

Telling a Story Assignment: Draft #2

Josephine swayed out of the car. It was a wickedly steamy Missouri day with rising temperatures above 100 degrees. The ac in her truck, a yellow 1981 Chevy Love pickup, had just blown. She had felt worse heat before. This was nothing.

Up the two steps to the freshly painted white house and that was where she paused. Josephine felt a little jittery. She wasn't quite sure whether it was the trimmed hedge surrounding the yard or that the sidewalk and driveway wasn't cracked or crumbling away. She wasn't a naturally nervous person. She considered herself a large woman with an even larger determination. *Business is business*, she thought. So raising her large hand, she curled it into a fist and knocked her fleshy knuckles thrice against the white painted door. There was a solid rhythm to knocks. *THUMP. THUMP. THUMP.* She waited a few moments.

"Mrs. Thompson!" Josephine's honey thick voice called out, "It's Josephine Maybell. I supposed to be cleaning for you today." Slowly the door opened, and Mrs. Thompson's white skin and white hair emerged from the gap between the door and its frame. Then, her wrinkled neck made an appearance, followed by a crisp white shirt, a pearl necklace, and some ironed khakis. Mrs. Thompson blinked.

"Ah, Mrs. Thompson, we talked on the line the other day. If I recall correctly, we scheduled for me to come over and clean your house. Might be that you forgot?"

Mrs. Thompson snapped into attention, "Of course I didn't. You're right on time. Please come in. Ms. Maybell" Josephine bent, gripping her bucket and her mop, and followed the old lady in.

"The place is quite a mess. You can start in the kitchen and spread out into the living room. After that, the hallway just needs to be vacuumed. I'll pay you afterwards."

Josephine nodded in response. She gazed around, familiarizing herself with everything the best she could. Then, picking up her bucket of cleaning supplies, she replied, "I'll be starting then."

An hour and a half later, sweat dripped off of Josephine's brow, falling down her round cheeks and onto the apron that she wore. *Done, done, and done.* With a *humpth* of satisfaction,

Josephine made her way back to the living room. Looking around, Mrs. Thompson was nowhere to be seen.

“Mrs. Thompson!” Josephine thundered.

“Yes! Out through the glass door to your left!” Mrs. Thompsons slightly muted voice called back. Josephine set down her supplies and slowly made her way to the glass door, pulling it aside with seemingly effortless strength. Outside, the humidity seeped quickly though Josephine’s clothes and hair, making everything feel slightly damp.

Josephine slid the glass shut behind her, preventing the warm wet cloth of air from creeping into the cool conditioned house. She gasped as she turned around, a heavy hand fluttering to her chest. In front of her were towering sunflowers, stocks as tall as a sapling tree and as thick as a small child’s arm. In the realm below the flowering skyscrapers, rows of what looked to be cabbage, lettuce, spinach, red mustard, and kale lined up in narrow flanks. Mrs. Thompson herself was off in the shade, kneeling in the dark black dirt with what almost seemed like a ridiculously large hat perched precariously on top of her slight frame. She pearl necklace, white shirt, and pressed pants had been replaced with a dirty sun shirt, and a pair of loose green canvas pants.

“Mrs. Thompson! I didn’t know you were a gardener. Why, this is all very gorgeous.”

Mrs. Thompson stayed where she was and looked around at the space, turning her head and with it the giant sunhat. “It’s been quite an adventure, trying to get it all healthy and growing. I could give you a tour if you’d like.”

“Oh no, Mrs. Thompson, there’s no need to. I was raised on a farm. My mother and father taught me well. I know all these plants.” Josephine’s attention turned to a row to the very left of her and howled. Mrs. Thompson jumped from her lowered position.

“Ms. Maybell! What on earth is the matter?”

“You got beets growing? Beets!?! How on earth –” Suddenly, Josephine felt very hot – too hot. “Say, do you mind if I get a glass of water and sit down for a moment?”

“Why of course. I should have offered it sooner. I wouldn’t mind a fresh drink myself.” Mrs. Hudson pulled off her gardening gloves, “Please, take a seat in the shade. I’ll be right back.”

Josephine and Mrs. Thompson sat underneath the awning in the backyard that overlooked the garden and talked until evening. Throughout their day together –as well as multiple glasses

of ice tea— they had discussed soil, plants, drip systems, and fertilizer. They laughed and would add in anecdotes about how they came to learn about gardening in the first place: Josephine through growing up on her parents farm, Mrs. Thompson through the need for something to do after her husband had died. The one thing that stuck in Josephine’s mind from that day was how Mrs. Thompson, a very manicured old woman in all aspects, had short fingernails with grits of dark soil under them. This, as well as how she had set down her perspiring glass with those dirty fingernails, and looking Josephine right in the eyes, had asked, “why on earth do you not have a garden?”

Josephine had quite a few answers, although some she kept quiet. She told Agnes that her yard’s soil wasn’t fertile enough to grow anything but dandelions and that she didn’t have the energy or time, going around to all the clients and cleaning their houses like she did. What she didn’t tell Agnes – what she had kept to herself for most of her life- was that she had moved to the big city to get away from the farm life she had once grown up in.

These justifications seemed valid enough, yet throughout the weeks after her time with Mrs. Thompson, the idea of growing a garden started to sprout in her mind. The doubts and explanations as to why she shouldn’t do it were still there though, and soon she pushed it to the back of her mind.

The sweet birds were singing outside the hospital window. They would flutter up to the brick ledge on the other side of the pane where Josephine had laid sunflower seeds out the day before and cock their little heads in delight at the small morsels. Josephine had been adamant when Barbara had called yesterday to ask her what she may want while in the hospital.

“But Josephine! They’re not gunna let you eat sunflower seeds in the hospital! You better be watchin’ your health, being in there for the reasons that you are.” Barbara protested when she had first requested the seeds.

“Barb, now listen up. You either come and bring me those sunflower seeds, or I’m not going to bake you one those cherry pies you love so much. You hear me? My health is my health. The doctors are going to fix me up good, don’t you worry.” There was a pause on the other line.

“Mhm. Fine. What flavor do you want?”

“Plain. No salt. Nothing.” Josephine glanced out the window as she said this, watching the little birds swoop and dive.

The bag of sunflower seeds had now been wedged beneath the tower of pillows that Josephine supported herself on. The doctor had told her that her heart attack could have been fatal. She needed to lose weight and start eating better. *To hell with that*, she thought, *my height*

is six foot. A woman that large must be feeding herself. Yet the doctor's words ran through her mind in a loop – over and over again.

It didn't surprise her that she had a heart attack. The lack this surprise-ness disturbed her too. She was 36. Sure she was a giantess of a woman, but she was 36. Somehow her age had given her the illusion of shelter against such a thing as heart disease. Yet part of her, still, was not surprised.

Josephine took the bag of sunflower seeds back out from underneath the tower of pillows and poured a few into her large hand. They looked to be pebbles, there in the center of her palm – very small but comfortable, lying atop the warm, dark surface of her hand. *Sunflower seeds. Seeds. Sunflowers. Mrs. Thompson sure had beautiful sunflowers. Beautiful, tall, and strong they were. I wish I were one of those sunflowers.*

Creative Writing Reflection Sheet

Name: Emily Wieser

Title: Story Reflection

1. What stage of the writing process are you at with this particular piece of work?

Check all that apply

- Just getting started Still exploring Know what I want, but not there yet
 Need others to read Need more time Need to leave it alone for a while
 Have specific questions Feeling good Totally bumfuzzled

Explain:

So I edited my first draft, but didn't add anything onto it. I feel confident with where I'm going in the story. It's a little different than what I was going to do with my original plot, so I need a little more time to conclude the story as a whole. In general though, I'm feeling good with where the plot is going.

I left Josephine off in the hospital with the sunflower seeds in her hands. I plan on having her conclude that she is going to grow a garden, but must confront the obstacle of how delicate her health is now. She loses a little confidence and becomes more uneasy because, as she's planting her garden, she has to revisit her past and what happened on the farm all those years ago, and look at why she left in the first place. I'm going to leave what happened to Josephine on the farm with her parents mostly up to the reader's imagination, but I'll give them a general frame. The climax is her forgiving herself as well as her parents, and this is where she starts to come to peace with her past. After that, it's going to cut to the future, when it's fall, and Josephine is once again stepping up to Mrs. Thompson's doorstep to hand her some zucchini bread..

2. What was the original spark for this piece of work?

The original spark for this piece was when I saw this picture of this large black woman in a sundress, holding a giant cabbage. She looked so incredibly happy. The caption underneath had a quote from her saying that the first vegetable should always go to your neighbor. I wanted to capture that picture and create a character out of the image of the woman. I wanted to capture that moment in writing and create a story through it. That was my original spark.

3. List three things you like about what you've written? Give examples...

1. I like how I give integrity to the Josephine as the main character. Her dialogue is strong, and she's confident with her body and who she is as a person. Yet I still give her something to overcome through creating a desire to plant a garden that's conflicting with her past. An example of this is when she is holding the sunflowers in the palm of her hand and wishing she were one of those tall, stalky sunflowers that she had seen in Mrs. Thompson's garden.

2. I like the descriptions I have for the environment. I'm happy with how I described Mrs. Thompsons garden as well as how hot and humid the Missouri air was. I'm also satisfied how, at the beginning of the story, I describe how Josephine is uncomfortable with the fact that there are no cracks in the sidewalk in front of Mrs. Thompsons house. This connects that character's emotions and identity with their surroundings.
3. Lastly, I'm satisfied with how I foreshadowed Josephine's heart attack. It was subtle, but it wasn't apparent that it was going to happen. This is shown when Josephine, who previously thought she could handle any heat, became overwhelmed by it and had to sit down.

4. What's non-negotiable for this piece of work? What are you sure isn't going to change?

I don't want characters themselves to change. I would be willing to change the environment or the circumstances surrounding them. But really, I tried to mold my characters so that it was apparent that they had these inherent traits within themselves that could never be changed. This, in a sense, lets the readers imagination flow more when thinking about the future of the characters themselves and what they would do in certain situations. The fundamental core, that isn't directly shown within the characters, is very important and non-negotiable.

5. List three things you're struggling with and want to improve in this piece?

I wouldn't say that I'm really struggling with anything in particular. Below are three things that I think I could improve on:

I want to improve on my dialogue a little bit more within the piece. Marcus, you mentioned how creating dialogue to help develop and move the characters along can really add to a story, and I would like to do that.

Mrs. Thompson is such a large part of Josephine's inspiration, and I'd like to bring her back into the end of Josephine's journey to help conclude the story as a whole. I don't quite know how to do this though without creating a super lengthy piece.

The thing that I'm struggling with the most is how to create obstacles and a climax for Josephine separately. I initially thought that her obstacles were going to be within her climax, not before it. I'm now just realizing that there has to be an obstacle before the climax that makes her struggle even more before she reaches the climax.

6. What feedback do you expect readers will give you?

I'd expect them to give me the feedback that I elaborate too much on Mrs. Thompson's house and not enough on the rest of the plot. Also, that it ends a little abruptly.

7. What would your response be if you receive this feedback?

That I agree, and that maybe I should cut some scenes out of Mrs. Thompsons part and add a little bit more to the climax as well as the conclusion of the story. This would fix the first part of the feedback as well as the second part. By trimming the beginning and adding more onto the end, it would help the transition from the climax to the conclusion a lot.

8. List three questions you want to ask your readers?

- Is there anything you are confused about?
- Does the heart attack seem too abrupt?
- How is the imagery?