips? It's certainly not the wicker waste can by the desk. He's maybe just a shade too good for that, with all he's learned and all he's suffered stoically. He understands what happens now, and you can help by stepping back. Just watch, as he stands and brushes the crumbs of consonants from the front of his shirt and from his jeans, and slips himself quietly into the drawer.