

I have an active imagination. My entire life, random characters have been coming into my head to laugh and gawk and run around in circles for a little while. And until very recently, I haven't done much of anything with them. Finding no real employment, they'll tire and slouch, perhaps propping an elbow against my eye socket to stare listlessly out at the world. Eventually—their urgent message forgotten—they end up wandering out of an earhole and back again to that land of who-knows-where to wait for another head to occupy.

And then I read about an online writing class offered through the Hoffman Center. I'd been feeling a restless creative energy building since my wife and I had moved to this stretch of coast the previous summer. Why don't I collect a few of these meandering characters and corral them into a story, I thought.

How hard could it be?

So I signed up. Upon receiving my first assignment, I discovered that my learning stance throughout the course would be one of utter bewilderment. It became clear from the first online lesson that most of the participants were already at various stages in the writing process. "Choose a scene from your novel and work on pacing," or, "add convincing detail to this romantic exchange," or, "let's sharpen up that character's development."

I had nothing. Zero.

In a reflexive panic, I quickly birthed out Charlie and Grace. She's enigmatic, I told myself, and he's infatuated with her...her.. well, enigmaticness?

A sense that I'd made a big mistake came over me as Charlie and Grace stared up from the blinding snowscape of an otherwise empty page. "What are we doing here?" they demanded. I couldn't help feeling a little sorry for them; lost and alone, created by an underprepared and ill-equipped god. "What are you looking at me for?" I demanded back, feeling defensive and bewildered and utterly out of my element. We began to argue, and I was losing.

So I emailed Jenny Shortridge, the writing instructor. I don't remember what her response was, and it wouldn't be helpful to you anyway, because what I've said so far has either made you smile benevolently at my utter naivete, or scared you away from ever thinking of signing up for a writing class.

But whatever it was, Jenny's words were just enough to keep me going. It certainly wasn't "where have you been hiding, Tolstoy?" but then it also wasn't "What in the hell were you thinking?" I remember something calm and encouraging and that, yes, this was supposed to be hard work and no, you're not supposed to have it all figured out in advance.

I kept typing, and then rolling my eyes and retyping, and after a while Charlie and Grace had a relationship happening—not a convincing or particularly interesting one, more like a stalking one—but it would get sharpened and more detailed and plausibly paced as the weekly

assignments continued. And as they did, I found something else bewildering, but pleasantly so—if that's a thing: A *world* began to emerge. Here I was, wandering a landscape, following a mysterious woman along a driftwood log, and wondering where we were all going next.

I knew she was stitched from aspects of my wife, and of introspection, and of the presence of a kind of grace mixed with longing for connection, and so somehow she felt both less real and more real than the ticking of the wood-stove and the trees outside my window.

I learned that through the discipline of sharing your work and honest critique and weekly deadlines, a character didn't have to wander away, unemployed and soon forgotten—they could grow, and be remembered and link you to something larger.

This writing class had been set up so that the writers would all meet in Manzanita at the end. I'd read my classmates' work and had begun to feel like I knew them. So I had to get used to the faces that greeted me at Vera Wildauer's house, because they were different from the pictures in my mind, like seeing a movie after reading the book.

"We want to know what's going to happen with Grace!" Vera said when she opened the door. And, taking off my coat, I wondered who Grace was. And that's when it really hit me: Vera meant the woman who had lived in my mind, and stuck around long enough to become part of a story, and was now at least a little bit alive in hers. I didn't know what to say, and so I went into the bathroom and smiled into the mirror.

Then I came out again and joined the conversation with real people and their real characters. My story made it into the Squid, and my wife came to the launch party, and I saw my name in the table of contents and tapped it with my finger. Black and white.

When a character runs through my head now, I say hello. And when someone asks me if I write, I say yes. I am forever grateful to the Hoffman Center, to Jenny Shortridge, and to the other ordinary, extraordinary people who were brave enough to sign up, too.

This morning, I started a fire in the wood-stove, heated some water for Margaret's tea, and raised the shades to see what the early morning was wearing. My wife and I have made our home where the bay tide flows in and out; a life-giving respiration of blues, browns and golds in an endless game of musical chairs.

In the distance, the breeze curls up from the Pacific to comb the clouds over Neahkahnie Mountain into playful pompadours, flat-tops, balding comb-overs. I am in love with all of this. Who wouldn't want to write about it?