

Michael Larkin

In Which Our Hero Resolves Not To Count Words

The year before he dies, your great-great-grandfather scowls at you from the photo. Hunched over, after seven decades of blacksmithing, he sits in a 1905 Waltham Orient touring car surrounded by five of his female kin and a stern sixth woman who is memorialized thusly in a handwritten note on the back: “She knows her rights. Also she use to eat eels.”

That same year, he will disappear. For three weeks, no one will know what became of him.

Jesus H. Christ! he says in his County Galway accent. *What is it you’re after?*

Many years pass before you look at the photo again.

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Where do they come from, our stories? You’re not sure, but you’ve heard plenty of advice for helping them arrive. It’s advice you share with your students.

Stay off the internet. Try to write every day, preferably at the same time and place to create muscle memory for writing. Silence your internal critic. Build brick by brick; let ideas cling like barnacles, even as the critic is condemning your mixed metaphors. Don’t wait for the perfect day, the tidy allotment of time. Do it now. Don’t stop. Tell the truth.

You should follow your own advice. At the end of one semester, you do a word count of the notes you’ve written to students about their drafts. The total is roughly half the size of a novel. If writing is a muscle, you are like a weightlifter whose body has withered, save one steroidal bicep. You resolve never to do such a word count again.

Zadie Smith recommends putting the draft of a novel in a drawer

and not opening it for months so you can see it with fresh eyes. If you're a teacher who wants to do his job well, you might take Smith's advice as an excuse for not writing.

You've been writing a novel for the better part of a decade. It's half good, half a mess. You work on it sporadically, you publish an excerpt, you put it in the drawer for Zadie Smith's months. You pull it out again, you think you've finally cracked it, and then you're sure you haven't. You noodle with it, you hold out false hope, your internal critic gremlins you mercilessly until, at long last, you let it go.

In the space that opens, the photo comes back to you.

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Three weeks after your great-great-grandfather's disappearance, a postcard arrives from Ireland. He'd left Boston on a liner, a grander ship than the Famine boat he'd come over on, to visit his hometown nearly sixty years after he first left. Three weeks without word to family—can you imagine?

You spend hours burrowing down Internet rabbit holes on genealogy, blacksmithing, coffin ships, archival collections, census records, births, weddings, deaths. You read books describing wraiths who walk the west of Ireland; their bodies rot into the boggy ground like the oozing potatoes that failed them. You see your family name on an Irish ledger from 1827, when your great-great-grandfather was three. Around the time he emigrates to America, his family's forge is referred to as a "famous" gathering place for young men and a "breeding ground" for Irish Nationalism and Fenianism, a place the Peelers (police) kept their eye on.

You spend hours daydreaming. Many nights, you scribble illegible thoughts into a bedside notebook in the dark. Eudora Welty once told *The Paris Review* that when she was in the thick of creation, "What you overhear on a city bus is exactly what your character

would say on the page you're writing." Riding on the bus you hear one teenage boy say to another, "Yeah, she use to be all like that." *She use to eat eels.*

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You sit at your cluttered desk. There are papers to grade, emails to answer, the dog needs walking, the bills need paying, the world's awful news is relentless, there are only a few hours before your daughter comes home from school, dinner to be made, dishes to be done. Always something else to do.

For a little while, you hold it at bay. You follow the advice you give your students.

Why did your great-great-grandfather leave America without telling anyone? What did he think he was up to? You look at the photo again. You hear what he is saying to you from the seat of that Waltham Orient. You turn to the blank page.

Here it comes.