

## Principles

Melanie sauntered into the blood plasma clinic and up to the front desk. She rolled up one sleeve of her cotton pullover and a thermometer was pushed into her mouth and a blood pressure gauge wrapped tightly around her pudgy arm.

“Left arm this time?” asked the nurse. Some donors traded off every other time, as Melanie did, and others who had been donating for years always used the same arm and had a permanent needle hole in it. It reminded Melanie of the holes through her pierced earlobes. She nodded in answer and the nurse proceeded to prick her finger and draw a sample of blood into a fine glass tube, pressing a cotton ball to the spot when she had enough.

Melanie sat in the waiting room and observed the others there, as she always did. There was a woman who was keeping her eye on four children. The three younger ones, who looked to be between two and five years old, were turning the pages of magazines rapidly and giggling madly as they did so. When they reached the last page, they would trade with someone else. One of them handed Melanie a magazine in his excitement, and she laughed and traded it for another. This went on for several minutes until their guardian got tired of the noise.

“Steve! You leave that lady alone. Linda, Eric, you too,” she reprimanded them all. Melanie really looked at the woman for the first time. She had so much makeup on that it was cracked in spots and was actually flaking off, little flakes of orange.

“Oh, that’s okay, it makes the time pass faster,” was Melanie’s reply.

The oldest boy looked up from his reading for the first time and he glared at Melanie as though he couldn’t bear hearing her speak. She stared back until he opened his eyes very wide,

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stuck his tongue out, and quickly looked away. “No, these children don’t bother me at all,” she added.

At this proclamation, the woman came over and sat next to Melanie. “I wish I could find a babysitter as nice as you,” she confided. “All the girls we’ve had lately have gone home in tears because of Robin there,” she indicated the oldest boy, “and they don’t like to play with the children either.”

“How does Robin make them so upset?” asked Melanie, surprised that the woman expected to find a nice babysitter with an obviously horrendous child.

“Well, he’s smarter than any of them, for one thing. He just can’t resist an opportunity to tell them so, either, and I guess that’s the problem. But you’re different, that wouldn’t bother you, would it?”

You bet it would, Melanie said to herself. “How old is he?” she asked.

“He’s ten, but he’s got the mind of an eighteen-year-old. He learned to talk at three months, not just mama but whole sentences! And he reads high-school and college-level books now. Isn’t that marvelous? I just don’t know what to say to him sometimes, myself. And it doesn’t help any that his father’s gone, either. He left four years ago, said the boy was driving him crazy.”

“These aren’t all my children,” she explained, smiling. “My sister’s in there,” indicating the donating room, “and I’m watching hers. Robin, there, is mine, and this six-year-old, Suzee.”

“But I’m doing all the talking,” she apologized. “Now what do you do?”

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“Well, I’m going to college, and I work in one of the offices there part-time, and I write when I’m not too busy for it.”

“You do? Why, this may be my lucky day! I’ve been looking for someone to write a little story about Robin here, something I could send to the National Enquirer and then maybe I could get on a talk show or something from there. I just can’t stand being poor! What kind of stories do you write?”

“Well, actually, just poetry mostly, but I have done a few stories. Mostly about things that have happened to me.” The woman beamed and Melanie quickly added, “But I’ve never been able to get any of it published.”

“Oh, that doesn’t matter! At least you know how to start. I wouldn’t know the first thing about writing. At least you’ve done some before. Listen, they’re going to call you in there soon; why don’t I give you my number and you can think it over and then call me. Okay?”

She didn’t see what it would hurt. After all, she wasn’t giving this woman her number. She seemed a little crazy, as did many of the other people who frequented this place. And as she took the scrap of envelope with a number scrawled on it, her name was called.

“Melanie?”

She said goodbye and went through the heavy swinging doors where twenty-four recliner chairs were lined up on opposite walls, most them filled. Saturday was a busy day here.

She sat down and watched as the young, bearded doctor stuck the needle into the inside of her arm, and was mildly fascinated. She hadn’t been able to watch the first time, but

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had forced herself to until she could observe without feeling as though she had just swallowed a worm. Since she received \$15.00 each time she went through it, she learned quickly.

As the blood streamed out of her, through the clear plastic tubing and into a bag at the side of her chair, she slouched down as far as she could and began to look at the other people around her. Exactly across from her sat the big woman she often met on the bus, whose face was always bruised and who had no teeth. Next to her sat a stringy-haired, dirty-blond, skinny girl, wearing only short shorts and a bathing suit top, who Melanie had never seen before. The girl stared at the brown linoleum floor as though she expected her Prince Charming to pop through at any moment. He didn't.

Melanie's arm began to ache; the doctor must not have stuck her properly. She hoped she wouldn't have a bruise on her arm like she had had the first time she had donated. She had gone with two friends who were regulars at the clinic, and had been scared stiff after reading the agreement they had made her sign saying that she wouldn't hold them responsible if she got an infection from the needles. But she went ahead anyway, and after it was over, her arm was blighted with a purple and yellow spot the size of her fist, and she imagined that people would think she was a heroin addict.

Thunk! The blood bag became just heavy enough to tip the balance holding it, causing a noise which brought the nurse scurrying. As the plastic tubing was flushed clean with saline solution, she waited for the red cells to be separated from the white and returned to her body. Once that was finished, she collected her fifteen dollars and walked back to the bus stop in the July sunshine.

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The woman had already left; Melanie was glad. There was something strange about that whole conversation they had had; it was the kind of thing that, when it happened, you weren't sure later if you had dreamed it or if it had really happened. Certainly Robin, the genius, had not wanted to have anything written in the National Enquirer about himself. He had been downright rude to her, and she didn't see any reason why she should make his life any easier.

But on the bus home, that woman and her son kept coming back to her thoughts. If she could get published, even in the National Enquirer, it might help her to get some of her poetry published. Robin would probably be a terror to work with, but if she could get along with him, she could get along with anybody. Maybe I'll give it a try, she mused. There's really nothing to lose.

When Melanie went to bed that night, she placed a curling, yellow legal pad and a pen beside the mattress on the floor which served as her bed. She always slept with them, in case she came up with a real inspiration in her sleep and had to write it down. So far, she hadn't needed it, but there was no harm in being ready.

In the morning, she stretched once in bed, and once again while making her way to the bathroom. She could make it all the way to the bathroom without opening her eyes, because there was nothing there to trip over. All her apartment contained in the way of furniture was a kitchen table, one bookshelf, a chest of drawers, and two inner tubes which she used for chairs. In the bathroom, she tried to see all of herself in the mirror tiled wall but as usual could not ignore the illusion that she was split into three parts going from side to side and five up and down. As she was looking at herself, she remembered what had happened the day before, and made a mental note to call that woman. "She didn't even give me her name!" she suddenly

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realized. “Well, I’ll ask her later.” She played with her hair until it looked somewhat human, brushed her teeth and washed her face, and then called the woman.

“Hello?” the woman answered.

“Hi . . . this is Melanie, from the clinic. I’d like to come over and talk about this story today, if it’s convenient.”

“Convenient? Why, even if it weren’t, I would make it so, for you. I don’t go to church every Sunday so I’ll be home all morning. Here’s where I live. From downtown you go up Quincy Street to where they’re tearing down that shopping mall where the roof caved in, you know where I mean? Then you take a left and go across the river and when you get to the corner where the park is turn right and we’re the fourth house from the corner on the left. It’s a red house with a white fence in front. Can you find it?”

“Sure . . . I’ll be over in a few minutes.”

She got dressed and jumped on her bike, rode it out the door and down the steps. Since she lived almost downtown, it wasn’t far at all to the woman’s house, but she hadn’t told her that. She wasn’t sure that she wanted her to know where she lived just yet. Uh-oh, she had forgotten to ask her name again. Well, she’d be there in a few minutes and could do it then. As she rode, she liked to look around. Seemed like you noticed more on a bike. She saw a ragged man pushing a shopping cart full of trash, a bruised woman with no teeth waiting for a bus, the lean young boys gathered in packs in front of the stores. The boys noticed her too, and she looked away and pedaled faster. But she was so busy looking around that she was startled by a car passing within an inch of her front tire. She nearly fell off the bicycle trying to stop, and the

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people behind the dark tinted windows honked the horn at her. One of the men even opened the window and whistled at her, and her face reddened. This was hilarious to them, and they howled.

She followed the woman's directions and soon saw the red house. As she pulled in, Suzee came rushing out to meet her, and she said hello and went inside. She accepted the offered cup of coffee, and the woman began to tell her the whole story of Robin's life.

As she talked, Melanie noticed that the woman's makeup was as thick as it had been the day before. Her hair was in curlers, but covered with a flowered scarf.

"Well, I knew he'd be a genius even before he was born. There's just some things a mother can tell about the child within her, and that's one of them. He kicked me only when I was awake, for one thing, and never once when I was sleeping like the other one did. When I went into labor, he didn't act like he wanted to come out, which I think shows signs of intelligence seeing as how the world's in such bad shape. But all that's very minor compared to what he can do now." She paused to light a cigarette. When Melanie looked sufficiently interested, she continued.

"He had the best entry in the sixth grade science fair when he was only in second grade! Of course he was disqualified because he was too young, but even so, all the other students were jealous and they said his father helped him. Robin did it all by himself though, he even thought up the idea for it by himself. Would you like to see it?"

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Robin had been standing in the doorway between the living room and kitchen, leaning against the door frame and glowering at both of them. "You don't have it any more," he scowled. "I threw it away yesterday. That's baby stuff."

His mother was aghast. "Robbie, you didn't! That was a wonderful project you did, and it meant so much to me. Why, oh, why?"

"I told you, it was baby stuff. Besides, if she's going to write a story about me, I want it to be about stuff I do now, not things I did when I was a kid."

Melanie saw her chance. "What kinds of things do you do now, Robin? Could I see some of them?"

He looked pleasantly surprised at being the center of attention. But, realizing that his defense was down, he reverted to the frown and stood up straight. "No, you wouldn't be interested. In fact there's nothing interesting about me at all." He ran to the back of the house and out the door.

The woman sighed and looked at Melanie. "I just don't know what to do with him. He's been this way ever since his father left. The few times he's really talked to me since then, he's said that he feels like it was his fault that Fred left us. Actually, that is the reason Fred gives, but he never was one to tell the truth. The real reason was because I spent too much time in the bathroom. That's the main thing he fought about. Isn't that a little unreasonable? I always told him he could share the bathroom with me, but he'd reply that there wasn't enough room for the two of us in there. Come look at this bathroom, it's huge!"

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She took Melanie's wrist and propelled her down the hallway and into the room. The walls were completely covered with shelves, top to bottom and all the way around, except in the shower. Even the mirror was placed in the shower to save room for shelves. The windows were hidden, if there were any. And on all of these shelves were bottles, tubes, cans, and compacts of cosmetics of every kind. Melanie counted seventeen different kinds of hairspray alone, and at least two cans of each.

"Isn't that unreasonable?" she asked again. "Isn't that the biggest bathroom you've ever seen?"

"Yes, undoubtedly." Melanie could see what the problem had been. This woman probably never came out of the bathroom except to eat and sleep. No, wait; there was a plate under the pedestal sink, with bread crumbs scattered across it. Melanie began looking around for a pillow and blanket.

"Well, let's get back to the story about Robin. I can tell you everything you need to know."

They returned to the living room and the woman proceeded to tell her the story of the boy's life all over again. Always stressed was her conviction that no one but herself really knew the extent of the child's intelligence, and this was to be the mainstream of the story.

Melanie was doubtful about the whole thing by the time the woman had finished, but, reminding herself of the publicity it could bring her, she agreed to write the story. They discussed possible ways for the woman to support Melanie while she wrote, supposedly so she could work faster, but Melanie wanted her privacy. She also had a sneaky suspicion that if she

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moved in with the woman or became otherwise indebted to her, she might become a full-time babysitter. So instead, they agreed to meet in another week to go over what she had written. Melanie finally gave her her phone number, now that they would definitely be working together.

On the way home, the bicycle ride seemed much shorter than it had on the way there. It was near noon by this time, and Melanie realized that she had had nothing to eat all day. She stopped at the downtown McDonald's, something she seldom did, but she felt today that soon she would be rich and famous anyway. Even though Robin would be a beastly subject, she felt that she could make the story into what would be called a classic in years to come. And then she would have so much money that she could eat at McDonald's every day for the rest of her life, if she wanted to. She ordered her weakness, a quarter-pounder with cheese, ketchup, and onions, and as she ate, she thought about how she might approach the story. She could begin with a sketch of Robin's school life, showing him amazing everyone the first time he appeared, or she could show him achieving an unbelievable score on his first IQ test, or she could show him discovering something for himself at an early age . . . that would probably be the best, she decided. Start with the first signs of intelligence that he showed. She ran outside to her bicycle and pedaled home quickly so that she could begin at once.

She finished the story in two days, rewriting it twice during that time. In her eyes, it was as perfect as it could ever be. She was truly proud of it; it had to be the best thing she had ever written, better, even, than any of her poems. Not only that, it was also the longest piece she had ever produced. It was all of eight pages long, and she was sure that the National Enquirer

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would snap it up immediately. For that matter, maybe she could sell it to one of those magazines for teachers! Or maybe even the New Yorker! In her mind it had no limits.

The telephone startled her from her daydreaming. She picked it up, and heard the woman's voice on the other end. "How are you coming? I know we agreed to get together in a week, but I couldn't wait to see how you were doing. Have you started yet?"

Melanie made a mental note to ask that woman's name before she hung up. She laughed, still overcome with pride. "Started? Why, I've finished it already. It's the best thing I've ever written. Here, let me read it to you." And the phone clattered to the floor as she ran into the other room for the manuscript. "Ready? Here it is." And she read the story to the woman, who, uncharacteristically, remained silent until she had finished.

"That's it?"

"What do you mean, that's it? This is the longest piece of writing I've ever done. How long is it supposed to be? You didn't mention a thing about that."

"Well, I had thought maybe twelve pages. That couldn't be more than six, could it?"

"It's nearly ten," Melanie stretched it to make herself feel better.

"Maybe you can do a little more to it. Just fluff it up a bit. I did have a few comments about the writing itself, though. First, you called me Tammy in the story. That's not a serious mother's name. How about something like Gladys, or Amelia? And you set it in Detroit, not in Milwaukee where it really happened. Also I think you go over the important parts too lightly. Like the part where he just won the beautiful baby contest and he told the judge not to kiss him. That's an exciting event in his life! Make it sound that way. And the time when he lost his

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dog and he communicated telepathically with it to find it. That's intelligence, isn't it? You barely touched on that. All you put in were the basic signs of intelligence, like the IQ test, and when he figured out how to start the car when he was two years old, and things like that. I think you ought to do the whole thing over. Would that be easier?

Melanie was floored. How could that woman not think her story was good? It was wonderful! And now she was expected to write it over again, changing everything. Not that she wasn't open to criticism, but a beautiful baby contest? She began to feel sick to her stomach. She couldn't rewrite it; she felt physically incapable of doing that. It was perfect as it was now, and to change anything would ruin it. How could anybody write that way? She had heard something once about being true to yourself in your writing, and she knew she would be violating that if she rewrote it again. She would have to tell that woman now, that she couldn't do it.

"Melanie?"

Melanie could barely speak. "Uh, well I, yes, I'm here, I just . . ."

She took a deep breath. "Yes . . . I'm here. I was thinking. I'm not going to be able to make any more changes. It's right the way it is, and I would find it impossible to do it over. I can't do it. You'll have to get somebody else." And with that she hung up. Melanie sat there on the phone holding the receiver. She wasn't going to do it! She would leave town. She would pretend insanity. She would do anything to avoid seeing that woman again. What was her name, anyway? She decided it didn't matter. Almost immediately the phone began to ring, but she picked up her keys and went outside. She needed to take a walk. The phone continued to

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ring until she was down the front steps and halfway to the corner, and then her apartment was silent.

By the time she got home, she was feeling much better and she knew exactly what she had to do. She called Information and asked for a number. She dialed. "Hello, National Enquirer? Have I got a story for you! You know those parents that think their children can do no wrong, but in reality the parents are the real problem because they are seriously dysfunctional?"

"Yes, yes," crooned the voice on the other end. "Tell me all about it!"